

2010

High Stakes Motherhood and School Choice

Amy B. Shuffelton
University of Wisconsin, Whitewater

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shuffelton, Amy B. (2010) "High Stakes Motherhood and School Choice," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 5 : No. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol5/iss2/7>

This Article in Response to Controversy is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

ARTICLE

High Stakes Motherhood and School Choice

Amy B. Shuffelton

University of Wisconsin, Whitewater

Introduction

Because it does not conform to the standard conception of a profession, motherhood might seem to have no place in this issue. A woman requires no special expertise, no knowledge, skill or educational degree to become a mother. Furthermore, the work she does as a mother is unpaid, sometimes even unrecognized as work. These two features of motherhood – its accessibility to any fertile girl or woman, and the fact that society provides no financial compensation to mothers for their hard work—are often lamented, though towards very different political ends. In fact, motherhood might be considered the very *opposite* of a profession: a status dependent upon biological, cultural and social factors, not educational ones, and involving labor done without pay or recognized steps to advancement.

And yet, at certain times and places, motherhood is treated, in public discourse and by mothers themselves, very much as a profession. Motherhood is especially professionalized nowadays by a large number of American mothers, who adopt what Sharon Hays (1996) labels “the ideology of intensive mothering” (first cited, p. xiii), which involves an eagerness to follow the advice of experts and the belief that children need to be carefully cultivated, *by their mothers*, if they are to flourish. Many contemporary mothers think of motherhood as a demanding, standards-based and knowledge-based occupation, which, though unpaid, is like professions in the kind of identification with one’s work that it requires. There are, of course, professionals in any field who put monetary gain ahead of the ideals of the profession, but the professions *qua* professions profess ideals and aims – law serves justice, medicine serves human health, teaching serves education, and so forth. Although there are no doubt some waitresses who are more dedicated to justice than some lawyers, waitressing as a line of work does not contain the same ideals as law. Motherhood, constructed in contemporary terms, is loaded with ideals; as a cultural ideal, it signifies far more than a biological status. One does it (at least in part) out of dedication to the enterprise and its ideals, rather than simply for material gain, which makes it more like practicing law than waiting tables or operating a forklift. The thriving industry of parenting magazines, published parenting manuals, and organizations of parents certainly treat motherhood this way. Whether or not motherhood really *is* a profession, a subset of contemporary American mothers and expert mothers’-helpers are treating it as such.^[1] There are grounds, in other words, for treating motherhood as a profession that raises dilemmas of the sort this journal aims to consider.

Professionalized motherhood does not precisely overlap with earlier generations’ professionalization of homemaking, which assumes a stay-at-home mother. Some stay-at-home mothers adopt the approaches of professionalized motherhood, but not all do. And many mothers who work full or part time for pay outside the home are also “professional mothers.” The phrase indicates an outlook, an ideology of motherhood and child-rearing, that is held by a large number of contemporary mothers, some of whom are home full time with their children, some of whom are not, and who may be (as I am) simultaneously members of other professions.

This essay explores a dilemma I confronted as a reluctant participant in the professionalization of motherhood. As a middle-class, highly educated, mother of two young children, I fall precisely into the demographic of women expected to be professional mothers, and indeed, many of the mothers around me are embracing it. I am increasingly skeptical of the tenets of this approach, however, so I write this essay as a dissatisfied insider. Consider me the office grumbler, attempting to foster discontent for the sake of institutional reform.

This journal asks contributors to consider a dilemma from the perspective of a professional at odds with the public square: To that call for a double-sided consideration, I would like to add a couple more perspectives. As a critical member of the profession of motherhood, I speak as a dissenter. I am therefore presenting the view from inside the profession along with a critique of it. Furthermore, in this case, widely-held opinion aligns itself with the professionalization of motherhood, but it seems to me to be at odds with what genuine democracy demands. Democracy and mass opinion are not synonymous, and in this case the claims of democracy demand to be heard separately from majority opinion. My discussion, therefore, does not precisely conform to the plot line of the call for papers, but the exploration of my dilemma reveals something important about how professional judgment can clash with the requirements of democracy in a variety of ways.

The Dilemma

I have two daughters, one of whom started kindergarten last fall. Because we live in Chicago, my husband and I were offered a smorgasbord of kindergarten choices, not all actually available to us, but out there to apply for. We could send her to the neighborhood school, or a public magnet school, or perhaps a public gifted and talented program, if she qualified. Or we could pull out of the public school system and send her to one of the local Catholic schools or other private schools around. Third, we could leave Chicago for the suburbs. Because my husband and I are both professors, all these options were within the realm of financial possibility. Furthermore, as two professors of education, we had considerable non-financial resources available: tips from fellow educators who know the schools well, expertise deciphering bureaucratic procedures, and insights into what the selective schools were looking for. We had social and cultural capital, as well as money.

We ruled out several of the options from the start. Neither of us wanted to leave the city for the suburbs, and frankly we could not easily afford to move right now even if we did. Nor did we consider sending our daughter to the more elite and expensive private schools. The magnet and gifted schools were possibilities but not certainties, as magnet schools select incoming kindergarteners by lottery, and gifted schools select by testing. The choice, therefore, was between sending her to a selective public school if she got in, the local Catholic school, or the neighborhood public school.

To my surprise, very few of the mothers I talked to even considered the neighborhood schools to be an option for their children (or for mine). Other parents and I talked about school choice when we met at preschool, at birthday parties, and at dance classes. (Fathers were around too, but my conversations about school choice were mainly with mothers.) Over and over I heard mothers say that, because they were strong supporters of the public school system, they'd always been certain they'd send their children to public schools, but once they actually became mothers, they saw matters differently. "It's all about what's best for my kid," I heard again and again. Sometimes this was punctuated with the further comment "it has to be, because I'm a mother." Not all of these mothers were opting out entirely; many who lived in the city sent their children to public magnet schools, and others moved to the suburbs rather than send their children to private schools. Many expressed uneasiness with the moral implications of their choices, but the prevailing logic was that motherhood imposes first priority demands. The consensus seemed to be that if one's child did not get into a magnet or gifted program but was staying in Chicago, he or she would, and *should* (for the child's sake), attend one of the Catholic schools, which do, in fact, serve a fairly diverse, and not solely Catholic, population.

I too had always been sure I'd send my child to the public schools. My mother was a lifelong public school teacher, and I grew up immersed in the belief that people have a moral obligation to support (in part by sending their children to) public schools. At present I am teaching my college's Urban Education courses, and reading in this field has made even more clear to me how important *middle-class* support is for *urban* public school systems. The Chicago Public School system needs parents like me and my husband opting in and sharing our resources with children who have less. When I talk about this with childless colleagues in education, I often hear that there's only one right answer: How could anyone, knowing what we know about schooling and holding egalitarian political beliefs, do anything but send her daughter to the local public school? Part of me, however, sympathized with the mothers around me who were saying that when your own kids are the issue, matters look different. They do. All the same, I was not willing to let my child's best interests be the trump card either. This was a genuine dilemma.

Professionalizing Motherhood

Before embarking on discussion of this dilemma, a more detailed consideration of contemporary motherhood is in order. Because discussions of motherhood are an ideological minefield, let me begin with the caveat that this essay makes no claims to tell the truth about all mothers, or the whole truth about any mothers. Rather, it presents a few sociological studies of motherhood and child-raising, which substantiate the claim that motherhood is professionalized and illuminate professionalized motherhood's outlook on school choice.

Contemporary mothers share an ideology that Sharon Hays (1996) identifies and names "the ideology of intensive mothering."^[2] Even when they do not embrace all the practices associated with this ideology, Hays shows, contemporary mothers recognize it as familiar and see the need to defend their decisions and choices against the demands it makes. It has a logic familiar to all contemporary mothers, reflected also in child-raising guidebooks, and consonant with the historical development of child-rearing practices and ideologies since early modern times. According to this logic, children are pure, innocent and helpless and need a selfless nurturer who will shelter them from the corrosive outside world, either by providing care herself or ensuring that alternative (although inevitably second-best) care is provided. The mother/child bond is uniquely tight, and lasting, and essential to a child's healthy psychological development. Only a mother (not a father, other family member, or paid caretaker) can provide this care. Mothers are responsible for "nurturing, listening,

responding, explaining, negotiating, distracting, and searching for appropriate alternative care,” practices which are “so labor-intensive, so time-consuming, so energy-absorbing” because mothers “understand themselves as largely responsible for the way their children turn out” (Hays, 1996, p. 120). Also importantly, mothers are held responsible by others for their children’s well-being, which means that choosing not to adopt tenets of this ideology requires a defense – which is often made in terms of the ideology itself. Mothers who work full-time, for instance, often defend this choice as “better for the child in the long-run.”

For Hays, the ideology of intensive mothering is a conundrum – and one half of a cultural contradiction. Classical sociological theory predicted that the predominating ideology of modern market societies, which views human behavior as the actions of *homo economicus*, would come to pervade all spheres of life. Although home was ideologically walled off from the heartless world of industrial capitalism for a time (by laws and cultural practices that required “proper” women to stay home with children and reserved the public sphere for men), according to these theories sooner or later the walls would cave in and families too would be dominated by the ideology of self-interest maximization. Some sociologists (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, et al 1985) argue that this is happening, but Hays argues that mothers’ adherence to the ideology of intensive mothering shows that this has *not* happened as conclusively as expected. Mothers are holding onto a culturally contradictory logic: Without denying capitalist market logic, they hold fast to a contradictory ideology, which calls on mothers to deny self-interest, ignore profit, and dedicate themselves to a time-consuming, psychologically demanding model of child-raising.

Hays considers, but ultimately finds incomplete, four explanations of mothers’ adoption of the ideology of intensive mothering: mothers’ natural propensity to love and nurture their children; the notion that intensive mothering *is* a rational utility-maximizing choice for women; women’s subjection and relative disempowerment in the face of capitalism, the modern state and patriarchy; and the possibility that intensive mothering is a means of fighting back against the opposed logic of rational pursuit of self-interest. Although all these arguments have their force, she argues, none is conclusive. Instead, motherhood contains, but has not managed to resolve, the contradictory tugs of modern culture. We are called to be utility maximizers, but we are saddened by the loss of, and unwilling to give up entirely, the other-regarding bonds of community. Deep human relationship has been relegated to mothers and children, but it exists there in uneasy tension with the otherwise overwhelming ideology of modern market society.

Hays is a sociologist of knowledge, and on the level of ideology, motherhood does seem to profess ideals at odds with rational self-interest and utility-maximization. Empirical studies of what mothers actually do, however, suggest that the practices of market capitalism have overflowed into the family more than Hays acknowledges. In *The Time Bind* (1997), Arlie Russell Hochschild explores a related conundrum: Why do many working mothers report that they would prefer to spend *more* hours at work, even as family time is increasingly crowded out by ever longer working hours? Her ethnographic research, carried out at a corporation considered one of the top 10 family-friendly workplaces in the US, where, however, only a small fraction of workers take advantage of the corporation’s flexible scheduling options, reveals a reversal between the worlds of home and work. Traditionally, home is considered a “haven” and work the “heartless world.”^[3] Home is where we forge community and nourish our well-being, according to this traditional model, and work is where we are harnessed by clock-driven demands. Increasingly, however, women report that the workplace is where they feel in control, accomplished, and connected to a social world. Work is where they have time for friends and feel self-satisfaction and well-being. At home, in contrast, they are unpleasantly deluged with the demands of family – what Hochschild (1989) calls “the third shift.”^[4]

The implications of this reversal are profound. “The social world that draws a person’s allegiance also imparts a pattern to time,” Hochschild notes. “The more attached we are to the world of work, the more its deadlines, its cycles, its pauses and interruptions shape our lives and the more family time is forced to accommodate to the pressures of work” (1997, p. 45). Inasmuch as women are drawn to the world of work, family time is restructured. It is, in Hochschild’s analysis, “industrialized.” Nowadays, families “outsource” a great deal of the work that used to take place inside the home – childcare, counseling, entertainment, tutoring, cooking. Furthermore (and in my opinion most ominously), family time is Taylorized just as work time has been.^[5] Family time has fallen subject to the cult of efficiency, and mothers frantically multi-task to achieve more in less time.

As anyone who spends time with small children knows, however, children experience time differently. Examining a dandelion cannot be scheduled and can take a long time, no matter if it’s found on an urgent trip to the grocery store. Going down the slide can take an hour, or 30 seconds, depending on a child’s mood. And small children respond to the Taylorization of their lives, Hochschild (1997) suggests, as assembly-line workers have responded to speed-ups: with slow-downs. Furthermore, emotional work may not be Taylorizable: Love can’t be built on schedule. In her research, she found many examples of small children resisting their parents’ urges to hurry up, finish up, not keep others waiting. Children’s

deliberate slow-downs are often tremendously frustrating and stressful for their already stressed-out parents – which makes home less appealing and work more so. The cycle of reversing home and work continues.

Or not. Some women have resorted to opting out of work. Lisa Belkin (2003) portrays a group of highly educated, elite professional women who got tired of the demands of work, did not like the effects on their family lives, and opted out of the fast professional tracks of law, business, and journalism. Some of these women are full-time mothers; others work part-time, typically at less demanding jobs. Not all elite professional women are opting out by any means, although a flurry of newspaper articles following Belkin's article suggested that they increasingly were. How much of women's decision to stay home is a choice, and how much is the result of inflexible, hostile workplaces, is at present the subject of much debate. Suffice it to say here that the ideology of intensive mothering, combined with the rising demands of American workplaces and lack of public support for children's welfare (e.g., healthcare, daycare, maternity and paternity leave) create severe difficulties for American mothers, privileged and otherwise.

Annette Lareau has charted the effects of these socio-economic trends on American child-raising patterns. In *Unequal Childhoods* (2003), she identifies a significant class divide among families. In their uses of time, language, and discipline, middle-class parents pursue a strategy that she calls "concerted cultivation." Much family time is spent on scheduled, outside-the-home activities, such as piano lessons, sports leagues, and gymnastics classes, which are considered important because they enable children to develop their interests and skills. Children have little free time to spend with brothers and sisters or neighborhood friends. Friendships, in fact, are mostly conducted through scheduled activities; birthday parties and other informal social events are treated as less important than organized soccer games. Parents talk to children extensively, encouraging them to express their opinions as well as to question and negotiate with authorities. Parental authority itself is expressed through language rather than physical discipline, and parents reason with their children, rather than demanding obedience to hierarchical authority.

Lareau contrasts concerted cultivation with the pattern she finds among working-class and poor families, which she calls "the accomplishment of natural growth" (first cited, p. 3). Parents using this strategy treat time, language and discipline quite differently. Children are believed to flourish with large amounts of unscheduled time, and adult intervention in their activities is not considered a worthwhile use of anyone's time. Poor and working-class parents use fewer words with their children, and although children prove quite capable of expressing opinions, adults do not actively cultivate this ability, nor do they cultivate the questioning of authorities and negotiation. Finally, discipline is a matter of rules and sometimes physical force, not reason. Lareau points out that this strategy has many positive effects. Children seem happier, more rested, more childlike. They get along better with siblings, and are quite creative in their uses of free time. The accomplishment of natural growth does not, however, mesh as neatly with the procedures and expectations of schools and the workplace as does concerted cultivation, which encourages children to engage in many time-management and linguistic practices that institutions expect and reward. As a result, poor and working-class children find themselves disadvantaged *vis a vis* their middle-class peers, and privilege is passed down.

Not all parents are taking home the norms of professional life and applying them to their families, but middle-class mothers often are – and find themselves in a culture that expects them to do so. As Hays shows, and Ann Hulbert (2003) documents in greater detail, over the course of the 20th century (and into the 21st), child-raising experts have become a louder and louder voice in the realms of child-raising. What experts advocate is not always adopted by individual mothers, but it is reasonable to read parenting guidebooks as a backdrop of cultural expectations that accurately reflects what widely held opinion, especially among the educated middle class likely to be buying and reading such texts, expects mothers to be. And the best-selling child-raising manuals very much echo the ideology of intensive mothering that Hays presents: knowledge-based, guided by standards developed by professionals in the field, requiring intense investments of time and money. New mothers are warned to be extremely suspicious of folk knowledge passed down by previous generations of mothers. What one's own mother did is presented as unreliable, outdated, and frequently dangerous. Starting when the child is still *in utero*, new mothers are expected to immerse themselves in standards-based child-raising.^[6] The mother who prefers not to finds herself at odds with what others at work and at home expect of her. Middle-class women find professionalized motherhood thrust upon them whether they want to adopt it or not.^[7]

Ideologically and practically, motherhood has been turned into a sort of profession. It demands expert knowledge and adherence to standards; it adopts many of the time-related, linguistic and disciplinary practices of the modern workplace; it calls for an intensive investment of time and identity; and it contains ideals and intrinsic aims. Although these features may or may not correlate to what particular mothers actually do, contemporary American mothers find themselves held up to the expectation that they will practice professional motherhood. But this shift leaves some very big problems, for women, children, and society at large. For an exploration of some of these problems, I turn to the dilemma of school

choice.

School Choice

From the perspective of social justice, the dilemma of school choice sometimes seems to have a straightforward answer: Middle-class parents have an ethical obligation to send their children to public schools. To do otherwise, this logic implies, perpetuates a system in which schooling segregates children racially and/or socio-economically and conveys inequitable advantage. However, there is an important distinction to be made between the idealized choices that discussions of social justice often pose and the choices that parents actually face. In his discussion of school choice and parents' moral obligations, Adam Swift argues that for a number of reasons having to do with fairness and equity, private and selective schools ought not to exist. "But knowing what the ideal society looks like," he continues, "doesn't necessarily tell us much about what to do, here and now, in the far from ideal world we actually live in" (Swift, 2003, pxiii). Parents of kindergarteners are not invited to restructure the educational system. We are given a more limited choice: Given the world as it exists on the first Tuesday after Labor Day of next September, to what school should I send my child?

In making this decision, parents have an obligation to consider both social justice *and* the welfare of their own children. Some partiality is legitimate. For instance, as Swift points out, reading bedtime stories to one's children has been shown to convey unequal advantage, but it would be unjustifiable to insist that parents not do so. Equality is good, but there are other goods at stake, including freedom and family intimacy. That said, Swift does not let parents off the hook too quickly. Swift suggests that parents are only justified in opting to send our children to private or selective schools under certain conditions, e.g., serious risk of psychological or emotional harm coming from school, bullying, and the school's provision of an education that is truly inadequate.^[8] He cautions, however, that to be justified in opting out, parents need to have accurate information and solid grounds for believing that the local public school is inadequate. Reputation and suspicion will not suffice. Furthermore, he notes that a school that provides a "good enough" education cannot be judged inadequate on the grounds that it does not provide competitive advantage.

When my husband and I were considering where to send our daughter, we visited our neighborhood school, where we were given a tour by the Assistant Principal. The building is new, and inside it was bright and clean, with children's art on the walls. The staff was polite, friendly and professional. While showing us around the school, the Assistant Principal told us about the particular challenges the school faces – children speaking 30 different languages, some of which are spoken by no teachers or available volunteers. In my mind, this explained why the school has achieved passable but mediocre test scores: a large number of children starting school without much English, and many parents marginally literate at best. She showed us how the school has carved out space from the library so that volunteers can work with children who speak little or no English; meanwhile, adequate room seemed to be available for books and a librarian. The school had computers, decent instructional materials, a gym/cafeteria, and a new, well-kept playground. In short, this school was an institution doing reasonably well with the resources at hand, and this impression is supported by what other parents whose children attend the school tell us.

Last September, however, my daughter started attending one of Chicago's selective public schools for gifted children, which granted her a spot based on her test scores. In the neighborhood school's kindergarten we visited, which was presented to us as the advanced kindergarten class, the students were reading at about the level our preschool-aged daughter was reading at that time. Had she gone there, she would have learned a lot about democracy and urban living, how to live and work side-by-side and make friends with people who are different from you. She would not have learned much in the way of math and literacy, not to mention science, music and art, which, the Assistant Principal told us, are put aside when standardized testing time comes around. I think we made a justifiable choice, as the education she would have gotten at the neighborhood school would not have been adequate *for her*. A certain amount of boredom may be an inevitable part of schooling, but she would have been bored beyond justification. But I remain troubled by the fact that a well-run local school is unable to provide an intellectually engaging education to students like my daughter, troubled above all that we had to make a choice between academics and democracy. In the choice my husband and I made, my daughter gets a good education, but she and other students lose something tremendously valuable too.

It would be absurd to hold the ideology of intensive motherhood entirely responsible for the problems of America's urban schools, but I think it plays a significant and under-examined role.^[9] At the heart of this ideology are problematic assumptions about responsibility for the welfare of children, stemming from the fundamental belief that *mothers are responsible for their own children*. From this *prima facie* unproblematic idea, some very problematic implications follow. For any particular child, no one *except* the child's own mother is held responsible. And mothers are responsible for no

children except their own. In recent years it has become more common for fathers to be their children's primary care-taker, and still more common for fathers to be intensively involved in their children's lives, but even if we expand the ideology to include both parents – call it “intensive parenting” – it remains problematic.^[10] No one would then be responsible for children except their own parents, and parents would be responsible for no children except their own.

In the case of school choice, intensive parenting works against democracy and social justice inasmuch as it provides ideological support for defining choices and limiting responsibility starkly. It supports my making a choice that protects only the interests of my own child, under the assumption that no other parent considers it his or her obligation to take my child's interests into account.^[11] And the evidence is that they do not: The majority of my middle-class, well-educated peers are not supporting communal welfare and improving local public schools by sending their children to the neighborhood school. Nor should they, since they have no reason to believe that if they send their children, other middle-class parents will do the same. (After all, when given the chance to send my daughter elsewhere, I took it.) The ideology of intensive parenting creates a classic prisoner's dilemma.

Liberal theory might respond that I need to recognize the demands of justice and, using the tools of reason, encourage my fellow parents to recognize them too, but my school choice dilemma is the kind of on-the-ground situation that highlights a critical weakness of liberalism: It can tell us what justice is but gives us little impulse to pursue it. Why bother? Because it is right to do so, but in practice, the pursuit of justice would likely make me a social nuisance – one more of those parents trying to press their political and moral views at parties and on the playground. I don't listen to the parents who explain to me that leather shoes entail animal slavery, that evidence on the internet challenges the medical establishment's presumption that immunization is safe and healthy, that organic cauliflower is really the only option, and I doubt they'd listen to me. If I go for the softer sell, social justice becomes an arcane hobby – something I take up while other mothers support youth soccer and plant gardens. Social justice may be morally right, but so long as the ideology of intensive parenting has love, power, money, and social acceptability on its side (and it does), the ideology has more motivational force.

The best way out of a prisoner's dilemma is cooperation, of course, but social cooperation has no place in the ideology of intensive mothering, which makes no demands of anyone outside the mother/child dyad. For cooperation to happen in the domain of school choice, the ideology of intensive mothering, and the professionalization of motherhood I have associated with it, needs to be disrupted and replaced with a better model. Reasons to do so extend beyond school choice, as there are multiple domains within which we might consider contemporary constructions of motherhood and child-raising to be bad for mothers, bad for children, and bad for democracy. The dilemma of school choice, which is laden with implications about the inadequacies and injustices of our public school system, provides a window into a partial selection of these reasons.

Making mothers entirely responsible for the well-being of their own children makes individual mothers responsible for projects no one can carry out alone. So long as I cannot depend on my fellow parents to support neighborhood schools for the sake of all our children, and they cannot depend on me to do the same, we are all stuck, and the same goes for many other aspects of bringing children up to adulthood. Valorizing mothers might seem a way to raise our status, but inasmuch as it makes no demands of men, the state, and capitalism, it instead leaves women (and children) holding out with limited resources in an increasingly threatened fortress (Hays, 1996). When mothers are viewed as the true and only keystones to their children's welfare, the need for publically supported healthcare, childcare, and universal, high-quality education disappears – conveniently for men, the childless, corporations and the state, inconveniently for all mothers and extremely so for the economically strapped. In Hays's words, the ideology of intensive mothering “has never been an entirely satisfactory solution to the problems of modernity. The cultural model of intensive mothering, after all, suggests that all the troubles of the world can be solved by the individual efforts of superhuman women” (p. 177). Privileged mothers can move our children into better positions – and find ourselves expected to do so or face charges of unprofessional behavior – but acting alone we cannot alter the playing field. Less privileged women, I hardly need add, are in far more difficult straits.

Nor is professionalized motherhood good for children. One might consider it simply a problem of justice, relating to the inequitable distribution of resources (with privileged children given a leg up by their own parents, while other children are left in the lurch), but I would argue that it is not necessarily good for privileged children either. Inasmuch as children are cast as innocent, pure and helpless, they are granted little agency, little power, little freedom to explore, to strive, and to play meaningful, productive roles in family and social life. The middle-class children Annette Lareau portrays strike me as deprived of genuine goods: close sibling relationships, opportunities to play imaginatively, control of their own time. Steven Mintz (2004) has documented changes in American childhood, from Colonial times to the present, which lead to children now being in many ways less free and less empowered than they used to be. Although Mintz emphasizes that in

many respects, including material comfort, health and safety, and family stability, the lives of American children are dramatically better now than ever before, children from earlier eras reported great satisfaction with the power and freedom they used to be given. Allowed and expected to work and to contribute to the family's survival, many children expressed pride and pleasure in their role as workers. In the workplace, children were given meaningful roles and also, significantly, the opportunity to forge deep and valuable relationships with older children and adults. In contrast, contemporary norms of middle-class child-rearing place a tremendous amount of pressure on children to achieve, yet provide few meaningful outlets for them to achieve what really matters. Relationships are limited to peer groups and the family. Children are thus caught in a disturbing paradox. Although they mature physiologically faster than ever, and have ever greater access to commercial culture, "contemporary American society isolates and juvenilizes young people more than ever before" (Mintz, 2004, p. 380) No one is well-served when parents try to wall their children in, yet for children to navigate the outside world, they require help and guidance from mentors beyond their own parents. For this, we need norms of shared responsibility for other people's children.

Strong high quality neighborhood schools could play a role here. A return to earlier modes of childhood, when children worked instead of attending school, is not desirable, but where then are children to find relationships with responsible adults and older peers? The neighborhood is one plausible answer, and schools have great potential for making a neighborhood a community.

Finally, in its dismissal of community responsibility for child-raising, professionalized motherhood is bad for democracy. By democracy, I mean Dewey's notion of democracy as "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (1916/1966, p. 87). His restatement of this definition in *The Public and Its Problems* relates the idea of democracy to my school choice dilemma even more clearly: "Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community. The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy" (1927/1988, p. 328). Professionalized motherhood involves no conjoint activity, no consciousness of a communal life, no awareness of its implications. As such, it is anti-democratic.

Conclusion

In the process of figuring out where my daughter would go to school, I heard the story of a magnet school principal addressing an eager group of prospective parents. According to a parent in attendance, the principal looked at the crowd, shook his head and sighed that if all of them would just send their children to the neighborhood schools, there would be no need for magnets. Given the complex tangles of American demographic and residential patterns, school funding, and education policy, that assertion might or might not be empirically accurate, but it reflects a simple, yet important, idea. If cooperation in supporting ordinary public schools, rather than withdrawal from them and removal to someplace better, were expected of middle-class parents, those schools would be better places. For that to happen, however, we need to change not only our thinking about schools but our thinking about responsibility for children and child-raising. To do so would be to the benefit of mothers, children, and American democracy as well as public education.

References

- Bellah, R., R. Madsen, W. Sullivan, A. Swidler and S. Tipton. (1985). *Habits of the heart*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Belkin, L. (2003, October 26). The opt-out revolution. *The New York Times Magazine*, 42.
- Dewey, J. (1916/66). *Democracy and education*. New York: Basic Books
- Dewey, J. (1927/1988). *The public and its problems*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University.
- Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hulbert, A. (2003). *Raising America*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Hochschild, A. (1997) *The time bind*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

- Hochschild, A. (1989) *The second shift*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Lareau, A. (2003) *Unequal childhoods*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lasch, C. (1977) *Haven in a heartless world*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Mintz, S. (2004). *Huck's raft*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rosin, H. (2009, April). The case against breast-feeding. *The Atlantic Monthly*. 303, 3, 64-70.
- Swift, A. (2003). *How not to be a hypocrite*. London, UK: Routledge.

Notes

[1] This claim, of course, does not apply to all contemporary mothers. Professionalized motherhood, for reasons having to do with education, family practices, financial resources, and cultural expectations, is by and large the practice of relatively privileged, well-educated, middle-class mothers of young children. (I am told that even when one's children are completely grown-up one never *retires* as a mother, but this essay refers mainly to the ideas and practices of mothers of young children.) Below I explore contemporary constructions of motherhood in more detail, but I want to be very clear from the outset that I do not mean to suggest that mothers who are not taking part in the professionalized motherhood *zeitgeist* are somehow not *true* mothers. Throughout, I shall use "professionalized mothers" to refer to those mothers who treat motherhood as a practice analogous to the professions.

[2] More precisely, contemporary mothers in the United States.

[3] See, e.g., Lasch, 1977.

[4] Work is the first shift, housekeeping the second, as Hochschild documents in her earlier book *The Second Shift* (1989). The third shift is emotional work: the demanding job of attending to the feelings of other family members, and this tends to fall overwhelmingly on mothers, as Hochschild documents.

[5] Frederick Taylor, also known as "Speedy Fred", was an early 20th century efficiency expert, whose ideas for speeding up work and making industrial production more efficient were eagerly adopted by American corporations at the time. Taylorization refers to the application of ideals of efficiency and speed to factories but also to other domains, e.g., school and family life.

[6] For a marvelous critique of what this means for nursing mothers, see Rosin (2009). Rosin's article also provides ample evidence of the pressure mothers put on one another to conform to expectations.

[7] This feature of professionalized motherhood – the fact that it is a status middle-class women are expected to accept whether they like it or not – also makes motherhood rather different from the traditional professions, such as law, medicine, and the professoriate, where initiates have to struggle to get in, not struggle to get out. But as noted at the beginning, I am not arguing that motherhood ought to be considered a profession, only that it has picked up some of the characteristics of one.

[8] For the full list of Swift's conditions, see *How Not to Be a Hypocrite*, especially chapters 7 and 8, and the handy questionnaire at the end.

[9] Annette Lareau's work is a step in the right direction. *Unequal Childhoods* (which uses Hays's work as an important source) examines how social class affects child-raising, and how child-raising affects school outcome. As a social scientist presenting empirical substantiation for theoretical claims about the effects of cultural capital, however, Lareau carefully avoids criticizing either model of child-raising. I think criticism *is* in order, not of parents for the choices they make, but of the underlying ideology that underlies the choices available.

[10] Fathers' increasing participation in their children's upbringing does not mean that mothers are now free of the burdens this ideology puts on them, and by no means am I suggesting that gender inequity is no longer a problem. My point here is that even if fathers were to be wholly included, the idea that nuclear families are the unit that matters is still problematic.

^[11] According to Swift, even if I can un-hypocritically send my child to a selective school, I still have some obligations to make the regular public schools better. I appreciate his recognition of this, but this is still an unsatisfactory resolution of the larger problem, inasmuch as it leaves other problematic assumptions about parental responsibility untouched.