Teachers' Perspectives on Race and Gender: Strategic Intersectionality and the Countervailing Effects of Privilege

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For Chuck, the love of my life, and my daughters, Emily and Anna
Whenever a teacher asks a student to share something with another student, decides between combatants in a schoolyard dispute, sets procedures for who will go first, second, third, and so on, or discusses the welfare of a student with another teacher, moral considerations are present. The teacher’s conduct, at all times and in all ways, is a moral matter. For that reason alone, teaching is a profoundly moral activity.

Gary D. Fenstermacher,

*Some Moral Considerations on Teaching as a Profession*
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ABSTRACT

As a policy prescription, education is often considered a panacea for racism and sexism, and teachers therefore the conduits for social equality. Strategic intersectionality suggests that teachers who have marked identities, especially those who inhabit more than one, may under certain circumstances experience a “multiple identity advantage” that can situate them as particularly effective advocates for others who are disadvantaged. This institutional ethnography explores the underlying premises of strategic intersectionality and the countervailing effects of privilege through observations and in-depth interviews of teachers in a primarily white elementary school, a primarily Hispanic elementary school, and a primarily African American elementary school, all within the same school district north of Chicago. Despite a commitment to social justice by teachers, the school district, and the town itself, efforts to address issues of race, class, and gender inequality remain rooted in individual-level strategies with no critique of contemporary institutional discrimination. The result is often an attempt by teachers to construct racial and gender utopias in their classrooms where "problems" of race and gender do not exist, and any connections to structural inequalities go unexamined or are presented as historical facts.
CHAPTER ONE

EDUCATION AS A PANACEA FOR RACISM AND SEXISM

As a policy prescription, education is often considered a panacea for racism and sexism. This approach is predicated on several fundamental assumptions: (1) racism and sexism are primarily if not entirely individual-level problems; (2) the education system in the U.S. is structured for equality; (3) teachers and administrators are race- and gender-neutral; (4) racism and sexism are irrational; and (5) education necessarily mitigates ignorance. Yet, empirical evidence clearly demonstrates that racism and sexism are structural in nature (Lorber 1994; Bonilla-Silva 2006); grave disparities exist within the institution of education in the U.S. (Oakes 1985; Kozol 1991; Valenzuela 1999; Delpit 2006); teachers and administrators are not only influenced by cultural assumptions regarding race and gender but often perpetuate these assumptions whether deliberate or not (Foster 1990; Ferguson 1998); dominant group members have a rational interest in maintaining social inequalities (Lipsitz 2006); and finally, that education may actually provide more effective strategies to mask racism and sexism as opposed to challenge them (Kane and Kyrro 2001).

Even so, education remains the most common answer to the question what can be done to address race- and gender-based prejudice. Multiculturalism is assumed to be the most common palliative for racism, while learning strategies that challenge traditional notions of gender are offered as solutions for enduring androcentric curricula, or more
recently a return to single-sex schooling. I argue that both approaches are ineffective means for addressing institutional racism and sexism. On the other hand, an increase in feminist, antiracist teachers who structure the learning environment in such a way that privilege, whether white, male, and/or heterosexual, is not only proscribed but fundamentally problematized holds far more promise for alleviating race and gender discrimination at both the individual and institutional level. This is a solution that can only be effective, however, if teachers are indeed sensitive to these types of privileges.

Strategic intersectionality suggests that persons who have marked identities, especially those who share more than one, may under certain circumstances exhibit a “multiple identity advantage” (Fragia et al. 2006) that may situate them as particularly effective advocates for others who are disadvantaged. The logic implied here supposes, for example, that women teachers of color from working-class backgrounds are more likely to be sensitive to privileges and inequalities related to race, class, and gender, and therefore uniquely positioned to structure the learning environment in ways that challenge racism and sexism at both the micro- and macro-level. What about teachers, however, who are socially located within a privileged category? Are they less sensitive to social inequality, and if so, is this primarily a factor of their whiteness, their maleness, their economic advantage, and/or their relationship to privileged students?

The purpose of this study is to explore the underlying premises of strategic intersectionality and the countervailing effects of privilege. Identifying common variables that emerge among teachers who are antiracists and/or feminists, and those who are not, I believe will provide the necessary data for school districts, teacher education
programs, and advocacy groups concerned with alleviating institutional racism and sexism in schooling and beyond, to develop recruitment and training programs in order to attract and retain these potential educators. Incorporating multiculturalism and gender-neutral materials in teacher education programs and in school curricula have failed to alleviate inequality in schooling. Indeed, if reform efforts are to achieve any degree of success, it is imperative to first understand whether teachers are in fact aware of the pervasiveness of racial and gender inequality in schooling, and the extent to which teachers address or avoid race- and gender-related issues within and beyond the classroom.

**Racial Inequality in Education**

In the United States, education like “race” and “gender” reflects a number of interesting paradoxes. On the one hand, education is assumed to be a great equalizer and at the same time a vehicle for social mobility. If one takes into account socioeconomic status, for example, there are measured differences according to General Social Survey data in income among those who hold a bachelor’s degree versus a high school diploma. Yet, when this statistic is further broken out by gender and race, it becomes clear the income of white males with bachelor’s degrees is significantly higher than other demographic groups. This reflects the other side of the coin: education in many ways is a failing system that instead of “equalizing” actually perpetuates inequalities and reproduces privilege (Weber 1946; Sorokin 1956; Tyack 1974; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Bourdieu 1977; Collins 1979; Oakes 1985; Coleman and Hoffer 1987; Gutmann 1987; Kozol 1991; Valenzuela 1999; Blau 2003; Duncan 2005; Delpit 2006; Harry and Klinger
In 1976, Bowles and Gintis wrote, “The education system, perhaps more than any other contemporary social institution, has become the laboratory in which competing solutions to the problems of personal liberation and social equality are tested and the arena in which social struggles are fought out.” (114) Today education as a policy solution for addressing social inequalities continues to garner widespread public support as well as the support of many social scientists (see, for example, Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996; Blau 2003; Bush 2004). According to Kane and Kyrro (2001), the relationship between education and beliefs about racial and gender inequality, “suggests that education may play a role in shifting inequality out of the shadows and into the spotlight by reducing people's adherence to beliefs that legitimate inequalities of gender and race.” (p. 711) Yet, this logic clearly ignores the structural consequences of race and gender; it suggests a policy solution predicated on the assumption that racism and sexism are rooted in individual beliefs and behaviors and therefore with the “right” education bigots will come to recognize their ignorance and abandon their prejudices.

Consensus on what constitutes the “right” type of education when it comes to racial equality generally includes a student body that is racially and ethnically diverse (Wolters 2008) and incorporates multicultural curricula. Indeed, multiculturalism has been the source of much scholarly debate over the past couple of decades and remains controversial for many (Sears et al. 2000) including parents, faculty and administrators, who do not wish to implement such curricula in their schools (Bagley 1992; Hartigan 1999) and others who believe individuals have the right to determine how much of their
energies to devote to their communities of descent (Hollinger 1996). However, social scientists that support multicultural education as a way to address racial inequality see measured potential. According to Blau (2003), “multicultural arenas help whites to reflect on their taken-for-granted privileges and presumptions and to consider the dark side of racial oppression, which in turn helps them to discover the importance of responsibility, mutual trust, and respect for their darker-skinned brothers and sisters.” (p. 214; see also Feagin et al. 1996; Parks and Kennedy 2007)

While some scholars like Blau (2003) argue that multicultural education initiatives have already generated great success, others believe there is potential for success only if a number of important shortcomings are addressed. For example, some scholars challenge that all too often multiculturalism leaves structural power dynamics such as the effects of capitalism unexamined (Darder and Torres 1998) and instead focuses on increasing self-esteem among nonwhite students or increasing white students’ understanding of history (Bush 2004). Indeed, according to Lewis (2005), “Multiculturalism as currently manifested not only does little to challenge students’ understanding of culture, difference, and race, but in fact serves to defend the status quo.” (p. 35) Further, multiculturalism may also increase white supremacy; Perry’s (2001) observation of multicultural education opportunities at a predominantly nonwhite high school revealed that it provided white students with the opportunity to gain new information about “exotic others” while further obscuring “white culture.” Finally, while teacher education programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in recent years have incorporated multicultural training and curriculum, Parks and Kennedy (2007) point
out that exposing pre-service teachers to a concept is not sufficient for incorporating its values into their teaching philosophy: students must first recognize their own biases and seek to reduce them (p. 941; see also Smith-Maddox and Soloranzo 2002; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2008; Pollock 2008).

In addition to scholars’ concerns about the merits of multiculturalism, there are also broader considerations about education as a policy solution for racial inequality. First, there is the question as to whether a system social scientists have empirically shown to reproduce inequalities through its differential treatment of minority students (Fernandez 2002; Morris 2007) should be the foundation of a policy to reduce inequalities. According to Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2008), “Contrary to the popular belief that educators across the world have typically been agents for progressive racial change, the weight of the evidence suggests that most educational systems, and most educators operate to maintain racial hierarchy rather than to challenge it.” (p. 334) In Lortie’s (1975) influential study of schoolteachers, for example, he found persons who were attracted to the teaching profession tended to favor the status quo as opposed to embrace progressive change. Indeed, according to Delpit (2006), “A primary source of stereotyping is often the teacher education program itself. It is in these programs that teachers learn that poor students and students of color should be expected to achieve less than their ‘mainstream’ counterparts.” (p. 172; see also Valenzuela 1999)

Further, Gillborn (2005) argues that education policy is an act of white supremacy based on the priorities it sets, the beneficiaries that it privileges, and the outcomes it produces. This includes educational reforms such as the No Child Left Behind Act of
2001 (NCLB) which reifies the use of test scores as markers of student aptitude and achievement; test scores that are consistently higher for white students as opposed to Black students. In fact, Jenks and Phillips (1998) argue the first step toward reducing racial inequality is to reduce the black-white test score gap. In addition, schools remain largely segregated resulting in long-term negative consequences for minority students including the reduced possibility of college-prep placement (Southworth and Mickelson 2007) and acceptance at mostly white colleges (Pettigrew 1985; see also Orfield and Eaton 1996; Noguera 2008; Fletcher and Tienda 2010). Even in integrated schools, however, the widespread use of tracking often creates a racialized learning environment that some scholars argue does the work of de jure segregation (Oakes 1985). According to Oakes, not only has research failed to show any group of students who benefits consistently from homogenous groupings, but the groupings of students that result from tracking and the consequent ways that educators tend to view these students (“good” students are found in high-achieving tracks, “bad” students are found in low-achieving tracks) produces very different experiences of schooling for students (for a counterargument in support of tracking see Noddings 1992; 2007).

Further, while a number of studies have shown that contrary to the premises of oppositional culture theory (Ogbu 1978), Black students are more likely than their white counterparts to value education (Myerson et al. 1998; Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Blau 2003; Hanson 2007; Kelly 2008) they are less likely to develop the skills, habits, and styles that teachers reward because of economic barriers (see also Farkas 1996; Lareau 2003; Battle, Alderman-Swain, and Tyner 2005; Delpit 2006; Harris 2006;
Harry and Klinger 2006). The consequences of these material conditions appear long-term even for minority students, especially Black males, who are accepted into elite institutions ensuring they have less resources with which to help them matriculate college (Alon 2007; see also Feagin et al. 1996). According to Feagin et al., “Claims that serious racial hurdles and animosities are no longer common in higher education are disproved by much evidence from the past and the present.” (p. 9)

In addition to concerns about the appropriation of the educational system to reduce inequalities, there are also important questions regarding the ability of teachers to lead the charge as evidenced by a number of studies examining teacher bias within the classroom (Foster 1990; Rong 1996; Ferguson 1998). According to Farkas (1996), teacher bias may be reflected both in their perceptions of minority students as low achievers who may consequently receive lower test grades and in the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby teachers’ perceive lower potential for minority students and thus provide them with less challenging materials (see also Ferguson 1998; Wood, Kaplan, and McLoyd 2007). This may also partially explain the pervasive discrepancies in test scores; according to Ferguson, “teachers’ perceptions, expectations, and behaviors probably do help to sustain, and perhaps even to expand, the black-white test score gap. The magnitude of the effect is uncertain, but it may be quite substantial if effects accumulate from kindergarten through high school.” (p. 313)

Further, studies of teacher bias in the classroom have yielded a number of troubling findings. Downey and Pribesh (2004), for example, find that white teachers’ bias at least partially explained the fact that Black students were consistently rated as
poorer classroom citizens than white students. The findings of Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, and Brewer (1995) suggest that while teachers’ race, gender, and ethnicity do not affect how much students learn it does seem to influence teachers’ subjective evaluations of students which can influence the way they track minority students and the encouragement they provide to them. In addition, Morris (2005, 2007) found teachers were more likely to discipline differently the bodies of their Black and Latino students, particularly with regard to dress and manners, as opposed to their white or Asian counterparts (see also Scott 2003).

Further, Harry and Klinger (2006) found racial bias present in the ways teachers interacted with children and their tone of voice: “It was present in some teachers’ discomfort with, even fear of, the behavioral styles of their students and in the low expectations that accompanied this discomfort.” (p. 55; see also Wood, Kaplan and McLoyd 2007) Similarly, Ferguson’s (2001) study of Black male students in an inner-city school found that teachers and administrators alike were inclined to identify certain students as criminals. Indeed, Black boys are the most likely students to be assumed at-risk (Noguera 2008) and disproportionately assigned to special education (Arms, Brickett and Graf 2008; Delpit 2006; Harry and Klinger 2006).

Finally, in addition to concerns regarding education as a source of inequality and teacher bias, there is the question as to whether even the “right” education can mitigate racial prejudice. Kane and Kyrro’s (2001) research found that group interests played a significant role in attenuating the effects of education on beliefs about social inequality particularly for dominant group members; the only group they found for whom education
was strongly correlated with progressive social attitudes were Black females uniquely located within interlocking systems of gender and racial oppression (see also Kane 1995). Further, Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) research suggests that younger, educated, middle-class persons may be the most likely to make full use of color-blind resources. In addition, Schuman et al.’s (1997) research revealed that respondents with the least amount of education, less than high school, were the most likely to hold favorable attitudes toward affirmative action as opposed to respondents with high school diplomas or college experience.

**Gender Inequality in Education**

When it comes to sexism, like racism, education is often the most common solution offered for alleviating inequality. Indeed, it is a policy prescription that dates back well over two hundred years. In 1792, proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft implored men to support the education of women, arguing that rationality produced better wives, mothers, and citizens. To this end, she insisted that not only was educating women a civic and moral imperative, but that it should be a coeducational endeavor. Women achieved access to education almost a hundred years before the right to vote, and by the early nineteenth century female education increasingly occurred within a coeducational context. By the twentieth century, however, it was clear to feminists that women’s and girl’s increased access to education and the growing dominance of coeducation had not eliminated gender inequality. From the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s, a new feminist coalition emerged to address both historical and newly emerging gender disparities in education by focusing primarily on the unequal station and
opportunities of adult women in the economic, political, and social life of the nation (Tyack and Hansot 2002/1992, p. 13). According to Tyack and Hansot, patriarchy, sex-role stereotyping, and institutional sexism, were identified as the primary sources of inequality. The efforts of these later feminists eventually bore fruit, leading to the passage of Title IX.

Despite the continued threats to Title IX, many successes have been attributed to this historic piece of legislation:

Not only has it helped eliminate blatant discriminatory practices across educational institutions, but it has helped root out subtler methods of holding women back by closing the gap between men’s and women’s financial aid packages, improving housing opportunities for women students and combating sexual harassment. (Musil 2007, p. 43)

Hahn (2007) equates the major successes of Title IX with greater achievement for girls in math and science, decreased discrimination against pregnant girls and teachers, increased access to vocational schools and programs for men and women, increased earnings and rank for women educators, the prohibiting of sexual harassment, decreasing biases against girls on the PSAT and SAT, and increased funding for women’s athletic programs.

Yet, with all these successes, gender inequality in education remains. Indeed, according to Bobbitt-Zeher (2007), focusing on women’s educational advances can obscure the ways that women remain disadvantaged on several educational measures; “Gender differences on four of these measures, in particular, are implicated in the gender income gap: (1) choice of a college major, (2) skills as measured by standardized tests, (3) amount of education, and (4) selectivity of the college attended. (p. 3; see also David
As Musil (2007) points out while the number of women earning doctoral degrees has increased, doctorates are not distributed evenly for women and men across disciplines, ranging from a low of about 19 percent in engineering and engineering technologies to a high of about 71 percent in psychology. (p. 44) Similarly, while female enrollments have increased in the professional schools, women accounted for only 33 percent of all partners in law firms in 2006 and only 27 percent of doctors. In addition, female physicians are overrepresented in internal medicine, pediatrics, and general family medicine.

Further, while the number of women in higher education has increased, only 34 percent are currently employed at doctoral institutions and women faculty represent only 31 percent of tenured faculty (Musil 2007). In addition, women faculty members are more likely to experience a significant wage penalty in fields that have greater wage dispersion (Langton and Pfeffer 1994; see also Tolbert 1986) and those employed in fields with higher percentages of women faculty (Bellas 1994). When it comes to fields that are dominated by men, women who break through the glass ceiling often find themselves still at a disadvantage. Colander and Holmes’ (2007) study of economics departments at top graduate schools found that compared to male graduate students, women were less integrated into the departments, less satisfied with their educational experience, exhibited more stress, and were less likely to plan for a career in academia. Further, Ayalon (2003) suggests that with women in math and science concentrated in poorly-paid teaching positions the effects of moving into male-dominated disciplines may be overestimated.
According to Johnson (2005), several studies also show that teachers continue to give more of their attention to boys rather than girls, a pattern that appears to continue through the university level (Duffy and Walsh 2001). Further, boys remain more likely to score higher than girls on standardized tests in math and science, while girls tend to score higher in writing (Buchmann, DiPrete, and McDaniel 2008). Similarly, while enrollment in math classes has increased for girls, they are still more likely than boys to graduate from high school having only completed Algebra II (AAUW 2002a/1998; see also Crosnoe, Riegle-Crumb, and Muller 2007). According to the American Association of University Women (AAUW), “Stopping a math education at this level can close the door on future studies, scholarships, and careers.” (p. 281) The same pattern exists for science where minority female students appear particularly disadvantaged (Ong 2005) despite empirical evidence suggesting strong interest in the subject area (Hanson 2007). In general, male high school students and female high school students complete the same number of science classes, but female students are less likely than male students to have taken biology, chemistry, and physics, by the time they graduate (AAUW). Further, Burkam, Lee, and Smerdon (1997) find that male high school students have an advantage over their female colleagues in both the physical and life sciences.

Finally, empirical evidence continues to show that gender stereotypes, much like racial stereotypes, permeate the school environment. Indeed, Jackson and Glee (2005) recently found, for example, that despite fifty years of social change, early school readers showed little deviation across time as far as representations of women, men, parents or families (p. 126). The persistence of these tropes has a number of consequences for
students including the acceptance of certain behaviors for boys, such as verbal abuse, that are negatively sanctioned when displayed by girls (Eliasson, Isaksson, and Laflamme 2007). Traditional notions of gender also continue to influence students’ selection of coursework and career (Guimond and Roussel 2001).

One solution to gender inequality in education that has gained some momentum in recent years is a return to single-sex schooling. Carr (2007) argues that support for single-sex schooling usually falls into one of three categories. The first and most controversial is that boys and girls are hardwired differently and therefore learn differently. For example, a common assumption is that girls benefit from teaching styles that emphasize communication and cooperation while boys benefit from individualized, competitive learning strategies (Tsolidis and Dobson 2002). However, as Campbell and Wahl point out (2002/1998), “While there are some differences between the average girl and the average boy, there are much greater differences among girls and among boys than there are between girls and boys.” (p. 725) Woody (2002) argues this logic not only serves to essentialize gender but it fails to acknowledge the diversity of experiences among boys and girls. (p. 284) Salomone (2003), a supporter of single-sex education, challenges schools to forgo these types of overly broad generalizations concerning boys and girls when constructing all-girl or all-boy learning environments, yet the “essentialism” she attempts to prevent is in viewing all girls and all boys as homogenous; the notion that “essential” differences exist between boys and girls is virtually uncontested.
Indeed, viewing gender as polarized has long underscored the research on boys and girls in schools and has proven to be a major methodological shortcoming. In Thorne’s (1993) study of interaction patterns among boys and girls in coeducational primary schools, she learned firsthand the problems associated with viewing gender as dichotomous as her research uncovered numerous exceptions and qualifications challenging the separate cultures argument. According to Thorne, binary models of gender basically exaggerate gender differences and fail to take into account variation by gender.

Further, an important consequence of the assumption that girls are “model” students and no longer represent an educational challenge is that girls may not be seen as deserving of particular attention or resources (Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth 2007; Williams, Jamieson and Hollingworth 2008; see also Lent and Figueira-McDonough 2002; Saunders et al. 2004; Crosnoe, Riegle-Crumb, and Muller 2007). Indeed, some educational advocates argue that too many resources have been funneled towards initiatives to increase academic success for girls and that now a boy crisis exists in the U.S. According to Sommers (2002/2000):

The federal government, state departments of education, and women’s groups have been expending millions of dollars addressing a surreal self-esteem problem that allegedly afflicts girls more than boys. In the matter of literacy, we have real and genuinely alarming difference between males and females. But this shows boys in trouble, and no one seems to want to talk about that, much less take concerted action to correct it. (p. 706)

Newkirk (2002/2000) suggests the discrepancy in literacy rates between girls and boys can be explained in part by the differences in their narrative preferences. According to
Newkirk, school-defined literacy in coeducational settings favors narrative preferences of girls and tends to view narrative preferences of boys as anti-social and deviant. Because boys’ styles of writing are discouraged, Newkirk argues that male students lose interest in reading and writing.

In general, the explanation for differences in achievement between girls and boys is attributed to public schools becoming “too feminized.” Interestingly, this logic assumes that male teachers by contrast relate to their students in “masculinized” ways, an assumption that has not found empirical support (Francis 2008). Still, Sommers (2002/2000) argues, “American educators need to ask whether, in moving away from skills and drills, phonics, teacher led discussions, competition, and same-sex classes, they have not inadvertently been moving away from what works for boys.” (2002/2000, pp. 710-711) Yet, according to Okopny (2008), those who support the boy crisis argument fail to point out privileged boys have historically studied and excelled in the same types of learning environments they argue are currently failing boys. Further, Rivers and Barnett (2006) point out that when race and class are factored into the analysis it is clear that white suburban boys as compared to inner-city and rural boys are not in ‘crisis.’

The second argument in support of single-sex schooling reflects the neoliberal perspective: parents should have diverse options when it comes to educating their children (Carr 2007). This was the justification used by the Bush Administration when it sought to amend Title IX regulations (“2006 Amendments”) in order to allow school districts greater flexibility in creating single-sex schools and classrooms (Stone 2006). Those who oppose single-gender schooling have found support from the American Civil
Liberties Union (ACLU) and National Organization of Women (NOW), both of which have challenged school systems seeking to implement single-sex initiatives.

The third common argument for single-sex schooling concerns social interactions in the classroom between boys and girls which include distractions related to members of the opposite sex and differences in how boys and girls may be treated in coeducational settings (Carr 2007). Heather (2002) found, for example, that parents’ choice to send their daughters to all-girl schools often reflects concerns about discrimination, sexual distraction, and harassment (see also Hand and Sanchez 2000). According to Tsolidis and Dobson (2006), it is common to see boys as negative influences on girls and girls as having a civilizing effect on boys. Tsolidis and Dobson suggest the reason a ‘boy-free’ environment has been considered beneficial for girls is because some believe it allows girls to, “gain the freedom to be themselves, to exercise leadership and to learn in an environment free of interference and the scrutiny of male classmates.” (p. 216, see also Dumais 2002) Supporters of single-sex schooling consider this especially significant when it comes to traditionally masculine disciplines like science and math (Tsolidis and Dobson).

It is important to note the logic implied here does not take into account sexual orientation (Smith 1998). “Indeed the adult assumption that single-sex education eliminates sexual tensions or distractions denies the existence of homosexual and bisexual youth.” (Campbell and Wahl 2002/1998, p. 726) In general, the education literature is replete with analyses of gender inequality in schooling that ignores or marginalizes the importance of sexuality. Yet, in the United States, gender and sexuality
are inextricably linked; whether theorized as compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) or
the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1999) “normal” sexuality is distinguished by hegemonic
masculinity and emphasized femininity (Connell 1987). The dichotomization of gender
reflected in patriarchal sexuality (Johnson 2005) is closely related to the stigmatization of
important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual, being
closely connected to the institution of marriage; and a key form of subordinated
masculinity is homosexual.” (p. 186) Homophobia is therefore integral to the
construction of hegemonic masculinity (Bem 1993; Kimmel 1994; Pharr 1998; Burn
2000; Pascoe 2007).

Indeed, recent scholarship has uncovered a number of troubling findings with
regard to sexual inequality in schooling. Cahill and Adams’ (2007) study, for example,
found a relationship between teachers who held traditional gender role beliefs and
homophobia. Similarly, in Pascoe’s (2007) ethnography of masculinity construction in a
California high school she noted the frequency with which male students invoked the
specter of the “fag” in order to challenge other students’ masculinity. According to
Pascoe, when boys called each other “fag” it was not an isolated homophobic act, but a
gendered and sexualized insult (see also Smith 1998). Further, Renold (2000) found not
only boys policing the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality through displays of
hegemonic masculinity but girls as well; girls who rejected hyper-feminine displays were
generally free from being stigmatized as long as there were counter-displays of
heterosexuality (see also Tolman 2006). The fear of stigma surrounding homosexuality
is particularly compelling given the number of studies that have shown high rates of victimization among LGBTQ students in school settings (Thurlow 2001; Bontempo and D’Augelli 2002; Lasser and Tharinger 2003).

Finally, in addition to single-sex initiatives, current attempts to address gender inequality in schooling include celebrating Women’s History Month, incorporating gender-neutral language and activities into school curricula, and developing programs to increase female participation and success in math and science. These objectives continue to fall short of achieving gender equality for many of the same reasons multicultural initiatives fail to achieve racial equality. Like Black History Month or Hispanic Heritage Month, Women’s History Month represents a limited time period carved out within the academic calendar to celebrate a handful of important contributions made by a relatively small number of women, not an opportunity to systematically critique patriarchy or white privilege. Similarly, incorporating gender- or race-neutral language and curricular activities does little more than create a façade of political correctness that ultimately masks the material consequences of gender and race both within schooling and beyond. Finally, initiatives to increase enrollments in academic areas in which women and other minorities continue to be underrepresented like math and science are little more than token measures if there are no parallel attempts to challenge the gendered and racialized structure of the labor market (Acker 1990; Collins et al. 1993; Lorber 1994; Risman 1999; Budig and England 2001; Acker 2004).
Intersectional Approaches to Understanding Social Inequalities

Intersectionality has been the focus of a significant amount of scholarship over the past couple of decades. Underlying intersectionality theory is a fundamental problematizing of privilege, which according to Hurtado (1996), is almost a “psychological impossibility” from a competitive, masculinist Western perspective. The basic premise underlying intersectionality theory is that oppressions related to race, class, gender, and sexuality (as well as other marked identities) cannot be understood in isolation from one another; each of these types of inequalities are in fact “interconnected” or “interlocking.” Intersectionality theorizing assumes that to elucidate the consequences of sexism, one must take into account its relationship to racism and socioeconomic status, for example, since everyday experiences in the larger social structure will vary for white, affluent women as opposed to nonwhite, poor women (Frankenberg 1993; Hurtado 1996). A significant contribution of intersectionality theory, therefore, is its conceptual approach to understanding inequality. According to Collins (2000), “Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice.” (p. 18; see also Frisby, Maguire, and Reid 2009)

Intersectionality theory has its roots in Black feminist thought (Collins 2000) and multiracial feminism (Zinn and Dill 1996; see also Belkhir and Barnett 2001). Indeed, a major catalyst for the rise of intersectionality theory has been the marginalization of Black women both within and outside the academy (King 1988; Simien and Clawson 2004; Branch 2007). Research by intersectionality scholars has documented myriad ways
that public policy, the legal system, and academic scholarship concerned with “women” and “minorities,” generally render Black women “invisible” by treating these categories as mutually exclusive (Crenshaw 1991; Hurtado 1996; Marchetti 2008).

A further contribution of the intersectionality framework is its conceptual allowance for innovation. According to Davis (2008), intersectionality has been employed as a theory, heuristic device, and reading strategy for doing feminist analysis. Empirical studies using an intersectional paradigm have explored multiple areas of inquiry including how one’s social location within the structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality impact their experiences of these identities (Zinn and Dill 1996; Kohlman 2006); the connections between masculinity, whiteness and citizenship (Glenn 2004); and the ways in which experiencing intersectional invisibility carries advantages and disadvantages (Kane and Kyyro 2001; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008), creates dilemmas and contradictions in the lives of African Americans (Bernet, Brewer and Kuumba 1999), and affects community development efforts, organizations, and public service (Hunt and Zajicek 2008).

As one might expect, however, along with the rise of intersectionality theory has emerged important criticisms. In particular, scholars have raised questions about the methodological challenges presented by intersectional theorizing (McCall 2005; Simien and Clawson 2004; Cuadraz and Uttal 1999). For example, a fundamental premise of intersectionality theory is that inequalities related to race, class, gender, and sexuality, are far too complex to simply be added together in order to explicate their consequences (King 1988). Yet, some scholars who have used intersectionality theory argue that it is
almost impossible from a methodological standpoint to measure multiple oppressions without a resulting additive effect (Bowleg 2008; West and Fenstermaker 1995).

Theoretically, for example, intersectionality should allow for the possibility of innumerable constellations of interconnected lines of difference (Davis 2008). The possibility of endless intersecting inequalities, however, creates a potential methodological pitfall in that some important intersections may be mis-theorized or under-theorized (King 1988). According to Hill (2005), the efforts to recognize the significance of intersecting oppressions related to race, class, gender, and sexuality, “can yield a bewildering array of demographic categories (e.g., black/poor/female, wealthy/Hispanic/lesbian) that may ultimately mask the diverse experiences of the people within each category.” (p. 11) Further, Acker (2006) argues that scholars who use intersectionality theory are often vague in their conceptualization of class and consequently do not theorize class in ways that capture the material consequences for women located in various social locations within capitalist societies (see also Bettie 2003).

Potential pitfalls surrounding the complexities of intersectionality, however, are empirically surmountable. Indeed, several scholars suggest intersectionality’s so-called theoretical “shortcomings” should actually be interpreted as its greatest strengths. For example, Davis (2008) points out that with each new intersection theorists conceptualize comes the opportunity for new exploration and understanding, which can also lead to new methodological approaches, while Bowleg (2008), Collins (2008), and Davis (2008), argue that intersectionality’s allowance for myriad connections between marked identities
challenges theorists to make these connections explicit in their research. Indeed, making these connections explicit is what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as “dynamic centering.”

Intersectionality scholars do not discount the complexities associated with elucidating numerous intersecting social locations (Collins 2008). In fact, according to Collins, few theorists can grasp the nuances of scholarship surrounding systems of power related to race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and age, for example, and therefore intersectional work is typically partial, generally focusing on specific intersections. (p. 71) Indeed, while recognizing the significance of myriad intersecting identities is fundamental to intersectionality, in everyday life certain intersecting identities are more relevant under certain circumstances than others (McCall 2005; Acker 2006; Battle 2006; Warner 2008). As Collins points out, “all systems of power are always in every situation, but the salience of any given system of power will vary across time and space.” (p. 74)

By conferring theoretical significance to particular types of oppression, “dynamic centering” allows scholars to explore the salience of specific systems of power (Collins 2008, p. 69). According to Collins:

It [dynamic centering] is similar to taking a snapshot of a graduation ceremony—you know that the event itself is far more comprehensive than what can be captured by the tool of one camera from one angle of vision at one point in time. Each individual snapshot provides a distinctive look at the relationships that are captured within its frame, yet each also provides but one piece of a much larger story. The goal here is not to freeze a slice of lived experience and reify it as truth but rather to examine one way of framing reality that can be combined with many photographs in the album (ideally taken by other people). (p. 73)
For the purposes of this study, for example, I place theoretical significance on race, gender, class, sexuality, and educational setting, as I employ strategic intersectionality to explore how these factors influence teachers’ perspectives on race and gender.

**Strategic Intersectionality**

While intersectionality theory fundamentally seeks to illuminate the consequences of interlocking oppressions, *strategic* intersectionality suggests that persons who are part of more than one subordinate group may under certain circumstances experience a “multiple identity advantage” (Fraga et al. 2006) that can uniquely position them, for example, to address social inequalities. Indeed, as Hunt and Zajicek (2008) point out, intersectionality not only supposes that one’s social location shapes both their identity and position within a power structure, but their perspectives on social reality as well. Empirical evidence suggests, for example, that young, working-class women as compared to other demographic groups are perhaps the most likely to be racially progressive (Bonilla-Silva 2006; see also Schuman et al. 1997).

Thus far, only two empirical studies have exclusively tested the parameters of “strategic intersectionality.” In a study of Latino/a legislators, Fraga et al. (2006) theorized that despite the obvious oppressions that accompany being a woman of color, Latina legislators as opposed to Latino male legislators, could utilize their intersectionality (multiple identity advantage) in ways that provided them with certain strategic advantages in public policy making: Latina elected officials were perhaps uniquely positioned to leverage the intersectionality of their ethnicity and gender in ways that were of strategic benefit in the legislative process. As such, they were positioned to...
be the most effective long term advocates on behalf of working-class communities of color thus facilitating their political incorporation in American society. (pp. 1-2) Fraga et al. found that a multiple identity advantage did exist for Latina legislators, and while this advantage did not result in a consistent pattern related to ethnicity or gender, nonetheless when statistically significant differences appeared between Latina and Latino legislators, the difference favored Latinas. In the end, Fraga et al. concluded that Latina legislators appeared to bring “unique perspectives, strategies, and opportunities to the legislative process that are distinct from those of Latino men legislators.” (p. 15)

In the second recent empirical study to employ strategic intersectionality, Hunt and Zajicek (2008), examined twelve Community Develop Corporations (CDC) in the Southern Arkansas Delta to determine their inclusivity with regard to poor women of color (who were positioned as the largest beneficiaries of their services), and consequently their level of effectiveness. Hunt and Zajicek found that despite the common goal among CDCs of empowering community members, women of color, the most marginalized community members, were rarely found in key leadership positions within the organizations thus impeding this objective. According to Hunt and Zajicek, intersectionality supposes “the policy-making process (and its resulting policies) is only as effective as it is inclusive of the voices and ideas coming from intersectionally-defined subordinate groups, especially poor women of color.” (p. 195) Therefore, Hunt and Zajicek call for all models and visions of alternative organizations to incorporate strategic intersectionality, recognize the importance of varying levels of community support, and strive for interactive models (see also Cole 2008).
The current study also seeks to explore the parameters of strategic intersectionality by examining the relationship between teachers’ social location and their attitudes towards race and gender. This research is particularly interested in exploring the ways in which these attitudes influence whether and how teachers address race- and gender-related issues within the learning environment. This includes observing how teachers “do gender” and “race” (West and Zimmerman 1987; West and Fenstermaker 1995) in their everyday interactions and how they approach (or avoid) race and gender in the curricula, in their school, in the institution of education, and/or society at large.

Overview

Beyond imparting core academic subject matter the education system is an important agent of socialization. It is an institution that monopolizes a significant part of most individual’s lives from kindergarten through high school, and a key site where educators as well as students “do gender” and “race” on a daily basis (West and Zimmerman 1987; West and Fenstermaker 1995). Indeed, while questions regarding education’s efficacy for alleviating sexism and racism given both its current structural inequalities and potential for “enlightening” students about race- and gender-based ignorance, and teacher’s subjective evaluations of students whether deliberate or not, it nevertheless remains a popular policy solution. I argue, however, that educational initiatives, including multiculturalism and single-sex programming, are not likely to have as significant an impact on racial and gender inequality in schooling as interacting on a daily basis with educators who are sensitive to institutional discrimination and structure the learning environment in such a way that boys are not privileged over girls, whites are
not privileged over nonwhites, and patriarchy and white supremacy are problematized.

This requires a thoughtful and concerted effort on the part of feminist, antiracist teachers to address these types of inequalities. While strategic intersectionality hypothesizes that teachers with a multiple identity advantage are the most likely to be feminist, antiracist educators, there are also myriad countervailing effects of privilege that can undermine this potential advantage. Like most individuals, teachers simultaneously belong to both privileged and oppressed groups. Further, teachers regardless of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, are generally trained within education programs that perpetuate as oppose to challenge systems of privilege.

The central goal of this study is to therefore explore under what circumstances strategic intersectionality propels teachers’ to recognize and address systemic racism and sexism, and the circumstances under which the effects of privilege and the organization of schooling subvert teachers’ potential “multiple identity advantage.” In order to lay the groundwork for this endeavor, chapter two discusses institutional ethnography as model of inquiry, details the fieldwork settings, and provides an overview of the teachers in this study. Chapters three and four illuminate teachers’ attitudes towards race and gender, and provide examples of the ways in which teachers’ do race and gender in the classroom. Chapter five reveals how the system of ruling relations and organizational complexes in which the teachers’ participate, as well as the countervailing effects of individual privilege, the (white) privilege of students, and the privilege associated with the community of Lakeview underpins teachers’ resistance to addressing institutional racism and sexism in schooling. Finally, chapter six discusses obstacles to equality in
education, including a critique of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and offers some suggestions for policy reform.
CHAPTER TWO
RESEARCH DESIGN

Traditional sociological analysis has a long and troubling history of marginalizing, problematizing, and rendering invisible, oppressed groups. Dominated by white’s “common sense” on racial matters, for example, mainstream sociological studies have often perpetuated a color-blind epistemology of race (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi 2008; Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi 2008). Further, as critical researchers have pointed out, to claim any knowledge can be value-free or apolitical as traditional social science has historically asserted ultimately limits the discipline’s ability to expose and reduce inequality (Sprague 2005).

Indeed, the rise of feminists in the academy has led to the illumination of myriad biases in traditional social scientific norms and standards throughout the research process including, for example, the tendency for researchers to “study down,” to ask questions designed to explore the deficiencies of disadvantaged groups, to rely too heavily on “logical dichotomies” that are in fact analogically false, to treat individuals they study as objects devoid of subjectivity, and to use extensive jargon, abstraction, and the denial of researcher standpoint in presenting their findings (Sprague 2005). Sprague argues, “There is a problematic pattern to these biases: they tend to work toward the interests of the privileged and against the interests of the rest, that is, of most people.” (p. 6) For race
scholars, these biases are reflected in the pervasiveness of “white logic” and “white methods” (Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi 2008). According to Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi, white logic refers to a “context in which White supremacy has defined the techniques and processes of reasoning about social facts.” (p. 17) White logic accepts at face value the eternal objectivity of elite whites and the eternal subjectivity of nonwhites, while white methods refers to the practices inherent in mainstream approaches to collecting and analyzing empirical data that is then used to buttress racial stratification in society (Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi).

A number of alternative methodologies have been suggested to address the inherent biases in traditional approaches to studying oppression. For example, Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi (2008), argue that research on white’s racial attitudes relies too heavily on the collection of survey data and call for greater use of in-depth interviews and mixed-method approaches. Sprague (2005) contends that in order to create knowledge that is more complete and less biased toward elite views, “we need to ground each view of the social world in the standpoint from which it is created, and foster dialogue among those developing the picture from different social positions.” (p. 2) Institutional ethnography offers a critical model of inquiry that takes up both of these challenges.

**Institutional Ethnography as Model of Inquiry**

According to Campbell and Gregor, “Institutional ethnography is a theorized way of seeing and knowing that re-oriens people in their everyday world.” (2004, p. 11) While traditional ethnography seeks to study a “site,” institutional ethnography seeks to
learn how that site is “held together” by other institutions (Sprague 2005). The social is the focus of sociological inquiry in institutional ethnography and is reflected in people’s coordinated activities with others; it is an aspect of what people do to be explored and explicated (Smith 2005). This study employs institutional ethnography as conceptualized by Dorothy Smith (1990; 2005). According to Smith (2005):

The overall aim of institutional ethnography has a double character. One is to produce for people what might be called “maps” of the ruling relations and specifically the institutional complexes in which they participate in whatever fashion…. The second aim is to build knowledge and methods of discovering the institutions and, more generally, the ruling relations of contemporary Western society. (p. 51)

Because institutional ethnography relies on individual experiences as data (Campbell 1998; DeVault 2006), several concepts are foundational for using this model of inquiry. The first is standpoint (Smith 2005). According to Smith, “Institutional ethnography takes for granted that each person is unique; each has a biography and experience that is her or his own; each is positioned differently from the others; each therefore sees things from a different perspective, feels things differently, has different needs and desires, different interests.” (p. 61) While institutional ethnographers acknowledge that individuals are the best authorities on their everyday practices, they do not treat experiential accounts as unblemished depictions of reality; what becomes data for the ethnographer is always a collaborative product (Smith 2005, p. 124; see also Campbell and Gregor 2004; Sprague 2005). Further, in order to privilege the standpoint of individuals, the ethnographer must always be sensitive to the unequal distribution of
power associated with the researcher-respondent relationship (Smith 1990; Walby 2007; McNeil 2008).

A second point concerns institutional ethnography’s analytic emphasis on organization and structure. While institutional ethnography begins by exploring the experiential accounts of the individuals connected to an institutional setting, it is not the individuals who are the objects of study (Smith 2005; Holstein 2006). As Campbell and McGregor (2004) point out:

This kind of analysis uses what informants know and what they are observed doing for the analytic purpose of identifying, tracing and describing the social relations that extend beyond the boundaries of any one informant’s experiences (or even of all informants’ experiences). Translocal and discursively-organized relations permeate informants’ understandings, talk, and activities. An institutional ethnography must therefore include research into those elements of social organization that connect the local setting and local experiences to sites outside the experiential setting. Analysis in institutional ethnography is directed to explication that builds back into the analytic account what the researcher discovers about the workings of such translocal ruling practices. (p. 90)

The empirical goal in institutional ethnography is therefore to elucidate social processes that have generalizing effects, not to generalize from experiential accounts (Holstein 2006). In order to achieve this goal, the ethnographer takes these accounts of everyday life as a problematic offering insight into actual circumstances where individuals participate in the social organization of those circumstances often unknowingly (Campbell and Gregor 2004, p. 49). For the purposes of this study, the problematic is privilege, both individual and institutional, and its corollary oppressions.

Third, because of the significant power of texts to organize and reveal what are essentially translocal knowledges and activities taken to be local and context-dependent
(DeVault 2006), the analysis and critique of texts is critical to doing institutional ethnography (Smith 1990; Campbell and Gregor 2004; Smith 2005). Simply put, the significance of texts for institutional ethnographers is found in their ability to organize and enable social relations (Walby 2007). Texts in institutional ethnography are therefore not conceptualized as data in a traditional social science sense, nor are they limited to print media (Walby 2005). Further, while Smith (2005) argues that texts illuminate ruling relations, recent scholars like Quinlan (2009) have challenged that texts have the potential to liberate as well as serve as agents of domination.

Finally, as with any methodological approach, institutional ethnography has its limitations. Walby (2007) argues, for example, that while the intent of institutional ethnography as conceptualized by Dorothy Smith (1990; 2005) is to create an alternative to the objectified subject of established social scientific discourse it has not as of yet figured out how to transcend objectification and power the ethnographer continues to assert in assessing ontology and collecting and analyzing data. Smith has also been criticized for overlooking the importance of diversity and therefore undertheorizing knowledges created by oppressed groups to resist their subordination (Collins 1992). According to Collins:

This approach misses the complexity of how race, gender, social class, age, sexual orientation, and religion result in differential placement regarding objectified knowledges and how this placement encourages some groups to develop and other groups to suppress alternative local knowledges, and suppresses it in still others. (p. 78)
To address this omission, Collins calls for analyses that take into account the significance of social location, which the current study seeks to do.

While Smith (2005) argues that institutional ethnography is an alternative sociology and not a methodological orientation, she also acknowledges that it is generally treated as such by sociologists. Further, while institutional ethnography seeks to explore as opposed to theorize the social, as Campbell and Gregor (2004) point out, the assumptions about everyday life ethnographers bring to their research reflect the theoretical framework on which the study is based. This ethnography, for example, extends from the basic premises of intersectionality theory while exploring a particular theoretical strand, strategic intersectionality.

Further, while this study seeks to explore the parameters of strategic intersectionality, it is also concerned with the countervailing effects of privilege. As Sprague (2005) points out, “working from the standpoint of the disadvantaged does not preclude studying the powerful. Rather, it involves problematizing power and advantage, asking about the mechanisms that sustain privilege and about the consequences of privilege for the broader society.” (p. 76) To do this, the current study seeks to serve as a catalyst for progressive change as is the tradition of feminist scholarship and as a reminder of the importance to remain “race conscious” (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008).

**Methodology**

Between September 2010 and March 2011, I interviewed, observed, and then interviewed a second time, eighteen teachers who work at three different elementary
schools within the same school district in a suburb north of Chicago: Morgan Elementary, Mason Elementary, and Helis Elementary, all of which offer instruction in kindergarten through fifth grade. Semi-structured initial interviews allowed me to gather background information on each teacher before observation (Appendix A). In these interviews, teachers were asked about their unique educational and career trajectory, teaching philosophy and pedagogy, as well as their subjective understanding of their social location. Several questions from the initial interview schedule were adapted from Lortie’s (1975) influential study of schoolteachers.

My official observation of teachers in their classrooms included approximately twelve to fifteen hours. In this phase of the research, I also incorporated the analysis of texts which included both the curricular materials that were used during periods of observation, rules regarding classroom etiquette and activities, as well as physical aspects of the classrooms and the schools. After the period of observation was concluded, I conducted a second semi-structured interview that asked about teacher’s attitudes toward educational policy in general and race- and gender-based policies specifically (Appendix B). This final interview also allowed me to ask questions about specific events that I observed while in the teachers’ classrooms and for teachers’ feedback regarding the data collected during this period. Teachers were compensated fifty dollars at the conclusion of the final interview to purchase classroom supplies. Of the three schools included in this ethnography, I spent approximately 114 hours in formal observations at Morgan, 68 hours at Mason, and 71 hours at Helis, for a total of 253 hours of collected fieldwork.
data. This does not, however, include countless hours of informal interactions with teachers, parents, and students within District 21. Finally, to protect teachers’ anonymity all of their names as well as the names of administrators and students, the names of the schools in which they work, the name of the school district in which these schools are located, and the name of the town have all been changed.

Lakeview

The schools in which the teachers in this study work are located in the District 21 public school system in Lakeview, Illinois, a suburb north of Chicago. There are two overarching reasons why I selected District 21 to conduct this research. First, as a resident of Lakeview with children who attend District 21 schools (not included in this study), I anticipated my connection to the community and school system as well as insider knowledge of locally recognized discourses and practices, especially regarding educational policies, politics, and procedures would allow me somewhat easier entrée into the field and tools to establish greater rapport with administrators, teachers, and students.

The second reason concerns the uniqueness of the community itself; Lakeview’s population of approximately 75,000 residents is racially diverse and politically liberal; as compared with national averages, residents, for example, have a much higher level of formal education; and the town prides itself on an ethos of social justice. One might reasonably expect that a city with these demographic features would house a public school system structured for equality (e.g., Noguera 2008). Yet, like most cities
Lakeview is very racially segregated and this segregation is, of course, reflected in the populations and student test scores of most of its ten public elementary schools. Indeed, recent analysis conducted by a researcher at the Urban School Leadership Program of the University of Illinois-Chicago studying differences in the achievement gap between white and Black students found that a substantial gap continues to exist between white and Black students in District 21 with regard to college readiness.

School District 21

According to a Chicago newspaper that calculated performance indicators of Illinois public schools based on each school’s 2009 state report card, one-third of District 21 schools rank among the highest performing Illinois schools. District 21 is also credited with a recent innovation that links student achievement to teacher evaluations, a tactic employed to increase the district’s chances of securing a Race To The Top grant, which it did not. According to the 2010 Illinois District Report Card, the average class size in the district ranges between 17.1 and 20.4 students, and per pupil expenditure is approximately $14,000 which is higher than state and national averages. Further, District 21 offers two magnet programs racial in structure if not necessarily intent: the African-Centered Curriculum (ACC) program at Mason, and a dual language program at five elementary schools including Morgan, Helis, and Mason. According to the District 21 Student Handbook (2009-2010), the ACC program “integrates historical experiences of Africans and African Americans into core curriculum and district learning standards. Low student class sizes, strong family involvement, and culturally responsive instruction
to develop a deeper understanding of the African and African American cultures are features of the program.” The dual language program provides instruction in both English and Spanish to enhance the academic achievement of English Language Learners (ELL). There are no gender-based curricular programs within District 21, though single-sex physical education classes begin in middle school.

The Schools

While similarities in curricula, teacher quality, and use of best practices can be found across all three schools, Morgan, Mason, and Helis differ in important ways including racial composition (Table 1). Morgan is a predominantly white school; white students comprise 65% of the student body. Indeed, in order to increase racial diversity, Morgan is the only school in District 21 that includes in its attendance area a predominantly Black neighborhood that does not border the immediate area of the school, which is almost all white. Mason, on the other hand, is a predominantly Black school with 45% of students identifying as Black or African American. The next largest demographic group at Mason is Hispanic students who account for approximately 27% of the student body. In addition, Mason enrolls the smallest percentage of white students in District 21, approximately 20% of the student body. Finally, Helis has the largest population of Hispanic students in the district, accounting for approximately 35% of the student body; Black students comprise one-fifth and white students comprise just over one-third.
Table 1. Racial Composition of Morgan Elementary, Mason Elementary, and Helis Elementary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morgan Elementary</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason Elementary</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helis Elementary</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are also stark differences between all three schools in terms of students’ socioeconomic standing, the number of students who are English Language Learners (ELL), and the number of students who qualify for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Table 2). Essentially, students with IEPs receive special education services. At Morgan, 29% of students are considered low-income based on factors such as the number of students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches, live in families supported by public aid, or are in foster care or institutions. By comparison, at Mason 65% of students are considered low-income as are 50% of students at Helis. Therefore, both of these schools are designated Title I schools. Further, while only 12% of students at Morgan are eligible for transitional bilingual programs based on limited English skills, Mason has 17% percent, and Helis has the largest proportion of limited English speakers in District 21 with 27% of the student population designated ELL. Finally, while approximately 8% of students at Morgan and 10% percent of students at Mason have IEPS in place, at Helis 17% percent of students receive special education services.
Table 2. English Language Learners, Students with Individualized Education Plans, and Low Income Students at Morgan Elementary, Mason Elementary, and Helis Elementary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>English Language Learners</th>
<th>Individualized Education Plans</th>
<th>Low Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morgan Elementary</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason Elementary</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helis Elementary</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Important differences also exist across all three schools with regard to testing measures used to calculate adequate yearly progress (AYP) according to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) guidelines. Morgan Elementary, for example, is one of two District 21 schools that recently received Academic Excellence Awards for sustaining high performance over time on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). Specifically, test scores must demonstrate over 90% of students meet or exceed state standards to receive one of these awards. Also, because Morgan consistently receives high scores, it is ranked as one of the top public elementary schools in the state of Illinois.

Both Mason Elementary and Helis Elementary, on the other hand, continue to struggle in their attempts to meet AYP, though Mason did recently receive an Illinois Spotlight School Award. Spotlight awards are given to schools where over half of the study body comes from low-income families and at least 70% of students pass the ISAT in reading and mathematics. Helis, however, recently had to offer students the option to transfer to three other schools in the district including Mason because as a Title I school it failed two years in a row to make AYP. Because Morgan Elementary currently exceeds student capacity it was not a transfer option. Helis is at a particular disadvantage when it comes to performance on the ISAT since it has the largest proportion of bilingual
students in the district. While ISAT test directions may be given in Spanish, and linguistically modified language forms can be used for math and science, they cannot be used for reading. In essence, limited English speakers, unless they have attended a U.S. school for less than a year, are required to comprehend and complete the ISAT just as native English speakers.

The Teachers

After gaining permission from the principal of each school in this study to conduct my research, teachers were contacted by e-mail and telephone to ask for their participation. In sum, eight teachers volunteered to take part at Morgan, four at Mason, and six at Helis. In the period that I spent in each teacher’s classroom I was able to observe not only how they interacted with their students, but often how they interacted with other teachers and at times administrators, both formally and informally. This allowed me to observe whether and how teachers addressed race- and gender-related issues within different contexts as well as circumstances in which the countervailing effects of privilege were particularly salient. Finally, my observations included teachers’ verbal and nonverbal communication with others, the way they physically (visually) construct the learning environment to reflect and emphasize what they believe to be important for student success, and the texts they relied on to impart their teaching philosophy pedagogically. This stage of research was particularly important for identifying the ways in which locally recognized components of race, gender and class
intersected (Kofoed 2008) and connecting them to their institutionalized forms (Ken 2007).

Like the schools in which they work, the teachers in this study are diverse on several important measures. First, the teachers vary in terms of gender and age (Table 3; Appendix C). Of the eighteen teachers in this study, twelve are women and six are men. The youngest teacher is twenty-five while the oldest is sixty-one; the average teacher age is 50-years-old. Second, the teachers identify with several racial and ethnic groups including white, Black, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Asian, and biracial (Table 3). Three white female teachers are interracially married, two to Hispanic men, the other to a Black man, and all three women have biracial children (Appendix C).

Table 3. Teachers’ Gender, Race, School, Grade Level, and Curricular Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Curricular Program</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Dual Language</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</table>
Second, teachers also vary in terms of their social class backgrounds (Appendix C). Based on the level of education and the occupation of their father and mother, their family of origin household composition and other pertinent information teachers provided about their upbringing, eight teachers grew up in upper-middle class households, four in middle-class households, and six in working-class households. Because of the significance of social class (Lareau 1987; Carbonara 1998) with regard to its interactions with race (Cole and Omari 2003; Lareau 2003; Hardaway and McLoyd 2008) and gender (Dumais 2002; Lent and Figueira-McDonough 2002; Bettie 2003), the heterogeneity of social class background among the teachers is particularly important to this study.

Third, teachers have different years of experience in the classroom (Appendix C). The shortest time spent teaching is 4 years, the longest is 31; the average number of years teaching is 22 years. Fourth, teachers work with different grade level children; one teaches kindergarten, two teach first grade, three teach second grade, six teach third grade, one teaches fourth grade, four teach fifth grade, and one teaches part-time in a second grade classroom and part-time in a third grade-classroom (Table 3). Finally, teachers work in different District 21 curricular programs; thirteen teach in the general education curriculum, four teach in the dual language program, and one is a special education/inclusion teacher (Table 3).

While important differences exist among the teachers, however, they are also similar in a number of ways that point to their access to economic and/or heterosexual privilege. First, every teacher except one in this study has a master’s degree; some
teachers have more than one, and the one teacher who does not have a master’s degree has a law degree (Appendix C). Second, most of the teachers are married, including one male teacher who is married to a same-gender partner (Appendix C). Of the only four teachers who are not currently married, one is engaged, one is divorced, and two are in long-term relationship, one of which is a cohabiting relationship with a man she refers to as her husband.

Third, almost all of the teachers in this study have children, some who are school-age, others who are grown (Appendix C). Of the four teachers who do not currently have children, one is in the process of trying to conceive a child with his wife; another is trying to find a birth mother along with his partner so they can grow their family; and the one teacher who is engaged plans to have children one day. There are only two teachers in this study who do not have children and do not expect to. Fourth, almost all of the teachers in this study were raised in traditional families with married fathers and mothers, siblings present, and, in the case of one teacher, grandparents as well (Appendix C). Only three teachers grew up in non-traditional households; two teachers grew up in a female-headed divorced household and one lived part of her childhood with her grandmothers and part with her parents.

A Note on Standpoint

Like the teachers in this study, I inhabit a unique social location that reflects both intersections of privilege and inequality. The most significant way in which I am privileged is my racial identity; I am a white person living in a white supremacist society.
I am married to a white man and while I grew up in a working-class family and was the first person to graduate from college, my partner, children, and I now lead what would most likely be called an upper-middle-class lifestyle. When I have experienced inequality in my life it has most often resulted from being a woman in a patriarchal society.

I also come to this project as an intersection of numerous contentious identities. I am a Southern woman who was raised in a Southern Baptist family with very rigid beliefs about the proper place of men and women in society to say nothing of the beliefs about proper boundaries with regard to people of color. While my mother worked while I and my siblings were growing up, she always assumed the “second shift” (Hochschild 1989) when she came home. She cooked and cleaned, and when I was old enough I took on a number of these duties as well. My brother was entitled to many privileges that my sister and I were not with the stated justification that “he was a boy.” It was always clear that my sister and I were to be caretakers first and foremost; men and boys were coddled.

What I learned about race, I learned growing up in middle Georgia where there were primarily two acknowledged races: white and Black. The neighborhood my family and I lived in while I attended elementary school was somewhat integrated although there were more white families than Black families. Nonetheless, I always had classmates of color throughout my school years. In fact, while the number of Black students in my classes increased throughout my middle and high school years, the summer before eighth grade my family moved to another part of town that was predominantly white. Indeed, I
remember overhearing my stepfather on more than one occasion remark with pride that if a Black family came to our neighborhood to look at a house for sale the neighbors would stand on their lawns to make it clear they were not welcome. The lessons I learned about race were therefore just as powerful as those I learned about gender. It was perfectly fine to have Black friends at school, but not outside of school. I could not invite my Black friends over to my house; needless to say, to date or marry someone of a different race was unthinkable.

How did a woman with these experiences grow up to be an antiracist feminist? It seems just as plausible that I might have grown up to be a racist misogynist. This paradox has haunted me throughout my years in graduate school and it is what ultimately led me to this project. I believe a major issue with regard to social inequality has little to do with a lack of data. In other words, sociologists have a plethora of data to illustrate that sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism, continue to permeate our society. This study is therefore not motivated by a desire to uncover that inequality exists in schooling. The “million dollar question” I believe is what explains the difference between those teachers who are willing to acknowledge privileges and inequalities remain deeply embedded in the structure of our society and are compelled to act towards their eradication, and those who are not.
CHAPTER THREE
DifferEntiatiOn: The new face of tracking

The three unique learning environments found at Morgan, Mason, and Helis Elementary, lend support to Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson’s (1997) argument that despite the perceived single curriculum of the elementary school, elementary schools are rigidly tracked by socioeconomic status and administrative fiat. What I immediately discovered when I began my observations was that tracking was also occurring on a daily basis in all three schools through the implementation of “differentiation,” an educational philosophy developed by Carol Ann Tomlinson, Professor and Chair of Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Policy, at the University of Virginia. According to Tomlinson (2000):

What we call differentiation is not a recipe for teaching. It is not an instructional strategy. It is not what a teacher does when he or she has time. It is a way of thinking about teaching and learning. As such, it is based on a set of beliefs: 1) Students who are at the same age differ in their readiness to learn, their interests, their styles of learning, their experiences, and their life circumstances; 2) The differences in students are significant enough to make a major impact on what students need to learn, the pace at which they need to learn it, and the support they need from teachers and others to learn it well; 3) Students will learn best when supportive adults push them slightly beyond where they can work without assistance; 4) Students will learn best when they can make a connection between the curriculum and their interests and life experiences; 5) Students will learn best when learning opportunities are natural; 6) Students are more effective learners when classrooms and schools create a sense of community in which students feel significant and respected; 7) The central job of schools is to maximize the capacity of each student. (p. 7)
The basis for this set of beliefs rests heavily on Tomlinson’s personal experiences as a public school teacher in the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties. Further, Tomlinson places significant emphasis on brain research to buttress claims regarding children’s needs and abilities (Tomlinson and Kalbfleisch 1998).

Tomlinson’s concerns over race, class and gender inequalities in schooling served as a major impetus for the development of differentiation. In theory, differentiated learning addresses all types of disparities by challenging teachers to attend to each of their student’s unique educational needs and learning styles; a basic tenet of differentiation is that a one-size-fits-all approach in the classroom does a disservice to all students particularly those who struggle and those who are gifted. Tomlinson calls on teachers to “differentiate up,” providing every student with the skills and opportunities to achieve at a higher (above-average) level. Perhaps as no surprise in an era of high-stakes testing, District 21 embraced differentiation, inviting Tomlinson in the fall of 2010, to conduct a professional development seminar for its teachers and sponsoring a community speaking engagement with Tomlinson, which I attended. After Tomlinson’s visit, the superintendent sent a letter to all parents of District 21 students indicating that Tomlinson’s visit served as further validation that the district’s adoption of differentiated learning as part of their five-year strategic plan was beneficial for all students and represented the future of curricular development and implementation in District 21.

There was not one teacher I worked with who disagreed with the basic premises of differentiated learning. Indeed, teachers like Ms. Roberts, a first grade teacher at Morgan, considered herself a huge fan, others such as Mr. Swain, a third grade teacher at
Mason, agreed that differentiation was something effective teachers did before there was a word to describe it, and there was a consensus among dual language teachers at all three schools that the nature of the curricular program in which they taught required differentiated instruction. The implementation of differentiation, however, was something most teachers found to be challenging if not impossible. After all, how does one teacher create and deliver a uniquely structured learning experience for every student in their class? In the following, Mr. Foy, a fourth grade teacher at Morgan, encapsulates the concerns about differentiated learning shared by many of the teachers:

Overall, I think that differentiation if you define it as, um, providing the kind of curriculum and support the kids need to, um, progress, I think it’s, it’s something that kind of has to be done. Um, every child learns differently so, and every child learns at a different pace, you kind of have to tailor your teaching, the curriculum to meet those needs. So, in general, I think it’s important and worthwhile and necessary. Uh, I guess, there’s some particular issues I have with it. Um, I think I’ve discovered that we expect teachers to meet all these different needs and I’m sure you’ve heard this frequently. Um, but it’s, it’s daunting. The devil’s in the details. It’s daunting to have to provide different types of education to a room full of kids with different needs. And you end up, you know, spending more time with one particular group and another groups gets, gets neglected. Um, and, I think, and so juggling all the different curriculum, all these different types of learning, and, um, activities to suit these kids is very difficult and it’s tough to make sure that every kid is getting what they need. I think it’s almost impossible.

Indeed, while every teacher I observed found some success in implementing activities with their students through differentiated instruction, the challenge issued by the superintendent and school board was to create a classroom in which differentiation was occurring throughout the day, every day.

In addition to the demands placed upon them to differentiate their classrooms, elementary school teachers in District 21 are also required to spend a certain number of minutes each day in literacy and math instruction. Further, teachers are generally
required to spend a mandated number of minutes every day working one-on-one or in small groups with response-to-intervention (RTI-Tier 2) students, students who are reading below grade level, for example. Finally, another recent policy initiative in District 21, inclusion, requires teachers to adapt learning strategies in order to fully include students who have documented behavioral, cognitive, and developmental disabilities, those students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP), in the general education classroom.

Inclusion was first introduced in District 21 in 2008 and is being rolled out by grade level. Currently, inclusion is fully implemented in kindergarten through first grade; every grade level in the district, however, includes or has the possibility of including students in general education classes with IEPs. According to Burke and Sutherland (2004):

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its 1997 amendments made it clear that schools have a duty to educate children with disabilities in general education classrooms. While there is no single set of characteristics that describes all inclusive schools, one defining practice is that students with identified disabilities are not isolated in special classes or areas of the school. Specialized supports required by individual students are provided within general-education settings, enabling all students to belong to a group of same-age peers. (p. 164)

This refers to “push-in” as opposed to “pull-out” services. With push-in services, reading and math specialists as well as speech pathologists and social workers come into the classroom to work with IEP students one-on-one or in a small group. With pull-out services, IEP students are removed from their classrooms and receive services in another room or in a hallway as I witnessed across all three schools.
While support for inclusion as an alternative to traditional self-contained special education classrooms continues to grow (Idol 2006), studies have nonetheless documented concerns among teachers especially with regard to the lack of special education training on the part of general education teachers who are expected to accommodate IEP students (Burke and Sutherland 2004) and negative attitudes expressed by non-IEP students in inclusion classes (Siperstein, Parker, Bardon, and Widaman 2007). Other concerns include the consequences of incorporating students with severe behavioral problems in general education classrooms (Idol 2006), the ability of the general education teacher or special education teacher to ensure that IEP students are not marginalized among their non-IEP peers (Berry 2006), the lack of formal training among inclusion paraprofessionals who often spend a lot of one-on-one instruction time with IEP students (Suter and Giangreco 2009), and as I saw firsthand, the lack of human and financial resources to implement inclusion as is intended with two highly-qualified co-teachers who are equally responsible for instruction of the class, one a general education teacher and the other a special education teacher. Further, to carry out inclusion as intended requires co-teachers to have adequate time to effectively plan, the lack of which was something co-teachers in this study complained was a chronic problem, and the willingness of general education teachers to share control of their class, not relegate their special education co-teacher to the role of instructional aid (Volonino and Zigmond 2007). I witnessed both in my classroom observations.

In order for teachers and co-teachers to attempt to meet the challenges of differentiation, response-to-intervention, and inclusion, students must frequently work
with other students in small groups. Indeed, one of the first things I was struck by when I began observations was how different the structure of classrooms in District 21 was compared to when I attended elementary school in the South. Gone were the rows of desks facing towards the front of the room where the teacher sat in his or her position of authority, presiding over their class. Instead, in all but one of the classrooms in which I observed four or five desks were grouped together in small pods, or students sat around round or rectangular tables, all facing one another. This environment fostered what teachers called “cooperative learning.” Further, most teachers attempted to cultivate a sense of camaraderie among the students who sat together and would sometimes have students take turns serving as table captains. With the exception of one, all classrooms also contained a rug or carpet area where students, particularly those in kindergarten through fourth grade, were frequently called to sit during the day for teacher instruction or read-alouds. This gathering spot was generally located near the Promethean board, a modern technological device in all District 21 classrooms that easily replaced teachers’ traditional reliance on chalkboards. Finally, all classrooms contained kidney-shaped or small round tables where most of the teacher-guided small group work took place.

In the same way that students with documented disabilities have Individualized Education Plans in place to attend to their unique educational needs, differentiation, in theory, is supposed to attend to every child’s distinctive way of learning. In practice, however, it relies heavily on grouping. For example, a differentiated task is one where the goal and outcome of the activity are the same for the entire class, but understanding that students learn in different ways and at different speeds, the teacher provides a
number of options for students in order to achieve the objective. A teacher who has eighteen students is not expected to develop eighteen different options to complete an assignment, as the logic of differentiation might imply. Instead, a teacher may develop three different strategies and allow his or her students to choose which path they want to take to achieve the end goal. Thus, grouping becomes a natural extension of differentiation.

According to Tomlinson, “Regardless of intent, acceptance of either special classes or tracks as a pervasive mechanism for addressing learner needs yields racial patterns that have become predictable in our schools.” (2004: p. 518) Ironically, the manifestation of differentiation that I observed almost always took on these same dynamics of “traditional” tracking. The new face of tracking, however, occurs within as opposed to across classrooms. The groupings of students I observed also took on a predictable fashion. Though teachers were “encouraged” to group students heterogeneously (e.g., Abu El-Haj and Rubin 2009), whether working with one partner or in a small group, students were generally placed with other students that were of the same gender or race. While teachers were very deliberate in assigning students to “pods” or tables so that the grouping of students in the classroom was heterogeneous overall in terms of race and gender, when students worked on academic tasks with partners, self-selected or teacher-assigned, or with small groups other than their tablemates they generally found themselves working with others of the same gender and race.

Homogenous grouping occurs for three main reasons. One, in the case of IEP students, Black and Hispanic boys are overrepresented among students who qualify for
special education services. Two, teachers are expected to rely heavily on formal assessments to determine whether or not students have mastered particular objectives. The outcomes of these assessments produce categories of students who are achieving above grade level, at grade level, and below, and in general it is these groups of students who end of working together on academic tasks.

Relying on formal assessments in this manner to address inequalities in schooling creates an obvious tautology. First, ISAT scores reveal disparities in achievement between white students and minority students. Differentiation is then offered as a strategy to address inequalities in achievement. Teachers rely on formal assessments to determine how students should be grouped in order to deliver differentiated instruction. Therefore, not surprisingly, the classroom assessments typically produce groupings of students that mirror the distribution in the statewide tests used to determine AYP. The belief among educators who support differentiation is that in a differentiated classroom, students who struggle, with or without IEPs, will benefit from interaction with their higher-achieving peers, yet, in my observations lower-achieving students were most often grouped with other students who also struggled when it came to reading groups, for example. Interestingly, the results of formal assessments do not produce results that would dictate same-gender groups, yet in my classroom observations it was uncommon to see mixed-gender groups of students working together, and I witnessed several times teachers specifically group students by gender.

Obviously, therefore, teachers did not rely solely on formal assessments or IEPs to determine which students should be partnered or assigned to a small group. Teachers’
personal assessments of their students were considered just as important as formal assessments in determining which students should work together. In the following exchange Ms. Lopez, a teacher in the dual language program at Morgan, talks about how she groups her students:

Ms. Lopez: Well, I know their strengths. I know their strengths.

LCS: Is that from formal assessments or from your personal observations?

Ms. Lopez: Both. It’s everything. Throw it in the pot, you know, and use it as needed.

Even when students were allowed to choose their own partners for activities, I often observed teachers giving instructions on how to make a “good” partner choice. Thus, understanding teachers’ attitudes towards race and gender are critical to discerning how differentiated learning gets implemented in the classroom. In the following, I explore two significant issues that provide insights into teacher’s perspectives on race: teachers’ ambiguities about the relationship between race and schooling especially as it pertains to multiculturalism, and teachers’ understandings of the nature and causes of racial inequalities in schooling including the efficacy of antiracism. In the next chapter, teachers’ perspectives on gender are specifically explored.

**Color-Blind Racism and Teachers’ Ambiguities about Race**

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” (p. 34) Given the racial disparities that continue to exist in schooling in the United States, it seems clear the problem of the color-line Du Bois wrote of persists in the twenty-first century. Yet, how to conceptualize and measure racial
discrimination has often proven to be as controversial as how to categorize race. If one takes into account responses to typical survey measures used to assess prejudicial attitudes in the U.S. it would appear Americans are becoming more racially tolerant. Overall, opposition to busing, residential segregation, and even interracial marriage has decreased substantially when compared with General Social Survey (GSS) responses thirty years ago. Other methodological approaches, however, have yielded data that paint a very different picture of race relations in the U.S. For example, while opposition to interracial marriage based on survey data has precipitously decreased, when respondents are questioned using in-depth interviews if they would marry someone of a different race or approve of their children marrying someone of a different race, the responses are overwhelmingly negative (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

The discrepancies in data measuring prejudicial attitudes revealed by qualitative and triangulated methodologies have led to a general consensus among social scientists that racism in the U.S. has not dissipated but in fact changed forms in the post-Civil Rights era (Bobo 1999; Dovidio and Gartner 2000; Sears and Henry 2000; Bonilla-Silva 2006). If Jim Crow racism can be characterized as blatant, “hot, close, and direct,” the new form of racism is subtle: “cool, distant and indirect.” (Pettigrew and Meertens 1995, p. 58) According to Forman (2004), what ties contemporary theories of race together is not only the belief that new forms of racism emerged as a consequence and reaction to the Civil Rights movement but the belief that racism is motivated by a rational desire to maintain a dominant position in a racialized social system as opposed to a matter of illogicality a common assumption in early race scholarship (see, for example, Hirschman
2004), particularly in social psychology.

According to Bonilla-Silva (1997), the new form of racism that exists in the United States in the post-Civil Rights era is “color-blind.” Color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006) manifests in four basic frames used predominantly by whites to interpret information about race: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of race. Abstract liberalism relies on the basic principles of political and economic liberalism to explain racial matters, for example, the justification of whites’ opposition to forced integration based on the liberal belief that all individuals should have a “choice” of where they want to live (2006, p. 28). The naturalization frame explains racial phenomenon in terms of natural occurrences, for example, my choice to date only partners who are white is not because I am racist, but because I am “naturally” attracted to men who are of the same race. Cultural racism relies on culturally-based arguments to explain racial incidents such as the belief that Black children perform poorly in schools because the “Black culture” does not value education. Finally, minimization of racism (or what I often refer to as the anything-but-race argument) is based on the notion that discrimination is no longer a major determinate of life chances for racial minorities (2006, p. 29), therefore, what appear to be racialized outcomes can be explained away by factors other than racism. The teachers I worked with relied at various times on the frames of color-blind racism to explain and buttress their understandings of race and account for their interactions with students and staff. While in general teachers were reluctant to explain racial matters in terms of “natural occurrences” or as a result of cultural deficiencies, the consequences of race and white privilege were deliberately and
consistently minimized or avoided.

In the U.S., race is pervasive yet “invisible;” invisible yet “obvious.” The institutions in which the teachers work, the ethos of the Lakeview community itself, and the teachers’ personal beliefs and experiences, converge in myriad ways to reflect and reproduce these paradoxes. On the one hand, in District 21 “race” does not exist; the maxim is every student can learn and be successful regardless of social location. On the other hand, teachers are forced to acknowledge race because NCLB requires educators to address inequalities among students or face mandated sanctions, and disparities in test scores clearly manifest along racial lines. Further, because Lakeview prides itself on being a racially progressive community, teachers are encouraged and expected to celebrate racial diversity. The end result is that anything negative associated with race such as acknowledging the existence of institutional discrimination that calls into question the basic tenets of the equality maxim are off-limits; anything positive associated with race such as the recognition of Hispanic Heritage month is embraced and heralded as examples of the social progressiveness of District 21 and the Lakeview community. The contradictions teachers face in having to deny the problems of race while at the same time confront them are explored in the following.

Who Are You Calling White? Creating Racial Utopias in the Classrooms

To minimize the consequences of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006), I argue requires whites to minimize the consequences of privilege. I witnessed this occur in almost every initial interview with white teachers. When white teachers were asked to identify their race, it was as if no one wanted to admit they were white (see also Solomon et al. 2005).
Only one white teacher, in fact, identified themselves as simply being “white.” Others like Ms. Hurley referred to herself as a “citizen of the world” and “just one of the many colors in my classroom.” Mr. Hamilton indicated that when he was asked for his race he generally identified himself as a human being. Mr. Gold was the most flustered when asked for his racial identity:

Give me choices. I don’t know, um, Caucasian, I don’t know. I’m beige. No, I’m Caucasian, I mean, I’m being funny with you. But-but I mean but, you know. I’m Jewish. It’s kind of semantics, it’s more Middle Eastern kind of, but it’s Caucasian if you have to put a category. A long answer to a short question.

In contrast to white teachers, racial minority teachers generally did not hesitate in identifying themselves as African-American, Black, Hispanic, Asian or biracial.

Interestingly, a dialectical relationship exists between white teachers’ reluctance to acknowledge their own identity in the racial order and the various racial groups represented by their students. Sometimes teachers would find creative ways to speak of the racial diversity in their classrooms without acknowledging race; Mr. Hamilton was fond of referring to his students as a million different flavors. Ms. Hurley, on the other hand, claimed to not see race at all:

Ms. Hurley: You know, people say to me, how many Black children do you have? I don’t think of them that way. I have to look at the pictures.

LCS: Do people ask that because they know you teach at Mason?

Ms. Hurley: Sometimes. Sometimes. But I don’t know how many. I have to like look at pictures of their names and think.

As Ms. Hurley and I exchanged this dialogue, I could not help but think of Lisa Delpit’s words: “I would like to suggest that if one does not see color, then ones does not really
see children.” (2006, p. 177) Indeed, what are the consequences of teaching children that you can be anything you want to be regardless of social location when the children’s lived experiences so often demonstrated otherwise?

Further, the “do’s” and “don’ts” of racial etiquette created numerous incongruities for the white teachers. In an example below, Ms. Hurley, who denied seeing the race of her students, talks about the benefits of racial diversity within her third grade teaching team due in part to their differences while in the next breath indicating her concern about third grade students seeing themselves as different:

Ms. Hurley: We’re [the third grade teaching team at Mason] very interesting because, you know, we’ve got a Black male, Black female, Colombian female, and a Caucasian, Eastern European female [Ms. Hurley] so it’s like, it’s like, we’re like an interesting team. We’re all demographically different!

LCS: Are the third grade classes integrated?

Ms. Hurley: No, they’re separate. I wish that they were actually. I think that would benefit the children to, you know, at least for brief periods every week, because I think it makes problems on the playground and stuff, kids see themselves as different.

Regardless of their race, however, every teacher I worked with attempted to create a racial utopia in their classroom in order to realize the maxim of social equality. The racial utopia was intended to serve as a microcosm of the larger society, an environment where opportunities were equitable regardless of students’ social locations, every child was equally loved and valued, put simply the “problems” of race were illusory. Indeed, in order to maintain the racial utopia institutional discrimination could not exist.

Therefore, when contradictions threatened the myth of racial equality, the teachers were compelled to acknowledge and address infractions at the individual-level. This includes
teachers like Ms. Parker, who not only voluntarily took part in an anti-bias curriculum training series sponsored by a community organization, but had firsthand experience of racial prejudice as someone married interracially and the mother of a biracial child.

When a racial epithet was hurled at a Black girl in Ms. Parker’s second grade class at Morgan, she responded by incorporating several books on hair into her literacy curriculum:

LCS: How has the reading unit on hair gone?

Ms. Parker: It’s been really great! It’s been really interesting. There was another incident after that one [the initial incident] about one of the kids from-and unfortunately both of these things happened from kids outside of our room-so at recess they’re putting these things on a couple of my students. But they said to one of my girls, you know, you’re dirty. That’s why your skin is brown. I’m like, really?!? Really?!? So…. (sighs) Um, you know, we talked about it as a class, talked about it with that teacher, and offered her all my skin color books and, you know, it’s all you can do.

LCS: Was the other teacher receptive to your offer?

Ms. Parker: The resources weren’t taken, but they were very willing to talk about it. Um, I’m not sure what follow-up was done in the classroom. Um, but my kids loved the books about hair, and, you know, by the end they were sort of, looking at each other’s hair and, oh, well, yours is this way, and, oh, yours is this way. (sighs) I don’t know if it, if it necessarily changed their views at all because we’d read all of those skin color books at the beginning of the year and they, they’re very much aware that there are these differences and that that’s so great. Um, what was interesting is I had a poetry book, um, that featured just all these really, really sweet African American girls with all the different, the hairdos, the tufts, the braids, the Afro-whatever it was, it was a really lovely book. And my one [Black] girl who can be a little bit of a pistol, I could just see her whole body just kind of opening up as I was reading and a couple of the little boys in the back were like, well, that one looks like Taylor and she kind of (motions throwing hair over her shoulder). So if anything it, it gave them all through the various books that we read, it gave them all just a mirror.
LCS: I doubt many teachers would do a unit on hair.

Ms. Parker: You know, unfortunately, we don’t have the time. I mean, I had to be okay with giving up a little bit of curriculum.

Yet, every teacher with whom I worked, including Ms. Parker, stated that any attempts to incorporate multicultural curricula into the learning environment was supported wholeheartedly by their principals and the parents of their students. Indeed, the plausibility of the racial utopia was enhanced not only through the denial of institutional discrimination but through embracing racial diversity: differences (obviously) exist among students, but differences are (always) a good thing. This was the essence of multiculturalism in District 21.

The Korean Fan Dance: Embracing Multiculturalism

District 21 takes great pride in considering itself a racially progressive school system. In the nineteen-sixties the district voluntarily instated a formal desegregation plan in an attempt to racially balance the population of all its schools. Then, in the mid-nineteen-eighties, District 21 adopted a policy that no defined racial group should comprise more than sixty percent of any one school’s population. In order to remain in compliance with this policy, the district has occasionally redrawn school attendance boundaries, located magnet programs in certain schools to attract particular racial groups, as well as bus students to schools outside of their neighborhoods as is the case at Morgan Elementary. Despite these efforts, two schools in the last few years including Morgan have exceeded the sixty percent racial threshold with more than sixty percent of enrolled students being white.
District 21 also takes great pride in considering itself a multicultural school system. In the following, Mr. Hamilton, a third grade teacher at Morgan, expresses the overwhelming sentiment shared by the teachers I worked with regarding multiculturalism in District 21:

LCS: Do you feel supported in your efforts to incorporate multicultural curricula in your classroom?

Mr. Hamilton: Oh, absolutely! I think, uh, the one thing I love about teaching in Lakeview is that we are self-consciously oriented towards equity and justice-multiculturalism. I mean, the more obscure the culture the better it seems sometimes! You know, I, if I were teaching children how to do a Korean fan dance, I’ll bet you I would have very little resistance from, uh, from administration or faculty on how to do it. They would want to know what standards I was teaching, how to do it, curriculum, they would want to know those things. But they would have no objection to me doing that, um, so yeah, certainly there’s a huge support for those kinds of things.

After spending several months talking with and observing teachers and students, attending field trips and assemblies, even just walking the school halls, it was clear to me that multiculturalism in District 21 was expressed in essentially four ways: (1) the celebration of racial and ethnic holidays and special accomplishments by people of color; (2) the placement of pictures of notable people of color on school walls as well as posters with catchy slogans extolling the virtues of diversity like “The Hand of Friendship has No Color”; (3) the incorporation of literature about people of color and/or written by people of color; and (4) enrichment opportunities including field trips and school assemblies. Multiculturalism did not include any systematic critique of privilege and inequality. Indeed, if there was any discussion of racial injustice with students it was generally introduced through the lens of history in the context of a social studies lesson.
Once again, acknowledgement of contemporary racial inequality threatened the maxim of social equality and therefore the plausibility of the racial utopia.

Further, because there was no required, explicitly-defined multicultural curricular program in place within District 21, principals and teachers generally had the autonomy to determine how much of any of the four elements of multiculturalism they wanted to integrate into their schools and classrooms. In the following two general education teachers and one dual language teacher discuss the nature of multiculturalism incorporated in their classes. The examples of multiculturalism they provide are typical of the classrooms I observed:

Mr. Foy: Well, um, it depends. We see it [multicultural curriculum] mostly in social studies when we study a particular topic. I think it’s [the social studies curriculum] pretty good about including African and, um, Hispanic, um, elements of the culture, Native American elements. We’re going to start a unit on Illinois history pretty soon and, um, and there’s a focus on, um, both the experiences of Native Americans’ history and the experience of African American history and Illinois history. Some of the books we read, uh, many of the books that we read, that are part of the curriculum are by African American authors about the African American experience. Um, I just finished reading aloud to my class, um, The Watsons Go to Birmingham 1963. We talk a lot about that. We talk a lot about the Civil Rights Movement. So it’s there. Does it need to be more? I suppose. I’m sure I could do more. But I’m fairly confident that I include as much as I should.

While multiculturalism in Mr. Foy’s class occurred primarily in the context of social studies lessons, multiculturalism in Mr. Hamilton’s class was expressed through the selection of certain texts:

Um, I, I would say being very, just cognizant of the characters that, that I’m choosing to read, you know, very cognizant of who the characters in my story are and, I’ll do that where, okay, this particular, um, theme of this story happens in Mexico. The theme of this story, um, is the African American family. The theme
in this story—Patricia Polocco has actually written a fantastic children’s book about, uh, a same gender couple raising a family. Um, you know, which is just very well done, honestly, it is fantastic children’s literature. Um, and so I am very conscious about choosing those things. I think other ways it comes into it is when students bring in their own selves in their writing time. They bring in their own selves and make their own connections in social studies and science, bring in their own experiences and background knowledge that, um, that’s how that happens. It happens at the human level, it happens at the human level and race is a part of that and gender is a part of that and, um, socioeconomic status is always a part of our experiences. Um, but unless I, I choose to accept the idea that that is my destiny and that is the only label that I’m ever allowed to give to myself then, um, then I, I’ve got to be making sure that, um, my students will read Amy Tan one day and enjoy Joy Luck Club as much as I did whether they’re Chinese or not. And that’s the attitude I tend to take when it comes to, comes to that [multicultural] curriculum.

In Ms. Stevens’ classroom multiculturalism took the form of celebrating Hispanic holidays:

I mean, I’ve never read the official description they give to parents about dual language but I’m pretty sure it includes something about like, you know, history of Hispanic culture and things like that, and unfortunately it’s not part of our current curriculum for social studies and stuff. I know in third grade they do something kind of—if you’re working with any third grade teachers they can tell you more about what they do. I just try to work it in wherever I can like if there’s a Hispanic holiday or like something happening in Guatemala or whatever, I try….

While all teachers expressed the importance of multiculturalism and felt there was ample support by the district and their school communities to incorporate multicultural curricula in their classrooms, there were limits even within the narrow scope of “acceptable” multiculturalism. It was perfectly defensible to read books by authors of color, celebrate Black History month, to teach students how to do a Korean fan dance. It was not permissible, however, to have an entire African-centered curriculum, at least not according to the majority of teachers in this study.
Where is the Program for Polish Students? The Limits of Multiculturalism

African-Centered Curriculum (ACC) is a magnet program offered at only one school in District 21, Mason Elementary, where the population of Black students is approximately forty-five percent of the total population. The ACC program was instituted in 2006 amidst controversy within the school system and the community at large. The main objection to instituting ACC was that it would reinstate formal segregation within a school district that had a long history of supporting integration; although the program would be open to applications from all District 21 students, the assumption (and later reality) was that it would be primarily if not entirely African American students who would enroll. The main endorsement for instituting ACC was that a program built on smaller class sizes, strong family involvement, and increasing the self-esteem and confidence of racial minority children through an emphasis on “culturally-relevant” curricula would decrease the disparities in test scores between white and Black students that had long plagued the district.

Very few teachers in this study, including general education teachers at Mason, knew anything substantive about ACC including its philosophical, pedagogical, and curricular foundation; everyone, however, had an opinion about the program. My intention was to build rapport with the teachers before specifically asking for their perspectives on the program, but in the case of Ms. Stevens it came up in our first meeting as we discussed the potential emphasis on Hispanic culture in the dual language program, which she strongly supported (in theory). ACC was another story:

Well, I don’t know. I just, I don’t know anyone [associated with ACC], and I honestly don’t know that much about it. I just think… it’s like they don’t have
like a program for, you know, for like all the kids who are Polish, to learn together about Poland. They’re not learning Polish, they’re just learning about Poland. It’s like why do we need a whole program just to learn about Africa? When like, I don’t know. I just, I get that it’s a big cultural group, but I just think if you’re going to offer one for African-Americans, you should also offer one for kids who are Polish or Czechoslovakian or whatever, I don’t know. That’s just my opinion.

According to the 2000 Census, persons of Polish ancestry accounted for less than six percent of the population of Lakeview while African Americans made up one-fourth. Indeed, no other racial minority group comprises more than seven percent of the population, making whites and African Americans the two largest racial demographic groups in Lakeview, a combined 91.5% of the population. I did not, however, intuit Ms. Stevens’ argument as one that could be assuaged by demographic data. Indeed, Ms. Steven’s comments reflected what most teachers expressed as their overarching concern with ACC: the self-segregation of Black students within a curricular program focused on Africa and African-Americans. After all, if the maxim dictated that all students were equal (the same), and a belief in abstract liberalism (Bonilla-Silva 2006) meant that no group should be singled out for special treatment, then why should District 21 offer the option of enrolling in a race-specific curricular program? Further, if District 21 was going to provide such a program, why was it geared towards those (Black) students as opposed to students of Polish ancestry, for example?

Indeed, as Ms. Jackson, a fifth grade teacher at Helis asked me, with no critical reflection of the dominance of Eurocentric curricula in the district, “Can you imagine them [District 21] saying ‘we need to have a special program for white kids because
they’re not getting enough [attention]?” Further, Ms. Jackson questioned the need for the ACC program given her personal experiences with “reverse racism”:

Ms. Jackson: You know, in some ways in Lakeview it’s, I mean, I’ve, my children have experienced reverse racism, of being called bad names for being white, so-

LCS: Can you give me an example?

Ms. Jackson: Of reverse racism? Well, I came from California where I grew up in a totally diverse setting. Then I came to Chicago and I’m like oh, there’s, I feel like there’s this big separation and I felt like when I worked at a schools in Chicago and some African American people treated me very poorly. And were very angry at me. (laughs) And I was like, oh, they’re pissed. (laughs) They don’t like me because I’m white. So that felt like reverse racism. Then they got, I mean, I had a woman come up to me my first year at a school in Chicago and said, ‘you know, I usually, I don’t like white people, but you’re pretty good,’ you know, that kind of stuff. And then also my sons go to King Elementary and they have this big, huge African American celebration which is fabulous.

LCS: For Black History month or…?

Ms. Jackson: Yeah, for Dr. King day because it’s King Elementary. So they have this two-hour assembly every year. It’s like this big fanfare. And I think that is wonderful. But at some point I felt like here’s my child, who is at a school that’s pretty much 50-50. And he doesn’t know the history, he has no concept of what people fought for, nothing. He’s a blank slate, right? And when he looks up on stage and all he sees is a representation of like-they had two African Americans win awards at that ceremony. No white kids.

LCS: Is it always African American children who receive the awards?

Ms. Jackson: Uh-huh. So for him, I’m thinking, you know, from my perspective, I’m like, I get where it comes from. But he’s five, and he’s looking up there going ‘oh, where am I in that picture?’ Just like every kid should feel represented in their school. Um, so I think that, that kind of balance needs to be brought back a little bit.
“Racial” balance was something most of the teachers in this study saw as antithetical to ACC. In fact, almost every teacher who I asked about ACC was strongly opposed on the grounds that it was essentially a segregated program. In the following, three white general education teachers at Morgan and a biracial dual language teacher at Helis share their perspectives of ACC:

Mr. Foy: I’m not, I’m not very supportive of it. I think it promotes, um, I think it promotes segregation. I think it promotes different, you know, kids are different. I’m not exactly sure what Afrocentric education means. What are you-how are those kids that much different? How is the education that much different? Um, I think it’s important to promote in our curriculum, um, models of African American achievement, and, um, teach African American history and to, um, celebrate cultural achievements of Africans and African Americans, um, maybe, maybe even slightly more so than European. But, in general, we need to celebrate in the limited time we have, celebrate the cultures and achievements of everybody.

Mr. Hamilton was in favor of incorporating culturally relevant materials into the standard (traditional) curriculum, but not replacing it:

I mean there’s no way to communicate eye rolling in a, in a tape recorder, but, um, but I’ll just put it there. (sighs) Um, and although I-there’s no although, every student has a right to know who Caesar Chaves is. Every student has a right to know, um, who, um, Isabella Allende is. Every, all of these are great fantastic folks that everybody should know about. You should know what Martin Luther King wrote, and you should know Malcolm X’s autobiography-it should be in the cannon of every single person’s literature. To be an educated person, you need to have a very diverse cannon of literature. Um, and that includes Shakespeare, and that includes the quote unquote dead white guys. And so in my mind, does curriculum need to be culturally relevant? Yes, but it needs to be culturally expansive as well and the point of school is to expand culture not to limit, and so when we’ve made choices like we’re going to have an Afrocentric curriculum, um, we do all of these things for the best of reasons, and for the best of, uh, intentions. Um, but do I, do I think that, um, that the historical contributions of gays and lesbians should be more a part of our curriculum? Yes, but not only for gay and lesbian students. I think for everybody.
Similarly, Mr. Gira was skeptical of the need for ACC given the scope of multiculturalism in District 21 and teachers’ cultural sensitivities:

You know, I. I don’t-I know very little about it [ACC]. I remember when it was initiated, um, I, I think it’s more important that kids just-it’s nice to provide them with interesting materials, but I think we’re [teachers] really aware of that now. I think, you know, we provide a mix of all types of literature, you know, we go out of our way to make sure that we cover, you know, the holidays and the special events and the people that are important to our history. That’s not a problem in this district. And, um, if those [Black] kids get the right training up front, it won’t be an issue.

Interestingly, when I asked Ms. Lee for her perspective, she attempted to juxtapose ACC with dual language, a magnet program that she was instrumental in bringing to Lakeview:

Well, I, I don’t see it [ACC] as an inclusive model. Um, I see it as an exclusive model, and I don’t personally, I don’t believe in that. The dual language model which I was, I was one of the hugest, uh, biggest, most prominent, you know, pioneers, you know, for that. We gave a lot of presentations and I was the chair of many committees to get dual language into Lakeview, um, and that is an all-inclusive model. I mean, any child can participate.

To be fair, not any child could participate in dual language. Students who were not English language learners could apply for the magnet program (just as they could the ACC program) and were selected by lottery with preference given to students who had siblings already in the dual language program and students whose neighborhood school offered dual language. Even so, I did not take Ms. Lee’s point about the inclusive nature of the dual language program as an invitation to quibble over the eligibility guidelines, but to appeal once again to the maxim of social equality. The general attitude expressed by teachers when it came to multiculturalism was that it was acceptable to add culturally-relevant materials to the existing (white) curriculum, particularly the literacy and social
studies curriculum; it was not acceptable to offer an entire curricular program focused on a specific racial (minority) group. Ms. Mendez, a first grade teacher at Morgan, encapsulates this sentiment in the following excerpt:

I think that’s [ACC] going against what you want, what you want to teach because I mean, I’m not—I don’t know 100% about the program, but I know it’s, you know, centered on African curriculum and, you know, teaching all about that and, I, I just don’t, I don’t think it’s necessary to do that. I think you probably have a class, you know, about that or have, you know, have-and we do stuff with, you know, African American history month and things like that, and I just don’t know-I mean, I don’t even know if people who are African would want their kids to be only learning African because my understanding and I’m not sure, but my understanding of the program is it’s just, it’s every, like math, everything is just taught with African culture, in a kind of African culture setting and that. I mean, I don’t even know if I was even from Africa, I don’t know that I’d want my kids in a program where that’s like the main things since there are so many other cultures and they don’t really talk about them, um, and so I think what I heard from other teachers, too, like a lot of people don’t want to put their kids in it because it’s so dominated by one particular culture.

Interestingly, Ms. Mendez overlooks the fact that District 21’s standard general education curriculum is dominated by one particular culture: white Europeans.

Given the overwhelming negative attitudes expressed about ACC, I thought the following dialogue particularly telling:

**LCS:** What do you think about ACC as a strategy for addressing racial inequalities in schooling?

**Ms. Parker:** Um…. I think that…. It’s hard to say because they [the district] keep it under wraps a lot.

**LCS:** How so?

**Ms. Parker:** We don’t hear anything about it. They don’t share stories of it. Um, it’s not talked about ever.

If teachers throughout the district were provided regular, substantive information about ACC would their attitudes about the program change? Interestingly, teachers who
taught in curricular programs other than ACC at Mason were more likely to identify positive aspects of the program. However, their concerns also mirrored those of teachers in other schools. In the following a Black general education teacher and a white general education teacher at Mason offer their insights regarding ACC:

LCS: Since you mentioned an early desire to work with African American males, I’m curious to know if you have ever worked in the ACC program here at Mason.

Mr. Swain: No, I haven’t.

LCS: You wanted to teach gen ed?

Mr. Swain: Yes, I wanted to do that because, yeah, I feel like for me and just my experience it’s-I don’t want the kids to feel segregated and I don’t think-

LCS: So it is sort of a segregated program in terms of there is not a lot of interaction between the ACC classes and other classes?

Mr. Swain: There are. Well, um, we do a lot because we have the dual language program and then we have ACC and we have 2 gen ed teachers at our grade level, myself, and there’s another teacher on the other side of me who also does gen ed and most of the grade levels work that way, and we do interact, you know. The kids get a chance to do different activities and things together throughout the year, not so much early in the year, but as the year goes on.

LCS: So it’s not like you’ve got these different tracks and there’s no interaction?

Mr. Swain: No, they interact. I just like the diversity. I guess that’s the easiest way to say it. I like the diversity of the gen ed classroom. I like to, um, the kids sort of get to see different races and backgrounds and I think that, to me, is the strongest way to teach because it’s more reflective of what they see in real life, you know?

Ms. Hurley believed there were benefits of ACC for the students enrolled, but did not believe the benefits would boost test scores, a major impetus for the program:
Well, I think there’s a lot of things that are beneficial [about ACC], but, you know, every morning we come in and we hear them singing Lean on Me or some other song of solidarity, and, and of support, and of community. And I want to take my kids in and do that, too, you know, because I think that everybody needs a little of that. I think there are some things they do that are just wonderful for kids. I can’t say that I’m very familiar with the curriculum. I can’t really judge. I don’t think it hurts for kids to learn about their heritage. But what I see happening is that I have one Black female in my classroom because they’re all in ACC. That’s not really representative of this school. Do I think it’s going to make a difference in test scores? No. No. I don’t. I don’t think there’s going to be a difference. You know, you have what you have. And children have their capabilities and test scores are just not a good way [to measure that]. Now, do I think there’s going to be growth there that maybe wouldn’t have happened? Absolutely. Absolutely. But how do you measure that? How do you measure relationships with parents that you might not have had if it hadn’t been for that program? I don’t know how you measure that.

Ms. Smith was a new teacher in the dual language program at Mason who came to District 21 with almost twenty years of teaching experience. She had also earned two graduate degrees, one in inner-city studies which she described as similar to Black studies. Ms. Smith expressed to me on more than one occasion that what attracted her to Mason was the curricular options it offered its students. Indeed, Mason refers to itself as “three schools in one,” reflecting its offerings of a general education curriculum, dual language program, and ACC. Ms. Smith’s concerns were not about the merits of ACC but its implementation given the demands placed on teachers in general:

Ms. Smith: I think that the ACC program and the dual language program if they’re done correctly are really valuable in making children know who they are and learn in a way that is more meaningful to them rather than just kind of a generic, you know-

LCS: What do you mean by “done correctly?”

Ms. Smith: Um, I think that there needs to be a lot more, uh, curricular focus and a lot more kind of, um, getting things organized beforehand and not being handed a curriculum, um, that doesn’t necessarily fit because I mean, the poor ACC teachers right now they’re trying to
get a Kwanza program together but they’re also supposed to be on 5.3 in math, and, and it’s like you could do the two things together because they’re playing music, and how about teaching fractions through that? But that’s not allowed to happen. So things need to be much better planned and much better tied together in order for the things to work really well, in my opinion.

Ms. Smith’s comments reflect the pressure teachers felt, particularly at Helis and Mason, both Title I schools, of being charged with the responsibility to produce classrooms full of academically thriving students while also attending to their students’ social and developmental needs. Maintaining the racial utopia was quite challenging: if all students had the potential to learn and be successful, why did white students typically outpace racial minority students and why were there more racial and ethnic minority boys in special education?

**Teachers’ Perspectives on Racial Inequality in Schooling**

As a manifestation of the equality maxim the racial utopia reflected and reinforced teachers’ understandings of the relationship between race and schooling. Teachers knew racial inequality existed; with the exception of one, all the teachers I worked with regardless of their race and the racial population of their schools, agreed with the notion that racial inequality was still a significant problem in schooling. In fact, a few teachers, like Mr. Hamilton, expressed fervently that enduring racial inequality was the most significant problem in education today:

**LCS:** Historically racial inequality has been a significant problem in schooling. Do you think that it is still poses a problem?

**Mr. Hamilton:** Oh, of course, it does! I, how could I not think that? It should be the most major civil rights issue right now, is, is racial inequalities in education. Um, the reality that, that if you take a look at who is not achieving well in my classroom and you take a look at what
race they are, it’s inexcusable. It is absolutely inexcusable. I would say that here at Morgan, and one of the unique, the weird thing is we have a district where our Morgan boundaries are not contiguous. We have this little square of land in a poorer area of Lakeview that kids are bused to every single day. And I do not have an answer to this question, but sometimes I think the best thing that could have happened for some of our students is that they happened to live in that little postage stamp of land that gets to come over here to one of the best schools in the state as measured by data. We know that. And, and so I think Anton sure did get lucky that, that he has the right address to get here at Morgan. Um, and….so do I think there’s racial inequalities, and do they remain? Absolutely and it still is affecting what we do in schools! I think we’ve taken a lot of efforts here in Lakeview to address that very honestly, um, but it’s still nagging and it’s still…not solved by any means.

Similarly, Ms. Martin, the only Black classroom teacher at Helis, spoke passionately about the marginalization of Black children, particularly boys, by teachers and staff, who would often come to Ms. Martin for her guidance in “handling” Black children when problems arose:

It just pains my heart sometimes when I walk up to the office and I see these little Black boys, sitting in the office. ‘Well, what are you doing here?’ ‘Oh, I got in trouble or I did this.’ I’m saying, ‘what?!” Many times they [teachers and staff] come [to me], ‘Ms. Martin, can you, um, can he come and sit in your room because he seems so-and-so?”…And I think some teachers won’t bother. Once you start acting up a little bit, you’re out of there. You are out of there. You’re sitting in [the office]…I had a class, I had a class much smaller than this with about, I had like 11 students. And most of them were boys, Black boys. So I said, like I said to them [the principal and staff], ‘why me?” And someone said, ‘you just have a way with them.’ This is something I feel in my heart for these kids because you know what? We think that because they are kids they don’t have issues. They do. They do…and sometimes I close my door and I say, ‘we’re going to have a talk.’ Yeah, and I sit them down and I, and I really get mad and say, ‘look,’ I said, ‘you are boys of color, you need to get your act together! You need to stop this and you are the ones losing out.’…Just today I was walking in the halls and these big boys, they come hugging me. Some of the other teachers, they won’t let them come near them. They won’t do that. They won’t listen. I say to them ‘what’s going on?’ ‘The teachers won’t listen. They think I’m bad, they don’t want’-and I go and I see them outside [the office] and
I’m saying ‘oh, my, god! ’ I mean, a white person-I hardly see a little white boy sitting outside [the office]. I don’t see it. And it bothers me as the only Black person in this building.

Despite these obvious disparities, teachers went to great lengths, even to the extent of creating racial utopias, to minimize the realities of discrimination and privilege. In fact, Ms. Lee who wanted to be on the record as many times as possible in support of inclusion told me on more than one occasion a major goal of inclusion was to foster the “invisibility” of inclusion students in the general education classrooms. Instead of challenging a system of privilege, ableism, the desire was to have students with disabilities assimilate or disappear into the general education classroom as fully as possible.

In essence, teachers walked a tightrope between openly acknowledging white privilege, ableism, and institutional racism, and the roles of each in the disparities in student test scores, academic outcomes, and special education referrals, and maintaining the illusion for their students that the historical problems of race had been solved and what problems did remain could be accounted for by ignorance and overcome by students making good choices. Indeed, a corollary maxim was students can be anything they want to be if they make good choices. The language of “good choices” was used to some degree in every class I observed in relation to choosing a good partner, following the rules of the classroom, and in being successful in life.

In the end, the issue for the teachers was not a matter of whether racial inequality existed, but how it was best addressed. This depended on teachers’ perceptions of the causes of racial inequality and their understandings of the nature and efficacy of
antiracism. Teachers’ insights once again tended to reflect the basic premises of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

The Declining Significance of Race

A number of teachers relied heavily on the minimization of racism frame (Bonilla-Silva 2006) to explain the nature and extent of contemporary racial discrimination in schooling. The tables had turned and class was now a greater determinate of life chances than race (Wilson 1978). Indeed, Mr. Gold, a teacher at Morgan, stated that class completely trumped race in terms of academic outcomes:

I think economic, economic background is [more important than race in explaining inequality] because I have kids of different races, I have African American kids that come from very successful homes, economically successful homes, and I have kids that don’t. And there’s also academic differences between them. So it’s not even the race, it’s just economics. Where kids come from, you know. So, yes, it’s always present and obviously you know, uh, the differences from where kids come from and community. And, so, it’s present but we work very hard to even it out, even the field.

Unlike Mr. Gold, however, most teachers who emphasized the importance of class acknowledged that race was still a problem, but it was declining in significance compared to socioeconomic status (e.g., Wilson 1978):

LCS: Do you think racial inequality is still a problem in schooling?

Mr. Foy: Well, again, it depends on what you mean. Unequal treatment, unequal opportunity, unequal attitudes by teachers toward students? Um, I think if they still exist they’re much more subtle than they used to be. In some sense, I guess, that’s progress. That it’s kind of been driven underneath, and maybe it’s diminished over the years. I think it’s fair to say, um, I think that inequalities nowadays are more economic. So African American kids who are struggling academically are in general coming from the lower income homes, um, not as educated, undereducated homes. Kids who are coming from affluent educated households, um, I think-
LCS: So you would say a problem exists, but it appears to be class-based, or socioeconomic?

Mr. Foy: I think. Now, that’s here in Lakeview, and I suspect many places. I am sure many other places the problem is, um, unequal, unequal attitudes, attitudes towards kids that are not fair and, and sometimes they’re hard to people will deny they have those attitudes, but if you dig a little bit deeper, you could kind of see it, um, or it becomes obvious that, yes, there is a racial attitude or, or a, a belief that those kids aren’t going to achieve, so therefore I’m not going to put much energy into having them achieve.

Mr. Foy jumps through a number of interesting hoops in this exchange. First, he questions whether racial inequality still exists; then acknowledges a basic tenet of color-blind racism, the evolution of racial discrimination from overt to covert manifestations; then uses the minimization of racism frame to explain current racial disparities; and then finally acknowledges that covert forms of discrimination probably do still exist, but not in Lakeview. Instead, social class is offered as the primary explanation for inequality: students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds regardless of race are disadvantaged and students who come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds regardless of race are advantaged. Yet, this logic ignores the fact that students coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are overwhelming racial and ethnic minorities.

Here, poverty is essentially treated as race-neutral. Further, this logic overestimates the effects of social class in mitigating the consequences of race: “While blacks have come closer to parity with whites in income, education, and occupation, the substantial racial differences in wealth continue to affect educational and social opportunities.” (Orr 2003, p. 299) According to Orr, the disparities in wealth between white and Black households
explain in large part the enduring discrepancies in standardized tests scores between white and Black students.

While the negative effects of poverty on student opportunities and outcomes were a common concern expressed by most of the teachers I worked with, sometimes teachers also discussed culture as an important variable that distinguished the students in their class. In the following Ms. Hurley, a third grade teacher at Mason, acknowledges the importance of race and class in understanding inequality, but adds that culture is also a critical factor:

I do think it’s an issue [race]. I think perceptions, any time you have, um...any time you have, um, minority students especially low-income minority students, you know. You’re talking about challenges there that might be different because of, partly because of class, and it doesn’t matter whether you’re Black or white, but also because of culture. Um, and you know those differences, um, can impact how children learn, what their style is, you know. Um, it, it took me a while to get used to, uh, low loud African American females are. White girls tend to be quiet, I mean, this is as stereotype, of course, you know. You can, I don’t generally say ‘oh, it’s a white child, she’s going to be quiet’ or ‘blonde, she’s going to be stupid.’ No, no, no, no. But I’ve just noticed, you know, that, that the high, well, it’s kind of like Italians are very high-profile. You know, I think by culture some people are. They’re louder, and they express their emotions differently, you know. But, put them together and you see kind of calming of that, and I mean, let’s face it. There’s, there are just like in language there’s, um, educational language and there’s social language. There’s a social way to act on the streets and at home and with your family and there’s an educational way to act just like when you have a job someday there’s a way that you act and speak and talk and dress at your job and at home you might be different. You might swear, you might wear jeans, you know, you might yell to your friends. And, and I think kids just have to learn that to be successful, so, so whether they’re high-profile or not, you know, I think there’s a place to meet in the middle, and for those kids that don’t express themselves whether they’re white or they’re Latino or they’re withdrawn and they’re African American and whatever you know, I think that there’s a meeting in the middle that happens when you form community in a classroom. And kids start rubbing off on each other.
While in this dialogue Ms. Hurley attempts to assert a race-neutral position, note the emphasis on the “calming down” of minority children, especially Black girls, as a benefit of their interactions with white children, especially white girls. Also, Ms. Hurley stresses, as did many other teachers, the importance of understanding, internalizing, and obeying the rules of the “school culture” in order to be successful (as opposed to “other culture”), an important theme discussed in detail in chapter five.

I’m Trying Really Hard to Get There: Antiracism in Schooling

According to Mica Pollock (2008), there are four foundational principles for doing antiracism in schooling: (1) rejecting false notions of human difference; (2) acknowledging lived experiences shaped along racial lines; (3) learning from diverse forms of knowledge and experience; and (4) challenging systems of racial inequality (p. xx). When I asked the teachers in this study to define antiracism, their responses mirrored Pollack’s criteria with the exception of the last principle; teachers’ definitions of antiracism were almost always framed as something that occurred on an individual-level. To synthesize their responses, an antiracist teacher is someone who has no preconceived notions about race (someone who is not prejudiced), does not treat their students favorably or unfavorably on the basis of race and indeed celebrates racial diversity (multiculturalism), and consciously attempts to create an environment for their students that is not bound by race (the essence of the racial utopia). Mr. Hamilton’s definition of an antiracist teacher is remarkably similar to the principles Pollock outlines, again, with the exception of the charge to address racial inequality at the institutional-level:

Antiracist teacher? Um, in the best sense of that word to me, if you’re going to be antiracist and, in the best sense of, um, it, it…. What you’re doing is, is delivering
loads and loads of what I call “contact therapy.” Um, it’s a, you’re making sure that people have a variety of experiences of, of successfully completing things and doing things with one another. We’ve got a very diverse classroom in my room right now. Um, you’re being extremely, um, aware of how race still does affect interactions and, and helping children develop the skills it takes to, um, uh, to, to learn and to work, to play, and to have fun and to have a great school day with kids who are not like them. Um, and race is one part, there’s a million other parts to that. I’ve got, you know, one boy who would love to come to school with fingernails pink and, and it’s making our classroom where that can happen. Um, in a way where that’s going to happen, is, is what I would say is an anti-prejudiced teacher. But in terms of specifically an antiracist teacher? Um, I, I would suppose the best sense of that word would be a teacher who is aware of how race affects student’s interactions and is aware of the benefits of learning and living and playing with people who are not like them and is aware of specific skills they can teach their students to make that happen.

Ms. Smith, who was passionate about her commitment to racial justice, was very sensitive to the influence of white privilege in the classroom, yet in her response she emphasized cultural relativism as opposed to structural change:

Um, I would say someone who [is antiracist] has no preconceived notions about how, um, how the child is, how the children are but also who understands that different cultures behave in different ways in the classroom and accepts that and understands how to deal with, you know, a more verbal culture or instead of trying to make everyone white, middle class, ‘let’s sit down, shut up, raise your hand.’ Um, I, I would say that, that would be a, a good first step in not making a kid look you in the eye if that’s not their culture, and, uh, kind of understand the cultures and try to teach them how to, you know, get along in mainstream society but also to accept who they are and not try to make them fit into this middle class, white middle class mold.

Based on the definitions the teachers provided as well as Pollock’s (2008) criteria, it was not surprising that almost everyone considered themselves to be antiracist teachers. Some like Ms. Smith embraced the label stating that being antiracist was something she worked very hard at while others like Mr. Foy accepted the label but acknowledged their antiracism efforts could be more valiant. Interestingly, Ms. Parker, the teacher at Morgan who had taken part in the anti-bias training series, was the most self-reflective and
thoughtful when I asked her if she considered herself an antiracist teacher. After a long pause, her response was, “I’m trying really hard to get there.”

**Conclusion**

When I began observing in classrooms, it was immediately apparent to me that a major disconnect exists between those who make educational policy and seek to enforce it including superintendents and school boards, and the classroom teachers who are expected to implement it. Elementary teachers in District 21 have myriad demands placed upon them, more than I would have ever expected, and every teacher I worked with made numerous sacrifices to try and meet those demands including working long hours, giving up their lunch periods, and spending their own money on resources for their students. Further, they are expected to regularly participate in professional development seminars and to embrace new initiatives the superintendent, school board, and their principals, hand down like inclusion and differentiation.

In reality, differentiation, unlike inclusion, is not new. As a number of teachers told me, trying to meet students where they are and working with them to achieve academic growth is something they did before “differentiation” existed. What Carol Ann Tomlinson did in developing a model of differentiated learning, however, was unintentionally provide justification for a new form of tracking. Indeed, I suspect an element of differentiation that particularly appeals to educators is the emphasis on students’ differences. After all, teachers are expected to exert a great deal of effort to maintain the façade that all students are the same in terms of potential and opportunity, yet they know assessments reveal stark differences between categories of students and
those categories are most obvious in terms of race, and in the case of students with IEPs, gender, too.

While differentiation offers teachers validation for attending to differences, on the surface it is neutral with regard to race, class, and gender. The homogenous grouping that tends to occur with differentiation and inclusion, however, clearly manifests along those lines. This is due in part to the framing of differentiation and inclusion in terms of individualistic models of social justice (Artiles, Harris-Murri, and Rostenberg 2006) that is buttressed by teachers’ common wisdom on race and racial inequalities. To a large extent, however, this is also the result of teachers trying to be proficient in meeting the demands placed upon them. For example, if I am a teacher who has to spend a certain number of minutes every day with a group of RTI-Tier 2 students who are struggling with reading, then the most efficient way to utilize my time is to put those students in one reading group where I can do guided reading with all of them at the same time. Yet, the reality is that RTI-Tier 2 students, like IEP students, are overwhelming racial and ethnic minorities which means this reading group is probably going to be mostly if not all nonwhite.

The selection of groups and partners also, however, reflects the ways that teachers do race (West and Fenstermaker 1995) in the classrooms. After all, in a racial utopia where the problems of race do not exist, and disability as well, what difference does it make if students typically work in groups with other students of the same race and ability? I return to this question in chapter six when possible solutions for addressing
inequality in schooling are considered. In the next chapter teachers’ perspectives on gender in the classroom are explored.
CHAPTER FOUR
WHAT PROBLEM? GENDER IN THE CLASSROOM

When I began the observation phase of this research, I expected to see far more examples of “traditional” forms of racial as opposed to gender bias in the classroom. While there were some instances of what I found to be blatant examples of prejudice, such as the geographic marginalization of almost every Black boy in Ms. Norman’s class who she made sit at desks removed from their classmates so they would not be “distracted,” for the most part, beliefs and behaviors regarding race played out at a much more covert level. The displays of gender I observed in the classrooms, on the other hand, did not appear to have evolved much from the time of Barry Thorne’s influential work on gender and schooling in the early nineteen-nineties, as the following examples from my field notes demonstrate:

Field Notes: Mr. Gira’s Fifth Grade Class, January 19, 2011

This morning Mr. Gira has transformed his classroom into Colonial Williamsburg for a social studies activity. Desks are grouped together in six stations representing the Governor’s palace, the slave quarters, the shoemaker’s shop, the tavern, the church, and the College of William and Mary and the dame school. He puts all the students into groups of two; all groups are same-gender except for one because there is an odd number of boys and girls who are present today.

As Mr. Gira explains to the students the activities they are expected to do at each station, he tells them when they get to the group of tables representing the college and the dame school, the girls have to do a “sowing” activity at the dame school, and the boys have to use a quill and paint to do a writing exercise at the college. Several boys laugh and a number of girls protest; one girl yells out, “But that’s not fair!”
Mr. Gira tells her, “But this is Colonial Williamsburg and that’s what women did, sow and take care of the home.” This is the only station in this activity in which a strict interpretation of historical accuracy is enforced. At the slave quarters station, for example, white students are not instructed to behave as masters and minority students to behave as slaves.

Field Notes: Ms. Parker’s Second Grade Class, October 5, 2010

As the students work on their assignment, I ask Ms. Parker why all of her reading groups are same-gender. Ms. Parker tells me that in her experience, girls are usually stronger readers than boys and although she has tried mixed-gender reading groups in the past, making the groups same-gender usually works better because girls in mixed-gender groups can sometimes overpower the boys.

Field Notes: Ms. Steven’s and Ms. Lee’s Second Grade Class, October 25, 2010

I arrive in Ms. Steven’s class at 9:30 a.m. after the students have returned from recess. A brief letter with grammatical errors is written on the board in Spanish and Ms. Lee, the co-teacher, is leading the students in making corrections. There is one part towards the end of the letter that I do not understand but Jesus is called on and inserts his name. A Hispanic girl laughs and says, “It’s always Jesus!” I record how many times children are called on by Ms. Lee in terms of gender: boy, boy, boy, boy, boy, boy, girl. Based on all my counts, boys are consistently called on more often than girls in this classroom.

Field Notes: Ms. Smith’s Fifth Grade Class, October 19, 2010

Finally, the social worker arrives twenty minutes late. She is continuing a series on bullying and today she is specifically talking to the students about cyber bullying. I notice the kids have gender segregated themselves on the rug in front of the social worker. The social worker goes over terminology on bullying, quizzing the kids, and asking for examples. She shows a short video on cyber bullying in which a young girl is victimized by her classmates and then “saved” by a boy in her class.

After the video, the social worker goes over right and wrong ways to address bullying. At one point, the only Black girl in the class, Jasmine, says, “Well, if you’re a girl you can scream.” The social asks her if boys can scream, too. Jasmine concedes some boys can, but not all. The social worker starts to challenge her assumptions about gender, but then moves on to another student.
Field Notes: Mr. Hamilton’s Third Grade Class, October 25, 2010

Mr. Hamilton decides to break the students into three groups to work in science stations. The students are divided up into groups based on the colors of their clothing. Since the first color Mr. Hamilton calls is pink, every girl except for one ends up in the first group.

Mr. Hamilton, however, realized almost immediately that by not taking into account gender norms, he had unintentionally segregated his class by gender. In fact, Mr. Hamilton, an openly gay teacher at Morgan, was one of the most deliberately gender-conscious teachers with whom I worked. While it was common to see same-gender partners working together in his classroom, small groups were generally comprised of boys and girls. This was the exception rather than the rule.

Indeed, when I began my classroom observations, I was surprised to see how often teachers across all three schools allowed students to work in same-gender pairs and groups. This occurred for three main reasons. First, students almost always selected partners of the same gender when they were given the choice. Second, gender was often the variable teachers used to select partners and groups. Third, because the number of boys with IEPs exceeded the number of girls, inclusion groups were generally same-gender. Even though partners and small groups also tended to be homogenous in terms of race, the teachers I observed were far more concerned about racism than sexism. As a result, when it came to gender, it was as if the consequences of gender segregation were rarely if at all a consideration even though, as Thorne (1993) points out, when teachers gender segregate activities in their classrooms students pick up on and elaborate the oppositional and antagonistic meanings. (p. 67) I witnessed this on a few occasions when
a boy and girl were paired together and one or both expressed their disgust at having to work with someone of a different gender.

In reality, the pervasiveness of gender segregation seems paradoxical given that in addition to creating racial utopias in their classrooms, teachers also attempted to create gender utopias in order to realize the equality maxim. However, because teachers’ perspectives on sexism were fundamentally different from their perspectives on racism, the gender utopia was even less effective as a means to attend to inequality. For example, while all but two teachers I worked with believed that racial inequality was still a major problem in schooling, the responses were mixed when it came to gender inequality. In fact, all three white, heterosexual male teachers I worked with stated that gender inequality was not a problem, at least not in Lakeview. Mr. Foy offers a case in point:

LCS: Historically, gender inequality has been a significant problem in schooling. I’m curious to know if you think it’s still a problem.

Mr. Foy: No. I don’t think it’s a problem.

LCS: And can you expand on why you think it’s not a problem?

Mr. Foy: Well, I can only speak for my classroom. And I think that I give pretty much equal opportunities for all kids to learn. I don’t, I don’t base any of my educational decisions on gender. I do, however, have a tendency to group them mostly on gender because I find that, I find that the girls and the boys, um, maybe are more comfortable working in their own gender. Um, that’s not always the case, but I do that frequently. Um, but in terms of providing the opportunities I think there’s equality there.

In Mr. Gold’s explanation of why gender inequality was no longer a problem, he offered an interesting commentary concerning the influence of the community itself:
Mr. Gold: I think it’s [gender inequality] zero problem. I can only talk about my classes. It’s zero problem in my class. My sense is from the teachers here at Morgan it’s probably a zero issue in all the classes.

LCS: Why here?

Mr. Gold: I don’t know, maybe it’s Lakeview. Because it’s a community that kind of, people who choose to live here and teach here, come with a predisposition to kind of viewing people to the best extent they can. It’s just that type of community we live in, you know. You don’t live in Lakeview if you are a different type of person generally. Now, all the teachers generally live in Lakeview, or they are people who have been associated with Lakeview a long time. And the ones who come from outside soon learn the type of personality and the type of community we live in. And you’d be very out of place if your attitudes were racist, and you know, homophobic, or, or you had gender preferences.

As Benokraitis and Feagin point out, when it comes to modern sexism, “Many of the battles won in the late 1960s and 1970s were limited or temporary victories.” (1986, p. 25) Yet, unlike with racial discrimination, the general attitude among the teachers I worked with when it came to gender was that while enduring prejudices and support for traditional gender roles may still exist, in general, gender inequality was not a significant problem in schooling anymore. As a result: (1) teachers were more likely to intentionally segregate students into groups based on gender, as opposed to unintentionally which was often the case with race; (2) unlike with race, teachers were inclined to believe that fundamental differences existed between boys and girls and those differences were most likely the result of biological or natural phenomena; (3) teachers were more likely to make androcentric selections or favor the preferences of boys over girls in absence of
tasks and books that were gender-neutral; and (4) teachers tended to support antiracism in schooling but reject feminism.

In addition, the environment of high-stakes testing virtually assured that gender inequality would not be problematized in the near future. According to Nel Noddings, “The academic purpose of the school drives everything.” (1992, p. 13) When test scores on the ISATs are compared for boys and girls across all three schools in reading, science, and math, any differences between boys and girls, when they do exist, pale in comparison to differences found across racial groups. Further, unlike with racial groups where whites score higher than Black and Hispanic students in every subject and in every grade, results when it comes to gender are less consistent; more fourth grade boys at Mason exceeded standards in reading than girls on the most recent ISAT while at Morgan, third, fourth, and fifth grade girls exceeded standards in math compared to boys. The bottom line is that as far as test scores in District 21 are concerned, gender is a non-issue (see also Noddings 2007). Interestingly, test scores on state report cards are not aggregated by sex and race.

Regardless of impact on standardized tests, understanding teachers’ perspectives on gender is just as important as understanding their perspectives on race, perhaps more so since contemporary sexism does not appear to be on District 21’s radar. Two areas in particular that highlight teachers’ perspectives on gender inequality include their understanding of the relationship between biology, culture, and gender, and their claims to or rejection of feminism, and their opinions of single-sex programming in public
schools. Indeed, teachers’ views on single-sex schooling illuminate the inextricable relationship between gender and sexuality in the classroom.

**Gender-Blind Sexism**

Mr. Gira: I’ve just found that I try not to see gender, you know, race, that stuff-you just can’t even look at that. They’re [students] just people. I think that’s the smartest way to approach it.

Like color-blind racism in the post-Civil Rights era, gender-blind sexism operates at a clandestine level. Benokraitis and Feagin (1986) distinguish this type of modern sexism as subtle sex discrimination and covert sex discrimination. Whereas subtle sex discrimination refers to the unequal, harmful treatment of women that is visible but goes unacknowledged because of the internalization of sexist behaviors, covert sex discrimination refers to the unequal, harmful treatment of women that is hidden and maliciously motivated (pp. 30-31). According to Benokraitis and Feagin, although covert sex discrimination is difficult to document, subtle sex discrimination is even more challenging to prove because it is generally viewed as “normal” behavior, not discrimination.

Interestingly, teachers’ perspectives on gender reflect the basic premises of the lenses of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006). It is their reliance, however, on certain frames over others that points to their divergent views on gender and racial inequalities. Whereas with race, teachers often appealed to the minimization of racism frame and at times the cultural racism frame to explain racialized outcomes, with gender,
naturalization and abstract liberalism were privileged in teachers’ understandings of sexism.

Of course, viewing gender as a biological or “natural” phenomenon is not a new empirical finding. Indeed, according to Judith Lorber (1994), “Gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it is bred into our genes. Most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life.” (p. 13) To “do” gender, according to West and Zimmerman (1986) is to create differences between men and women that are not natural or biological, yet once created reinforce the “essential” nature of gender (p. 137). When the teachers in this study performed gender (Butler 1990) in the classroom, they were far more likely to display what Benokraitis and Feagin (1986) refer to as accidental dimensions of sex discrimination resulting from ignorance, insensitivity, provincialism, or misguided favors (p. 39). For example, several teachers indicated the reason they allowed students to work in same-gender groups as often as they did was because the students preferred it, or the students were most comfortable working with others of the same gender. Teachers were not willing to validate this logic in regards to race.

Naturalization was not only reflected in teachers’ perceptions about the comfort levels of students working in same-gender pairs and groups, but also in the reification of traditional notions of gender. Internalization of gender roles occurs well before children
start elementary school (Maccoby and Jacklin 1987; Bem 1993), as Ms. Roberts illustrates with an example from her first grade class:

I’m shocked at how in starting last year, like, um, how set they [Ms. Roberts’ students] are, how set their stereotypes are about, about boy-girl things. So, um, you know, we’ve [Ms. Roberts and Ms. Parker] been going to this anti-bias workshop so I mean we, last year, I mean, it’s mostly what we talked about. I mean, we talked about skin color a lot, lessons about that and stuff, but I mean they [Ms. Roberts’ students] were just saying such outrageous things about gender roles and they still do. So…. (sighs) I mean, uh, it’s shocking to me that how these little kids’ mindsets might as well be my grandparents’ mindsets, you know? On the other hand, I think there is progress, I mean, clearly.

While Ms. Roberts was discouraged by her young students’ rigid ideas about gender, oftentimes it was teachers who perpetuated male privilege even if unwittingly. In the following excerpt, for example, Ms. Stevens talks about her literature selections based on the gender composition of her class:

I mean, well, I have like a really big group of boys in here. I just have a small amount of girls in here which is very different for me, and I find myself like at the library trying to find like read-alouds that I think they’re really going to enjoy. And, like, you know, I have to maybe not read “Fancy Nancy” and read “The Boy Who Loved Words” instead because you know that’s more geared towards the students who are in here. Um, so I mean, I don’t think as far as gender bias or like inequalities or anything like that there’s any big issue. I don’t see, you know, the kids like I don’t know making assumptions against each other or anything like that.

Notwithstanding the importance of literature as a cultural resource that influences children’s understanding of gender (Jackson 2007), Ms. Stevens’ comments reveal another significant way in which teachers’ treatment of gender differs from their treatment of race: multiculturalism is viewed as an important vehicle in District 21 for bringing attention to the experiences of (racial) minorities in the context of a “white”
(majority) institution. In Ms. Stevens’ class girls are a noticeable minority in terms of both numbers and power, yet Ms. Stevens made it clear on more than one occasion that she was more concerned about attending to the preferences of the boys in her class rather than the girls. There is no equivalent of “multiculturalism” for addressing historical and contemporary sexism in District 21. Indeed, Women’s History Month is not even celebrated in the schools where I worked:

LCS: Do you celebrate women’s history month here at Morgan?

Ms. Mendez: We don’t. We do Black History month. We do not [celebrate Women’s History Month], and I don’t feel badly about that. I mean, I don’t-I think that women should be celebrated all day, I mean, every day, you know. Not for a month. We celebrate people as they kind of come up and I don’t feel that women or anyone really needs to have their own month in order for it to be fair or in order to you know sing the praises of a woman or anyone else. We read women authors, we see women, you know, in good positions all the time, so the kids I don’t think would be shocked to know that women have achieved something, you know. I think especially these little kids. They see a lot of achievement by women and people who used to be minorities and, you know, so I think they have a different perspective.

A reliance on the naturalization frame is also reflected in teachers’ perceptions of the academic potential and outcomes for boys and girls. In the following, Ms. Lee explains why she thinks more boys receive IEPs than girls. Her response also typifies teacher’s reluctance to acknowledge the pervasiveness of sexism:

Ms. Lee: Hmmm. I still see it [gender] as an issue, um, not a problem.

LCS: Can you tell me what you mean by that?

LCS: How so?

Ms. Lee: There’s more boys that have IEPs in our building. There’s more boys than girls hands down for sure. And that’s always been the case. I don’t know why. I tend more to believe that, you know, boys just, you know, take a little longer. They’re a little more squirrely. But that’s a generality for sure. (laughs) Um, and girls aren’t. And they adapt I think a little more, a little more readily. Not all, again, but just as a general, you know, statement. But I don’t see it as a problem because we are differentiating for so many students.

Similarly, Mr. Gira appealed to what he believed were inherent differences in boys and girls to support his argument that gender inequality was no longer a problem in schooling:

LCS: Do you think gender inequality is still a problem in schooling?

Mr. Gira: No. Not at all, not here. Yeah, I mean, uh, um, girls have all the opportunities that boys do. In fact, I mean, I, I can count on my female students to be more diligent at this age, almost every year, you know. The, the harder working, more focused students are large percentage girls.

LCS: Why do you think that is?

Mr. Gira: I think they [girls] mature faster and boys are still little boys in fifth grade. They’re not really very mature but girls start to, to mature a little earlier and just the nature of their personality. They’re more sedentary, they can focus, you know, they’re not as active and moving around as much as boys. Um, I mean, rarely do I have problems with girls in that, in that area. Whereas boys are just, they’re, they have too much energy and it, it shows in school.

Another interesting difference between teacher’s perspectives on race and their perspectives on gender was revealed in their reactions to antiracism versus feminism.

When asked, every teacher to some degree wanted to be considered an antiracist teacher;
at the very least, this was considered a noble ambition. There were few teachers, however, who accepted the title “feminist teacher.” Indeed, it was often the same teachers who embraced the label of antiracist teacher that fervently rejected the label of feminist teacher. Further, among those teachers who did consider themselves feminists, even if halfheartedly, they did so based on the tenets of liberal feminism. This offers an interesting expansion of Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) abstract liberalism frame by taking into account the ways in which individuals appeal to the premises of economic and political liberalism to underscore their beliefs about gender as well as race.

The “F” Word

Anticipating teachers may be uncomfortable talking about feminism given the widespread efforts to dismantle the women’s movement and feminist platforms beginning in the late 1970s (Douglas and Michaels 2004), I broached the topic by first asking teachers about gender inequality. Then, when teachers asserted favorable attitudes towards gender equality, as all did in this study, I asked whether they considered themselves feminist teachers. In the end, I was surprised by how fundamentally different teachers’ reactions to feminism were compared to antiracism. My expectation was that teachers committed to feminism would also be committed to antiracism and vice versa. However, a number of self-described antiracist teachers immediately rejected the idea they were feminists:

LCS: Do you consider yourself a feminist teacher?
Ms. Stevens: I don’t think so at all. No, I mean, no. I think it’s just like more the child as a whole instead of just like, this is a boy, this is a girl. Like I don’t even think about that. Yeah.

Ms. Lee’s reaction to my question was one of incredulity. Perhaps not intending such a kneejerk response, she quickly went on to express some support for feminist goals but not a commitment to feminism:

A feminist teacher?!? Hmmmm…. No. No. I wouldn’t say a feminist teacher. I mean, I firmly believe in all of the feminist, um, values and-not values, um, their, their stances, you know, their, their platforms. I do believe in them, but I wouldn’t say that that drives my instruction or that’s my philosophy of teaching.

Ms. Jackson was also taken off guard by my question because of what she believed was feminism’s lack of relevance:

LCS: Would you consider yourself a feminist teacher?

Ms. Jackson: Feminist, boy. (laughs) What do you mean by feminist?

LCS: What does it mean to you?

Ms. Jackson: (laughs) Because feminist to me seems like an old term, it seems to me like back in the seventies when everybody was, you know-I grew up in the hippie times in San Francisco and feminism was like this, you know. I think of a feminist as kind of like an almost outdated. Feminism is a word that I don’t even feel like they use very much anymore. (sighs)

LCS: Why do you think it’s not used very much anymore?

Ms. Jackson: Because I feel like it’s not as relevant. I mean, I do think that a lot of that fighting for equal rights and all that, I don’t see that as an issue now. And especially in a school setting. I mean, it’s all women.

Interestingly, a number of teachers rejected the label of feminist teacher because the implication was to be a feminist was to favor girls over boys. Indeed, when I asked
Ms. Mendez, a first grade dual language teacher, whether she considered herself a feminist teacher the question she posed back to me was “Feminist in the sense that I think women are better?” This logic, used frequently by the teachers in this study, implied that gender equality was a zero sum game from a feminist perspective. While on the one hand this illustrates teachers’ acknowledgement of the contradiction between the equality maxim and privileging one group of students over another and their use of abstract liberalism to deny “special treatment” (Bonilla-Silva 2006), it also clearly reveals some teachers’ lack of knowledge about liberal feminism and mainstream feminist goals. In the following examples, two teachers from Morgan and two teachers from Mason illustrate a conflation of feminism with showing favoritism to girls over boys:

LCS: Do you consider yourself a feminist teacher?

Mr. Gold: A feminist teacher? No. I just consider myself a teacher. I don’t, I don’t think I, uh, you know, favor one group over another in any way. I don’t think any student should come home ‘oh, my teacher, put down this group or that group,’ so I try very hard to keep my politics out of school, to not make any child feel like, you know, the teacher is against them.

Mr. Swain also responded to this question by expressing a belief in the equality of boys and girls, but would not consider himself a feminist:

Hmm…. I consider myself someone who, um, tries to motivate all the students to try everything regardless of their gender. Um, and that they shouldn’t feel that they shouldn’t, shouldn’t try because of that. Um, and I tell the girls in here all the time and the boys, too, you’re just as good as anyone else. Um, there’s no reason you shouldn’t try it. If you don’t like it, just don’t do it again. But, um, I think I take that into account. It’s funny, you, you remind me, that question reminds me of a lot of friends that I have and discussions we used to have back in college and we would always have conversations about those issues.
Ms. Smith’s response reflected the belief that “typical” feminists wanted women to have superior, not equal, rights to men:

Ms. Smith: Um, that’s a really interesting question. I would, I’m coming from this liberal arts background where I took this whole course on feminism and there are so many definitions of feminism running around in my head. Um, I guess in, in the typical way I would say no.

LCS: What do you mean by typical?

Ms. Smith: That, you know, sort of like, you know, women should have, I mean, I, I feel that girls should have equal rights in my classroom, but I don’t feel like I should give them more rights than the boys, you know, it’s not like affirmative action. It’s hard to explain. But I’ve just, I’ve had too many courses in this, but, yeah, I, I don’t feel-I, I’m very conscious of making everyone feel, you know….

LCS: You said you’re not a feminist in the typical way, so are you one in an atypical way?

Ms. Smith: I, um, I mean I do, I’m very self-reflective and I go home and I examine like how many times did I call on blah blah and how many, and how, and I have those equity sticks in my room, those little sticks to pull out so that I’m fair.

Even teachers who considered themselves feminists, were careful to point out they were just as concerned about boys’ success as they were girls’:

LCS: Do you consider yourself a feminist teacher?

Ms. Hurley: Oh, probably. Probably. But I’m also, I feel like I’m also an advocate for, you know, so much of the time, Black males are maligned, you know. And, and we have to understand that, um, cultural differences and class differences, um, play a major role in how they see themselves. You know, they don’t see themselves necessarily as having, some boys, you know, whether they’re Latino or they’re Black mostly, they don’t see themselves with a lot of aspirations, you know. I want them to have dreams.
that, that I keep telling them are achievable, that, I see you have this gift.

Ms. Lopez, like Ms. Hurley, accepted the label of feminist teacher, but again was careful to express a gender-neutral attitude:

LCS: Do you consider yourself a feminist teacher?

Ms. Lopez: I think so. (laughs) I hope so. I really do push the girls and, um, you know girl power. Um, and also the boys-I talk to the boys. I mean, it goes two ways. We’re equal.

While teachers were reluctant in general to consider themselves feminists, those who did were careful to align themselves with liberal feminism. This was understandable given the basic tenets of liberal feminism corresponded with the basic tenets of the equality maxim. Therefore, teachers who understood feminism’s main objective as equalizing opportunities for boys and girls were most inclined to consider themselves feminists as Mr. Foy’s response illustrates:

LCS: Do you consider yourself a feminist teacher?

Mr. Foy: (laughs) I guess that depends on how you would define it.

LCS: How would you define it?

Mr. Foy: (laughs) Well, that’s a big question. Um, uh, in, in the sense that I want girls to have just as much opportunity to learn as boys and not to, um, kind of pigeonhole them into special roles, um, I guess I would consider myself a feminist teacher. I don’t know many teachers who are living in that kind of, you know, pre-feminist era where girls have certain particular roles that they had to meet, so, yeah, I guess if that’s how you define it, then that’s what I am.

According to Johnson (2005), “If feminism is invisible, patriarchy is invisible.

And if feminism is distorted and discredited, patriarchy is safe from scrutiny, for
feminism is the only critical perspective on patriarchy we’ve got.” (p. 191) To speak of feminism in many ways is a misnomer; indeed, there are many types of feminisms. While Tarrant (2006) warns that an emphasis on distinguishing between feminist traditions, while useful and necessary at times, often leads to viewing these traditions as oppositional and therefore irreconcilable, it is also important to consider the contributions and limitations of particular agendas, and if any brand of feminism was deemed acceptable by the teachers I worked with it was liberal feminism. Indeed, when it comes to education, liberal feminists have done much to make the playing field more level for women and girls (Tong 1998). In addition to providing a platform for the passage of Title IX, the liberal feminist agenda for addressing inequality in schooling includes increasing opportunities for girls and women in underrepresented areas like math, science, and sports, and providing a legal framework for challenging discrimination such as sexual harassment.

Liberal feminism, however, also has a number of fundamental shortcomings. First, the measure of equality that emerges from the liberal feminist agenda is clearly based on the position of men; if masculinity is privileged then in order to advance gender equality girls and women must be “raised” to the level of boys and men by removing legal and political obstacles that bar access. The liberal feminist framework for addressing gender discrimination in schooling problematizes male privilege only to the extent that it does not entitle women to the same spoils attached to masculinity. As Barbara Katz Rothman argues, “The liberal feminists, in asking that the ladies be
remembered, are not so much offering a critique of American life and values as they are seeking full access.” (1989, p. 194) In this way, it becomes inconceivable to ask whether boys should be compared or “raised” to the level of girls since it is femininity, not masculinity that must be “overcome.”

Indeed, it is even possible for the liberal feminist agenda to create obstacles to obtaining gender equality in schooling given the current climate of high-stakes testing associated with NCLB. First, if masculinity serves as the ideal type and girls begin to outpace boys as they have in areas like reading and writing, then not only are antifeminists inclined to believe that gender inequality has been alleviated but that perhaps the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction as evidenced by contemporary debates about the existence of a “boy crisis” in public schooling (e.g., Newkirk 2002/2000; Sommers 2002/2000; Rivers and Barnett 2006; Okopny 2008). Second, as long as gender equality is measured exclusively in terms of test scores and the ability of girls to gain access to coursework and disciplines historically underrepresented by women then other manifestations of sexism can easily go unattended.

Further, in the case of liberal feminism, the patriarchal structure of society in which public schooling not only functions but serves as a vehicle to legitimate male dominance goes unchallenged. According to Johnson (2005), liberal feminism relegates male privilege to an individual problem disconnected from the larger social structure that promotes it: “A basic problem with liberal feminism (and liberalism in general) is that its intense focus on the individual obscures the power of social systems. This is one reason
why liberal feminism doesn’t recognize patriarchy as something to be reckoned with.” (p. 115)

Not surprisingly, liberal feminism is the most palatable form of feminism in the U.S. (Johnson 2005), and whether teachers wanted to call themselves feminists or not, every teacher I worked with voiced a commitment to the basic tenets of the liberal feminist platform. Indeed, the equality maxim is predicated on the belief that all children, boys and girls alike, have the same potential for academic success. Further, the equality maxim also suggests that teachers should reject the notion of public single-sex schooling on the same grounds most rejected ACC. In reality, the majority teachers were opposed to the idea of single-sex public elementary schools, but were willing to consider formal segregation of boys and girls beginning in middle school, at least for some portion of the school day. Teachers’ standpoints on this issue were often buttressed by the naturalization frame (Bonilla-Silva 2006) as they expressed beliefs about fundamental differences between boys and girls.

**Teachers’ Perspectives on Single-Sex Schooling**

While the thought of public schools reverting to institutions in which students are separated primarily on the basis of gender may seem unimaginable in the contemporary U.S., a growing number of advocates are working to bring their vision of sex-based segregation in the classroom to fruition. In fact, the Bush Administration proved an ally to supporters of single-sex schooling; in 2006, NCLB made $3 million in grant money available for public school districts to experiment with single-sex options. Further,
NCLB’s reification of test scores as benchmarks for academic success provides no opportunity to consider the latent functions of single-gender initiatives. As Woody points out, “Any school reform, which highlights gender as a significant marker of identity, must consider the implications of such policy on students’ lives.” (2002, p. 280)

According to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education (2011) there are currently 524 public schools in the United States offering single-sex programming, of which 103 operate exclusively as either an all-girl school or all-boy school. This number is expected to increase in the future; indeed, some states like South Carolina have made single-sex programming the cornerstone of their educational policy with ninety-seven schools in the state embracing single-gender options in an effort to boost public school choice and test scores (McNeil 2008). New single-gender elementary and secondary schools are permitted if attendance is voluntary, if the goal is to meet important governmental objectives such as offering diverse educational opportunities to parents or to meet the educational needs of the student, and if the school provides a substantially equal coeducational class in the same subject. In addition, schools are required to reevaluate single-sex programs every two years to make sure federal requirements are being met, yet according to Stone (2006) no mandate for scientific evidence is attached to single-sex initiatives. On the other hand, scholarly research on single-sex schooling has proven more contradictory than conclusive (U.S. Department of Education 2005). After observing the pervasiveness of gender segregation in all three schools, I decided to ask teachers about their perspectives on single-sex schooling.
In general, the teachers I observed were opposed to single-sex public elementary schools because it violated two basic corollaries of the equality maxim: (1) the school as a microcosm of society must teach girls and boys to work with one another, and (2) boys and girls together contribute something unique to the learning environment. The explanation teachers offered in support of the second corollary underscores their beliefs in the inherent differences between boys and girls. Indeed, according to Thorne (1993), “The separate-and-different-worlds story is seductive. It gives full weight to the fact that girls and boys often do separate in daily interactions, especially when they create more lasting groups and friendships.” (p. 90) Interestingly, in the following excerpt, Ms. Stevens appeals to the separate cultures argument to oppose single-sex schooling:

LCS: Recently, some parents and educators have advocated for a return to single-sex public education, and NLCB made available $3 million dollars in grant money to experiment with such options. As a teacher, do you think this is a good way to address issues associated with gender in schooling?

Ms. Stevens: I don’t think that’s, I mean, I don’t think that’s a good idea only because I think they [students] learn so much from each other and just the attributes of like boys and girls are so different in a classroom. I mean, like they teach other such valuable lessons during the day and also that’s just not like how society, it’s just not how it is.

Mr. Swain’s response also expresses the belief that schooling should mirror the “real world”:

Mr. Swain: I would be opposed to it [single-sex schooling]. I, um, we, we were reading a *Time for Kids* article, but yeah it had that same debate. Yeah, we wrote a persuasive essay about it and, and most, some of the kids were in favor it. They, they thought they would be able to concentrate more if the boys weren’t around, if the girls
weren’t around. Um, but, the most, majority of the kids were in favor of saying nah. And I do, too. I wouldn’t be in favor of it. I just think in the real world you have to be able to work with all kinds of people, regardless of sex and race. And, um, you should grow up that way.

While the teachers I worked with generally rejected the idea of public single-sex elementary schools, several were willing to concede possible benefits of segregating schools or programming on the basis of gender at the middle or high school level. The logic teachers used to support this argument was particularly insightful; the underlying assumption was that while gender inequality was not a problem in elementary school, it potentially became a problem after fifth grade. Ms. Lopez captures this sentiment in the following excerpt:

Something happens still in our-after all these generations of, um, women’s lib and I think we’ve taken some, you know, steps back. But, um, I think if girls, for the most part, and even the ones like who have supportive teachers and parents and, we have to be so careful, I think. But after the age of ten-something happens at puberty. Ten is almost like a magical age for girls. They’re still confident; they’re still equal with boys in some ways. They haven’t, and something happens where then they all of a sudden-they become girls, you know. I don’t know if you know what I’m talking about. And then the whole middle school stuff happens and then the, the boys and liking the boys, and the boys liking them and then acting certain ways to be liked by friends and by boys and then I think, and then teachers really have it harder there, too. I’ve seen it with my own daughter who, who was the most confident, strong and I loved to say this, I use this with love, you know, “tomboy” who could outrun, outwit any boy her age or older, but then once she hit that, it affected her.

Ms. Jackson also believed that inequality was something that “kicked” in at a later time:

Well, what I remember learning in school is that gender inequality also varies according to age, that, you know, I-what I kind of remember reading is that it’s the younger kids that you tend to see the boys getting, having a little less, you
know, access because of their tendencies to, their not matching the, the fit of the school setting and that is, in high school girls tend to get the shaft a little bit. (laughs) That the inequality kind of kicks in at the older grades and the boys start to intimidate and become more assertive, the girls fall back. That’s what I remember.

According to Pascoe, “The ordering of sexuality from elementary school through high school is inseparable from the institutional ordering of gendered identities.” (2007, pp. 26-27) While none of the teachers specifically talked about “sexuality” in discussing single-sex schooling, the justifications they often gave in support of sex segregation included behavioral distractions and problems that emerged when boys and girls were together. In the following, two white, women teachers and one Latina teacher talk about what they believe are benefits of segregating students by gender:

Ms. Parker: I think that I would, I would like it [single-sex schooling] for my own son perhaps. (laughs) I think in middle school some of those, sometimes single-sex classes can be beneficial. I think, there’s an awful lot of distractions going on in the middle school classrooms, um, but I don’t know if I’d want them separate for the entire day necessarily. So I don’t know, um, you know, part of it I wonder if there’s enough community-building in these middle school classrooms and is, and is that why there can be these problems or distractions or whatever. Um, I don’t know. I, I think that all together as a community of learners there is something very special about having male and female students together. Um, so I wouldn’t change it for myself, for my (second) grade level.

Ms. Lopez and Ms. Smith offered unique perspectives on the question of single-sex schooling. In the following Ms. Lopez provides anecdotal evidence in support of single-sex schooling for girls:

Actually, I went to an all-girl high school. Um, so I have a different view on that. It took away that whole boy-girl, the whole gender problem. Um, we didn’t have
the boys to act meek around, or the whole—it was interesting. It took the boy thing 
out of the picture. And you could be yourself more.

Ms. Smith had actually conducted her own research on the issue which informed 
her opinion:

Ms. Smith: I wrote a master’s thesis on that [single-sex schooling]. Um, I 
think that we would have a lot less issues.

LCS: What kinds of issues would single-sex schooling solve?

Ms. Smith: I think kind of the behavior issues and the need to kind of show 
off. Um, and impress and the worry about how, how we’re dressed 
which is, is such an issue that it causes inequity, um, in, in the 
classroom. The kids are very concerned about-like Abby is 
always, you know, you know, (makes motions to indicate well-
dressed) and, and the other girls are like (makes motions to 
indicate not as well-dressed), you know, and boys will like her 
[Abby] better than, and, and it’s that kind of thing that it’s very, 
it’s like we’re not focusing on the learning, we’re like, so yeah. So 
I think that would make a difference and also take a lot of pressure 
off her [Abby].

LCS: So you support single-sex schooling from kindergarten through 
twelfth grade?

Ms. Smith: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Note the heteronormativity implicit in the logic of Ms. Parker, Ms. Lopez, and 
Ms. Smith: separating boys and girls in schooling in order to avoid sexual distractions 
assumes the heterosexuality of boys and girls. What is also insightful about these 
conversations is they reveal not only a belief in the asexuality of students until at least 
grade five, but a belief that gender-related problems do not begin, for the most part, until 
that time. Then, when problems do occur one possible solution is to segregate boys and 
girls in the classroom as opposed to addressing male privilege and heteronormativity.
A Research Note on Sexuality

While I was particularly attuned to recording how teachers performed gender and race in the classroom, I was also very deliberate from the moment I entered the field about discerning any instances in which sexuality was particularly salient in the classroom (see for example Cahill and Adams 1997; Smith 1998; Lasser and Tharinger 2003; Lindsay, Perlesz, Brown, McNair, de Vaus, and Pitts 2006). However, in the context of the elementary school, there were very few instances in which I had the opportunity to dynamically center sexuality (Collins 2008). Indeed, it was extremely rare that “sexuality” even came up in my conversations with teachers. The two exceptions involve a second grader at Morgan whose mothers are lesbians and my work with Mr. Hamilton. I am reluctant to make any claims about heterosexism or homophobia in schooling based on this limited data, however, it does suggest some interesting questions for future research.

In order to create a sense of security and to build community in their classrooms, the teachers I worked with, particularly in the lower grades, would often ask students to bring in a picture of their family to put up in the classroom. It was not unusual for teachers like Ms. Parker to go a step farther and have the students share stories about their family with the other students, an activity that younger students especially seemed to enjoy. For the first time this school year, Ms. Parker had a student bring in a picture of himself with his two mothers and sisters. Ms. Parker embraced the added diversity this
brought to her class, but was also sensitive about making sure her student felt safe to talk about his family:

LCS: Did your students enjoy sharing information about themselves with the class about their families?

Ms. Parker: They loved it! They loved hearing about each other’s families. And I have one student who comes from a same-sex household, didn’t it, nobody- (makes motion to indicate the other students could have cared less)

LCS: The kids were like ‘eh’? (shrugs shoulders indicating no big deal)

Ms. Parker: Exactly. Exactly. Which I think is fabulous in contrast to how kids might have reacted when I was their age.

LCS: I find that refreshing.

Ms. Parker: Yeah. I had made sure prior to his sharing, though, that I read a picture book which wasn’t so to the point, but it was-it’s about these two hens who fight over this one egg and then at the end of the book, the, uh, the text is something like this chick was the luckiest chick in the world because it now has two moms who love and care about him. And I just wanted them to hear that about-the plot wasn’t about that at all. It’s this great story of a weasel and the egg and it’s fantastic, but I thought, well, I’ll just, you know, slide that in. Um, so I think that’s definitely a way then hopefully to foster that feeling of safety is starting from a place of I want to hear about your family, and I accept you and your family and I think by my model hopefully they’ll feel that and act on that as well.

This incident begs the question what might a sexuality utopia in the classroom look like, taking into account the current dynamics of the gender and racial utopias? If Ms. Parker’s model serves as the benchmark for the treatment of sexuality, then it will most likely reflect an interesting cooptation of the current approach to dealing with race and gender in District 21. While it is unlikely that sexuality will be addressed in the same
fashion as Hispanic Heritage month, for example, incorporating literature about gays and lesbians or written by gay and lesbian authors, as is often the approach when it comes to race, would appear to compliment District 21’s current practice of multiculturalism. However, it also seems likely given the inextricable link between gender and sexuality that sexuality will be treated in some respects like gender: invisible, a non-problem. Yet, unlike with both race and gender, it is doubtful that sexuality would serve as a vehicle to segregate partners and small groups at the elementary school level. Regardless, I cannot fathom District 21’s treatment of homophobia including a systematic critique of heterosexism based on what I observed in terms of their approach to racial and gender inequality. These, however, are important considerations for future research especially in this era of heightened attention to school bullying and the victimization of gay and lesbian students (Thurlow 2001; Bontempo and D’Augelli 2002; Lasser and Tharinger 2003).

A second important consideration for future research in this area is whether openly gay and lesbian teachers tend to challenge the heteronormativity endemic in schooling or whether the countervailing effects of privilege and institutional constraints lead gay and lesbian teachers to promote homonormativity. Mr. Hamilton offers an excellent case in point. One of the first things I noticed when I entered Mr. Hamilton’s third grade classroom was the picture of him and his husband on his desk. In my observations, I also found it was common for students to ask Mr. Hamilton questions about his husband just as students would often ask questions about the families of
heterosexual teachers. For example, the Monday following Halloween a girl in Mr. Hamilton’s class asked what costumes he and his husband had worn. Mr. Hamilton would also use personal examples in class that referred to his spouse.

I looked forward to the opportunity to ask Mr. Hamilton about his experience of being an openly gay teacher in District 21 and finally one afternoon had an opportunity to join him and his class on the playground. I asked Mr. Hamilton if he has ever received any flak from teachers, administrators, or parents for being openly gay. Mr. Hamilton told me that no one had complained to his face, but that regardless he would not have it any other way; according to Mr. Hamilton, it was imperative that he be true to himself, and that teachers who hide their identity behave cowardly.

Interestingly, Mr. Hamilton remarked on a couple of occasions that he believed his social location as a gay male teacher offered him unique insights into gender; indeed, he was the only teacher whom I worked with who believed that gender inequality was still a significant problem in schooling and in society. In the following excerpt, Mr. Hamilton offers his understanding of the social construction of gender and the ways in which schooling tends to promote essentialism:

I think there’s two huge things that happen at schools. First, is that people assume there are differences between boys and girls that don’t exist. Um, there just is no- and I, I’m an evidence person. I like to know what I am talking about, and I am happy to be challenged, persuaded if I’m, if I’m wrong, you know. Um, but there just-why is it that boys seem to be playing football more? Is it because it really is a spatial thing happening or is it because people are tossing footballs at boys when they’re young, and not tossing footballs at girls when they’re young? Um, I, I tend to think it’s because of what we’re explicitly teaching and the, and the connections that are firing inside a person’s head happen because of the experiences that we have. I can’t, if I’m going to hold onto this constructivist
idea, I have to believe that we can learn anything we want to as long as we have the requisite experiences to make it happen. Um, I think at schools we say, well, we need to make sure we’re meeting the needs of boys, and meeting the needs of girls. We have students and we need to make sure we’re meeting those needs. Um, that said, part of the way I do that I, I know it sounds paradoxical and now I am talking out of both sides of my mouth, but one of the things I have to do is I have to make sure that if I’ve given a few seconds away time to a boy to answer the question, that I am doing the same for girls. And sometimes, and I don’t know why this is, but I find myself having to do it consciously, being very deliberate about it, or otherwise I’ll discover that I’ve talked to five girls in a row about, um, how characters are feeling, and not talking about feelings with boys. Um, and I’ve got boys of a million different flavors in my class, and, and there’s no reason to think that they can’t answer that question as, with as much alacrity as any of the ladies in my room. But oftentimes if I’m not conscious about it, it doesn’t happen. And I, I don’t have an explanation for why that is….

Mr. Hamilton acknowledges the polarization of gender that has long underscored research on boys and girls in schooling (e.g., Thorne 1993; Campbell and Wahl 2002/1998), and even though he was more willing than the other teachers I worked with to believe gender was socially constructed, his approach and demeanor in the classroom generally reflected a more homonormative stance. Homonormativity refers to a political stance taken by gays and lesbians that espouses support for dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, creating the possibility of a demobilized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption. (Duggan, 2002, p. 179). Homonormativity, according to Stryker (2008), is not only a macropolitical extension of neoliberalism, but a micropolitical force that maintains dominant constructions of knowledge, power, and authority. While Mr. Hamilton’s ideas about gender were more progressive than the other teachers in this study, he generally placed more emphasis on data-driven approaches to schooling and the importance of internalizing school culture than his
colleagues. In the next phase of this research, I welcome the opportunity to specifically explore the relationship between teachers’ sexuality, heteronormativity, and privilege.

**Conclusion**

In *Race in the Schoolyard* (2005), Amanda Lewis discusses the challenges of trying to study race in a predominantly white school where educators, parents, and students did not consider race to be a problem since “whites” did not think of themselves as belonging to a racial group and there were so few racial minority students who attended the school (see also Lewis 1994). Lewis’ frustrations from trying to problematize something that participants did not see as a problem kept coming to mind as I attempted to study gender inequality at Morgan, Mason, and Helis. For the most part, the sentiment among teachers was that gender inequality was not a problem. Yet, there were clear examples of behaviors and attitudes that had not changed much over the years:

**Ms. Smith:** Um, I, I teach a Math Olympiad class in the morning, and, um, it’s, it’s interesting…. It’s interesting, um, because the boys are much more willing to take risks in math than the girls. And they’re not necessarily my students. They just come to me for an hour a week, but it’s, it’s been kind of an eye-opening experience to see how the boys are like, they’ll just dive in and, and take risks and shout out answers, and the girls are still very, you know, ‘can you help me?’

**LCS:** What age group are we talking about here?

**Ms. Smith:** Fourth and fifth grade. And so, yeah, that shows me that, that there still is a lot of inequity in, at least in the lower grades of how math is taught and how it’s approached, um, same with science. Same with science. Yeah, I do see that in science even though it’s very hands-on in this district. The girls are much less willing to be leaders during science.
I also had an opportunity to observe part of a Math Olympiad meeting after school at Morgan where there was one girl present out of approximately twenty boys. Since Mr. Gira was a faculty sponsor I asked him about the gender ratio of Math Olympiad and he confirmed that historically there have been three times as many boys than girls participate.

Ms. Smith’s colleague at Mason, Mr. Swain, observed a similar pattern among his third grade students when it came to math and science, but understood these dynamics to be fairly inconsequential since girls generally outpaced boys in reading in his class:

I still think that girls don’t, um, I tend to notice that the boys are more into the math and science, um, as in the traditional argument. Maybe not as much, but I do think in general for the most part, um, that’s an area that, um, you just don’t see as much representation from the girls. And it’s, but it’s the opposite in reading. Um, I think girls, the girls that I’ve had in class tend to do, or perform much better with reading then, uh, the boys do. Uh, and also understanding maybe different, um, I think they make inferences earlier and they are able to find the main ideas in texts a little bit sooner than boys. And a lot of it may have to do with their maturity level. I’m not sure what it has to do with, but that could be it. But, yeah, beyond that, um, I don’t really sense, um, too much of an inequality.

According to Barbara Risman (1998), “Gender expectations are socially constructed and sustained by socialization, interactional expectations, and institutional arrangements. When individuals and collectivities change socialization, expectations, and institutions, the gender structure changes.” (p. 152) What do these contemporary examples of girls’ participation in math and science in a socially progressive community suggest about socialization, expectations, and institutional arrangements? As Ms. Parker told me when asked about students internalizing gender messages, “You know, I think we
as teachers sometimes forget-and I do it, too-how our actions hold such messages for the kids in them.”

Further, since institutional sexism is generally dismissed in the same fashion as institutional racism, any enduring prejudices in the classroom or society are treated as individual-level infractions that can only be remedied at the same level of analysis. For example, in the following excerpt, Ms. Hurley talks about encouraging one of her girl students in math and science, as opposed to challenging the continued underrepresentation of girls in these subject areas:

Well, I think girls, um, they still, you know, in third grade there are some girls who are really, really strong in math and science. And I just, I just really encourage them, you know, in a different way than I do the boys. You know, I was saying to Meredith, you know, you’re really a mathematician you know. You have what it takes to do very complex math in the future. And, you know, it comes naturally to you, but you have to have the confidence to know that. And I’m just going to keep telling you so that you remember when you’re in seventh grade and all the girls are not making it to the honors, but you are, that you need to remember that it’s where you belong because you have a gift for it, you know.

Finally, while teachers treat racial and gender inequality different in many respects, the denial of institutional racism and sexism virtually assures the perpetuation of patterns of inequality. Addressing sexism at an individual-level may be necessary but it is not sufficient for alleviating structural inequalities. As Judith Lorber (1994) argues, “Gender has changed in the past and will change in the future, but without deliberate restructuring it will not necessarily change in the direction of greater equality between men and women.” (p. 6)
Returning to Colonial Williamsburg

I began this chapter with a vignette about a fifth grade social studies exercise taken from my field notes. When I returned to Mr. Gira’s class a few days after the Colonial Williamsburg exercise took place, he was preparing to review the lesson and give the students a quiz over the material. To be fair, turning the classroom into a modest representation of Colonial Williamsburg was not Mr. Gira’s idea; it was part of the standard social studies curriculum adopted by District 21. Mr. Gira, however, as the teacher has a lot of autonomy in what he chooses to emphasize about the lesson, what additional information he offers to share, and how he responds to students’ questions. Indeed, according to Fenstermacher, “The teacher’s conduct, at all times and in all ways, is a moral matter.” (1990, p. 133)

Mr. Gira begins the review by asking the students what they remember about the exercise.

A white girl calls out, “Some people were not treated as well as other people!”

“Okay,” Mr. Gira says. “Who weren’t treated as well?”

Several students shout out, “The slaves!” No one makes reference to women being treated as second class citizens.

Mr. Gira concurs. “Yeah, the slaves were pretty much mistreated,” a gross understatement in my opinion. Mr. Gira goes on to ask, “Why was slavery necessary during this time?”

I can think of myriad ways in which this conversation with the students would allow Mr. Gira to address issues of white privilege, power, racism, how slaves and women were not considered fully human, and the contemporary parallels that could be drawn, but he does none of this. Instead he makes the comment, “African Americans did a lot of things for us to make this country great that no one else was willing to do.” There was a choice in the matter?
Mr. Gira uses his curriculum guide to go over each station that was part of the original exercise. When he gets to the College of William and Mary and the dame school, he asks the students how education was different in Colonial Williamsburg than it is now.

A white girl responds, “Some girls didn’t go to school!”

“And if they did,” Mr. Gira says, “they had to learn to sow and take care of the home because that was their job.” Again, an opportunity to talk about patriarchy and women’s subordination is lost.

Mr. Gira asks the students what the purpose of the tavern was and several kids shout out answers: to talk politics, to play games, to visit. There is no mention of the fact that these were essentially white men’s spaces. Indeed, Mr. Gira tells them the tavern was a place everyone could go.

A white girl raises her hand and asks, “Were Black people allowed in the tavern?”

“No, slaves were not allowed in the tavern,” Mr. Gira says.

“That’s not very fair!” she protests.

Mr. Gira agrees and then asks the students to talk about the slaves and how they were treated. He attempts to express the inhumanity of slavery, but this sentiment is lost when he makes statements like, “Some slaves worked in the masters’ houses and those were pretty good jobs.”

A white boy, confused, asks, “Well, since there would have been more slaves than white people, why didn’t they rebel? Why did they stay enslaved?”

Mr. Gira tries to articulate the fear that whites instilled in slaves and the consequences of rebellion, but there is no condemnation of the immorality of slavery, nor is their condemnation of women’s second class status in Colonial Williamsburg.

In my classroom observations at all three schools, Mr. Gira’s treatment of race and gender is not unique. The teachers I worked with were aware that social inequalities existed and believed that some like race were far more acute than others such as gender. Teachers’ resistance to address inequalities as contemporary, ongoing, structural
problems, not historical phenomena or manifestations of individual-level bigotries, however were consistently undermined by the countervailing effects of privilege including teachers’ own privilege, the (white) privilege of their students and their students’ families, and the privilege of Lakeview. All three are examined in detail in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE COUNTERVAILING EFFECTS OF PRIVILEGE

A central goal of this institutional ethnography is to discern any possible correlations between teachers’ social location and their attitudes towards race and gender, and how these attitudes influence the methods and extent to which teachers address race- and gender-related issues within the learning environment. I spent several months observing teachers “do gender” and “do race” (West and Zimmerman 1987; West and Fenstermaker 1995) in their utilization of curricula, and in their everyday interactions with students, teachers and administrators. Critical to this study, I attempted to uncover whether teachers understood the causes of racial and gender inequality to be rooted primarily in individual-level bigotries or embedded within the structure of society.

Strategic intersectionality suggests that because of their marked identities within systems of privilege, teachers of color, gay and lesbian teachers, and women teachers, particularly if they are from working-class backgrounds, should be the most likely to recognize the pervasiveness of racial and gender inequality in schooling and uniquely positioned to work towards the alleviation of both (e.g. Fraga et al. 2006; Hunt and Zajicek 2008).

In the course of this research, I attempted to identify feminist, antiracist teachers with the expectation they would be the most inclined not only to acknowledge racial and gender inequalities as enduring problems within education but to employ strategies for
addressing racism and sexism. However, simply relying on teachers to self-identify as feminists or antiracists, or to reject these labels, is clearly not sufficient. Indeed, in the case of antiracism, practically every teacher wanted to be thought of as an antiracist teacher; after all, what teacher would want to be considered anti-antiracist? However, after months of observing teachers in classrooms, it was apparent that a number of self-described antiracist teachers rarely if ever even broached the topic of racial inequality with their students and at times engaged in behaviors that appeared antithetical to the basic premises of antiracism, especially when it came to grouping students.

In the case of feminism, on the other hand, hardly any teachers wanted to be considered a feminist teacher. Yet, every teacher subscribed to the basic tenets of liberal feminism; that boys and girls should have equal access to all the opportunities available in the learning environment. Therefore, to fully explore the parameters of strategic intersectionality requires not only an understanding of how teachers see themselves in relation to antiracism and feminism, but an examination of teacher attitudes and behaviors in order to identify whether teachers: (1) believe racial and gender inequalities are significant problems in schooling today; (2) understand these inequalities to be structural in nature, not merely individual-level problems; and (3) actively seek to address racial and gender inequalities inside and outside their classrooms.

First, who are the teachers in this study who believe racial inequality is still a significant problem in schooling? If I were to operationalize and statistically analyze this variable it would result in a constant; every teacher except for two stated that racial
inequality remained a problem in education to some degree. However, of the five white teachers who spoke the most passionately about racial inequality, they include a gay man (Mr. Hamilton), two women who are interracially married and who voluntarily attended an anti-bias curriculum training series (Ms. Roberts and Ms. Parker), a woman from a working-class background with advanced degrees in inner-city studies and English as a Second Language (Ms. Smith), and an obese teacher who described herself as feeling marginalized while growing up (Ms. Hurley). Every teacher of color believed racism was still a major problem in schooling.

Who are the teachers who believe gender inequality is still a significant problem in schooling? First, no straight, white, male teachers in this study believe sexism is a problem in education, nor do many women teachers for that matter. Of the teachers who are willing to concede that gender inequality has lessened but not completely dissipated, they are all women (Ms. Roberts, Ms. Parker, Ms. Chang, and Ms. Lee) with the exception of Mr. Swain, a Black man. Mr. Hamilton, the only gay teacher in this study, is also the only teacher who believes sexism is still a major problem in schooling.

Two additional questions imperative for exploring the parameters of strategic intersectionality include whether or not the teachers who believe gender and racial disparities exist in schooling also understand these to be institutional-level problems, and if so, whether or not they actively challenge white privilege, heteronormativity, and patriarchy. Of the teachers who believe that racial and gender inequality are still problems in schooling, all expressed in our conversations the belief that racism and
sexism went beyond individual-level discrimination to some extent. Yet, in the classrooms these teachers rarely framed racial and gender inequalities as contemporary, institutional problems.

These findings offer an interesting challenge to the basic suppositions of strategic intersectionality. As the theory suggests, the teachers in this study with marked identities including every teacher of color, women teachers from working-class backgrounds and/or interracially married, and the sole gay teacher in this study, acknowledged the pervasiveness of racial inequality in schooling. These same teachers also expressed a concern about sexism, although with the exception of Mr. Hamilton, none thought gender inequality was a major problem in education currently. Although these teachers believed there were qualitative and quantitative differences in the degree to which racism and sexism manifests in schooling, they nonetheless believed both were problems that extended beyond the school halls.

As strategic intersectionality suggests, these teachers were uniquely positioned as potential advocates for social justice in education; unlike other teachers in this study who were also concerned about inequalities in schooling, they had personal connections to minority communities and firsthand experiences of discrimination. Yet, I found several examples of privileges that subverted this “multiple identity advantage” (Fraga et al. 2006) in the same ways it possibly prevented other teachers from even acknowledging the prevalence of racism and sexism in schooling. In general three types of privilege worked against teachers addressing contemporary, institutional racism and sexism:
privilege associated with individual teachers’ social location; privilege associated with (white) students and their families; and privilege associated with the community of Lakeview. To fully understand the countervailing effects of all three types of privileges first requires an exegesis of the ruling relations that underlie the relationship between teachers, social inequalities, and privilege (e.g., Smith 1990; 2005).

Map of the Ruling Relations

An overall aim of institutional ethnography, according to Dorothy Smith (1990; 2005) is to explicate the ruling relations and institutional complexes in which people participate. Further, the goal of interviewing and observation in institutional ethnography is “not to learn about the individual per se but to learn about the individual’s location in the relations of ruling or to learn what the individual does with texts.” (Walby 2007, pp. 1012-1013) Through interviews and observations of the teachers in this study and the analysis of texts, a map of ruling relations crystallized, providing an institutional context for teachers’ attitudes and behaviors towards race and gender (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Map of the Ruling Relations

In Figure 1, the black arrows represent the hierarchy of authority endemic to the system of power in which the teachers in this study participate. This hierarchy includes the U.S. Department of Education, the Illinois Department of Education, District 21, principals, teachers, and parents. Figure 1 also provides a visual representation of the institutionalization of educational policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). For example, the U.S. Department of Education is charged with ensuring that school districts comply with NCLB. The Illinois Department of Education adopts the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) as the means to measure whether each public school in Illinois is making adequate yearly progress (AYP) and thus in compliance with NCLB. To ensure that all its schools meet AYP, District 21 adopts policies such as
differentiation in an attempt to increase students’ academic success. Principals of schools within the district bear the responsibility of making sure their teachers are effectively implementing District 21 policies and preparing students to succeed on the ISATs. Finally, teachers, under pressure to produce students who pass the ISAT or face consequences including negative outcomes on their performance evaluations, rely on parents, for example, to read with their children, feed their children breakfast before coming to school, and to make sure their children have completed their homework.

Given the teachers’ position within the organizational complexes of District 21, essentially one rung above parents within the formal hierarchy of authority, it is no surprise that teachers’ explanations for the success or failure of their students rests heavily with parents. In reality, teachers are frequently made the scapegoats when students underperform; the common wisdom is that if teachers are doing their jobs effectively, then students should be making academic gains (see for example Ingersoll 2005). Well aware of this argument especially in an era of high-stakes testing, teachers in this study generally turned the tables, making parents the scapegoats. This was essentially based on the same argument; if parents are doing their jobs effectively then students should be able to perform well in school.

The recourse available to address teacher and parent grievances only further exacerbates this relationship. If parents have a problem with the policies of their child’s teacher or with District 21, their objections are attended within the system of power; they can, for example, complain to the teacher, the principal and the district, as illustrated by
the gray arrows in Figure 1. Teachers’ grievances concerning educational policies, however, are filtered through the teachers’ unions at local, state, regional, and national levels, thus teacher complaints are generally peripheral to the system of power (see outlined arrows in Figure 1).

In essence, teachers are uniquely positioned within the system of ruling relations between their principals and the parents of their students, and are expected to appease both. However, teachers are beholden first and foremost to their principals who evaluate their performances which is particularly important to those who are not yet tenured. Teachers rarely complained to me about their principals, but openly shared their criticisms of District 21 policies, the superintendent, and the school board. Yet, when problems arose, teachers consistently laid blame with students’ parents, especially if they were minority parents since it was the minority students who generally struggled in their classes. The following vignette illustrates patently teachers’ participation in the order of ruling relations in District 21:

Once the students left for art class, Ms. Hurley turned to me and said, “You know last week you were asking me about equity. I want to clarify more of what I meant by my response.”

Ms. Hurley reminded me of her complaints last week about the time she is now expected to devote to writing out lesson plans. According to Ms. Hurley, District 21 recently hired a nationally known “lesson plan expert,” Wendy Jackson. Ms. Hurley made clear that the problem, however, was not Wendy. In fact, she talked to Wendy who stated that the superintendent and the school board had misinterpreted her expectations. Wendy realized that it was impossible for teachers to do what they needed to do in the classroom (and outside) if they were regularly spending several hours producing written, detailed lesson plans.
I asked if teachers at every school in District 21 had to comply with the new lesson plan dictate. Ms. Hurley told me they do, however, the principals have the discretion as to how this is carried out. At some schools, she told me, teachers do the task together, perhaps once a month. It appeared the expectation at Mason was that lesson plans be done far more frequently. I wondered if this was because Mason was not a top-performing school.

“The problem,” Ms. Hurley informed me, “is that the superintendent is a politician, not an educator. And the board is not made up of educators. They don’t realize the challenges we have here in the classroom. They don’t know what it’s like when a teacher can’t get a young girl to concentrate because she was raped yesterday. They don’t know what it’s like when they put all the demands on us and the parents don’t care.”

She made a reference to a new documentary about charter schools soon to be released. “I won’t even see that. Just seeing the previews makes me so angry. Charter schools have lots of problems as well. Some work, but many do not. And the major difference with charter schools is that the parents want their children to go to those schools. Those children understand the importance their parents are putting on education and the benefits of attending that school. Here, the school is just open to whoever lives within the school boundaries. So you have parents who drop their kids off at 7:45 in the morning—the school doesn’t open until 9:00! Their parents won’t even try to get them into the before-school care that is subsidized which for these very low-income parents means it would be practically free!”

“Where do the kids go who are dropped off that early?” I asked.

“On the playground, or they sit in the hallways. You know, at least they’re in a safe space if they’re sitting in the hallways. On my way to work in the morning, I see three Hispanic mothers who gather at the corner, and you know what they do? They walk their middle schoolers over to the middle school so they can make sure there is no trouble on the way to school. And they wait with them until the bell rings and the kids can go inside. That’s what a good parent does!”

I assumed Ms. Hurley would consider me a good parent even though I did not walk my middle schooler to school. What was the difference between me and the “bad” parents she was telling me about?

Ms. Hurley continued, “Or when the parents won’t even buy their kid boots. That’s what happened last year, our principal told a parent that her child needed boots, and she said ‘well, you buy them, then!’ Yeah, I would like to have time to
meet their demands, but I don’t even have time to do planning with my co-teacher! I use a bathroom that I have to wipe away urine and feces before I can even sit down!”

Ms. Hurley also told me about the tensions between the teacher’s union and the superintendent given that the lesson plan dictate was taking away from instructional time. I asked if the principal at Mason was supportive, and Ms. Hurley told me he was, but that he often “didn’t get it” either, thinking she had far more time than she did to accomplish what she needed to accomplish. He was in his mid-thirties she told me and had made mistakes (which she did not seem to want to elaborate on) but he was trying to correct them. Ms. Hurley believed he meant well, but it also seemed that she wanted to see him do some things differently. He was not someone who apologized directly, she told me, but instead would offer verbal praise as a way to make amends.

I asked Ms. Hurley if she thought Mason was treated differently from other schools in the district.

“I think so,” she replied. “Mason was the first all-inclusion school, for example. I am not sure how that was decided. I mean, I think it’s a good idea, but why was our school chosen? The superintendent eats breakfast where my husband and I often eat as well. One morning when I saw him, I went over and asked him why we were going to be the first all-inclusion school. He didn’t have a good answer and we talked about the weather for a minute, and that was it. Friendly, you know. And he would never say this to me, he’s friendly to me, but then I heard he went to a meeting with the teacher’s union and said Linda Hurley interrupted my breakfast and wanted to know why Mason was going to be the only all-inclusion school. And he said it kind of jokingly, but, you know, why shouldn’t I ask him? It’s something that directly affects me and how often do I get a chance to talk to him?”

In this vignette, Ms. Hurley illustrates the pressure teachers face as they try to navigate their roles within District 21, including their relationship with the superintendent, the school board, their principals, and parents. A fundamental argument that Ms. Hurley asserts, as did several teachers in this study, is that no one in a position of authority in District 21 has realistic expectations of what teachers should be accomplishing given the limited amount of time they have and the scope of problems
students bring with them to school. Further, when teachers talked about these problems they were generally not presented as the result of structural inequalities like poverty, unemployment, or institutional racism, but as the result of bad parenting decisions. Finally, blaming parents for underperforming students was not the only consequence of the nature of ruling relations in District 21 and the system of education in the U.S.; other outcomes that were particularly acute include devaluing the importance of teachers’ work, the surveillance of teachers, and holding teachers responsible for meeting myriad demands without providing them with the requisite resources for success.

Five Minutes in the Grand Scheme of Things

Another fundamental complaint teachers’ expressed other than having to cope with the challenges of inadequate parents was how they believed teachers were perceived and treated within District 21 and in society in general. Mr. Hamilton elucidates this argument with an example of a recent dispute between District 21, the teachers, and the teachers’ union. Interestingly, in this exchange Mr. Hamilton uses the example of social class to buttress his point. His own sense of privilege is revealed as he juxtaposes white collar work with blue color work. His assumption is that white collar workers should be entitled to make demands and expect recompense while blue collar workers on the other hand should keep quiet and follow orders:

Mr. Hamilton: I think another part I find challenging [about teaching] is there-and I’ve thought about this a lot lately and I’m starting to put this into words a little better-I don’t think teachers have figured out if they’re blue collar or white collar yet. For example, I belong to a teacher’s union that I really believe has overplayed its hand in many respects. Um, I believe that oftentimes our national union
asks for things that are not good for students. Like we fight tooth and nail against a longer school day, even though that is exactly what students need. They need a longer school day and extended year. But at the same time, we have an administration [District 21] that is extremely disrespectful of us at every turn, and is not willing to give teachers their due, and hasn’t really decided how much is it worth having fantastic people to teach kids how to read, how to write, how to do math-

LCS: Are you speaking of District 21?

Mr. Hamilton: I think in this district in particular and also in general. I think that teachers’ unions have been a scapegoat in the reform movement for quite some time but then you have to fight tooth and nail for everything you can get in terms of your working conditions. You know, right now we just had a grievance cited against us, our teacher’s union. Our bell rings at 9:00. Our day’s supposed to start at 9:05. And it’s hard to communicate to parents, for example, that if I’m with students, I’m teaching. The moment that bell rings I am working, you know, when I sign my kids up for a half-hour piano lesson, I don’t get 35 minutes, you know. So that extra five minutes is five minutes that I’m not making my copies, that I’m not returning my phone calls. And if it’s five minutes that I am not getting paid for, then it’s five minutes, and it’s hard because you don’t want to-I’m trying to explain what the challenge of teaching is-that there’s a real lack of prestige. There’s a real lack I think on the part of teachers of not understanding are we blue collar or are we white collar? In the sense of blue collar, it means we toe the union line. We grab for that five minutes for whatever it gets, you know. Whereas white collar is like we’ll figure this out in a way that’s good for kids but then you can expect to pay a professional salary. We want to be treated like professionals. Um, by and large I feel working in Lakeview, I’m paid more or less fairly, you know, than I have been in other districts but I think that’s been a big challenge. Um, seeing myself as a professional, but at the same point living in a world that does not see me that way, so…

LCS: And do you mean that about Lakeview in particular, or just in general?

Mr. Hamilton: Definitely general, but there’s definitely some real things in
Lakeview that I’ve noticed. That and, for example, this five minutes idea. Our superintendent, for example, will say things like ‘so the five minutes you spend walking your kids to class is not instructional time and it’s time we don’t have to pay you for it dah dad dah dah dah. It doesn’t violate your contract this, this, this, this.’ And our superintendent will say things like that. It’s like well then you don’t understand what my job is then because if I am with students, I am teaching. That is what I am doing, and it’s not about the five minutes as such because it’s five minutes—you know, what’s five minutes in the grand scheme of things? It’s about the sense of we agreed to this, and yet this is now coming.

The question Mr. Hamilton raises as to whether teaching is essentially white collar work or blue collar work is also relevant to the observation of teachers. While teaching is generally considered a highly-trained profession that carries with it a great deal of autonomy, teachers’ location in the ruling relations is such that they are increasingly under surveillance.

The Lesson Plan Dictate and the Surveillance of Teachers

Teachers’ position within the system of ruling relations is also evident in the surveillance of their work. Teachers know that at any time during the school day their principal can come into their classroom to observe their behavior. In fact, a major justification for the recent lesson plan dictate is that the principal or superintendent should be able to look at a teacher’s lesson plan and know what to expect if they were to walk into a teacher’s classroom on any given day at any given time. Of course, anyone who spends even a small amount of time in an elementary school classroom would realize the absurdity of this expectation; indeed, the assumption being that the school day
will run perfectly as scheduled, allowing teachers to stick expediently to their lesson plans:

Ms. Norman: Their [superintendent and school board] idea that if we walk into your room on such and such a day we will know what you are going to be teaching because this is your lesson plan—well, the truth is, I can do a whole week and by Wednesday I’m rebooting and changing and adjusting which is teaching. Everybody does that, so this whole idea that you’re scripting out your lessons—I, it just doesn’t make sense, you know. And I don’t think you can possibly have, I mean, my cohort in here is so different than the other fifth grade teacher’s cohort. There is no possible way we could be, even if we’re teaching the same reading lesson, it’s not looking the same. I mean, the differentiation isn’t even the same, you know. I mean, you might have a couple of outcomes that you want, you know, you want to have, on understanding certain vocabulary or some sort of like synthesis of information or whatever, but the first and second grade readers in my class, their [work] is going to look a whole lot different than, you know, and it’s going to be taught to them in a whole different way. I’m not writing all that out! (laughs) It’s like, no way!

LCS: It sounds like the superintendent and school board need to come spend time in your classroom.

Mr. Norman: They do! They really do! No, they honestly—they really do!

Further, while it may seem obvious that working with a classroom full of children is more likely than not to bring unexpected challenges that can derail a lesson plan, teachers knew there could be penalties if a person in a position of authority came in to observe their classroom and they were not where they were supposed to be in their lesson plans. Ms. Hurley illustrates this point in the following exchange:

LCS: You mentioned he [the principal] may be coming in today? Does he come in to visit or to check what you are doing often?
Ms. Hurley: He does formal observations, but today is a day we were supposed to give him this lesson plan, like twice a month we’re supposed to give him one, and he goes to the superintendent’s meeting and the superintendent says, ‘I want to see an example of an excellent lesson plan for third grade in a general classroom,’ and he’s got to look in his notebook and pull one out. So every teacher who teaches reading had to turn in a lesson plan today. It wasn’t so long, but it took two hours to do, two hours that I should have been getting ready to teach, I should have been looking for the highlighters, I should have been looking for the worksheet, and rereading the teacher’s guide because I know what I am doing. But, um, he got his lesson plan and the plan is he is supposed to just pick one and observe and see if the lesson plan is being followed. So, in other words, if I’m teaching math when I am supposed to be teaching reading he’s going to have an issue. So I’ve got to stick to the schedule because it’s all about marching in unison these days. There’s very little room for a teachable moment.

There were also other forms of surveillance that took place within the schools as well. This year Morgan welcomed a new principal when its former principal, who was much beloved by the teachers and staff, decided to retire. On a couple of occasions when I was doing my classroom observations I noticed the new principal, Mr. Brixton, would come in, sit down, observe while typing feverishly on his laptop, and then leave. I asked Ms. Parker once what he was doing when he came into the classrooms and she told me that she was not sure. I also asked Ms. Lopez about this since she is the union representative at Morgan. She told me that she did not know either, but that she had received complaints from teachers who were perturbed that Mr. Brixton had not disclosed what he was doing when he came into their classrooms recording information on his laptop. The secrecy surrounding Mr. Brixton’s visits and the climate of suspicion it created did not bode well with a number of teachers including Ms. Lopez who stated she
had been hoping for more collaboration from him as a new principal but that he was probably acting on orders he was receiving from the “higher-ups.” After Mr. Brixton was made aware that some of the teachers were upset by this practice, he disclosed at a staff meeting that when he came into the classrooms he was evaluating the teachers based on approximately thirty different assessment points. This will apparently culminate in a body of data he will be collecting over this school year. No teacher seemed to know what the body of data would essentially be used for.

Interestingly, according to Ms. Lopez, teachers generally come to her when they have these types of complaints since she is the union representative but when she raises their concerns in staff meetings, she told me, teachers who have forged the original complaints will oftentimes not speak up. From Ms. Lopez’s perspective, she essentially ends up being “the one holding the bag.” Indeed, Ms. Lopez is considering resigning as the school union representative because of all the extra time it requires. Extra time is a precious commodity for the teachers in this study.

Confronting Unrealistic Demands: The Case of Inclusion

If there was one challenge every teacher in this study could agree on it was that there were not enough hours in the day to accomplish all that District 21 and their principals expected of them. This was immediately obvious to me once I began my classroom observations. I would often marvel at how the district could expect their teachers to meet the numerous demands they placed upon them since it was rare that the teachers were provided with the requisite resources necessary to implement district
policies as effectively as possible. This was nowhere more obvious than in the case of inclusion. As Ms. Stevens points out, “People love the idea of inclusion. People love the idea of kids being included in the classroom.” However, as Ms. Stevens and a number of other teachers in this study made clear, there is a breakdown between supporting the idea of inclusion and implementing it effectively in the classrooms.

Inclusion in District 21 is currently being rolled out by grade level. General education teachers in grades kindergarten through third grade are supposed to have special education co-teachers who spend half of their time in one inclusion classroom and the other half of the time in another inclusion classroom. Indeed, the very concept of an “inclusion” class is reminiscent of traditional tracking in that an inclusion class theoretically contains all the students in a particular grade with IEPs. However, this is usually not the case in practice as some students in non-inclusion classrooms are tested and granted IEPs in the course of a school year and are not moved from their classroom to an “inclusion class.” After observing inclusion classes and talking with inclusion teachers and co-teachers, I found numerous examples of negligible resources needed to implement inclusion as intended, in addition to other emergent problems that were not being addressed.

First, there were teachers’ concerns about whether or not inclusion teachers were receiving the human resources needed to be able to effectively implement inclusion. Mr. Swain served on the committee that was successful in bringing inclusion to District 21. However, he was not happy with how the policy was ultimately ushered in:
Mr. Swain: Well, I was actually a part of the, um, the committee that, that, um, sort of came up with the ideals and the ideas, um, behind inclusion why we would want to use it in our district. I think something happened, um, as the planning was taking place, that some of the things were sort of rushed through. I think, um, I’m not sure if the infrastructure is really in place to do it in a way that would benefit teachers and students. So I’m not really happy with what I see as far as, um, how it’s been implemented so far. I think that ultimately it should benefit students, but I also think that you have to have enough, um, support in place in order to make it truly effective depending on the types of students you have included in the classrooms. I think it could have the potential to, uh, affect students who would otherwise perform strongly because they may have more distraction within the classroom and with the teacher having to manage, um, potential behavior problems. There are other types of issues that would present themselves that it could affect the regular population of students that you have in your classroom. At the same time, I do think it could help the [IEP] students to be in the least restrictive environment, but it just has to be done the right way with the right supports in place.

LCS: This is recurring theme I am finding among inclusion teachers: where are the resources?

Mr. Swain: I think that’s true. I think, but I think that’s something unless you actually see a classroom in action often you can sort of overlook, and I think that’s what politicians do. I don’t think they really truly realize what teachers are confronted with. And we are lucky in our district. I mean, I have friends who teach in other areas of Illinois and in different states and it’s completely different depending on where you go, but you’re right. The lack of resources and just the, the management that you need.

Not only did teachers have concerns about the lack of extra staff to implement inclusion successfully, but about the competence of the resource help that was available. This was a challenge Mr. Williams was facing in his classroom. As the teacher of the kindergarten inclusion class, he had been assigned a part-time special education co-teacher at the beginning of the year. However, shortly after the school year started his
co-teacher took a leave of absence to attend to family problems. Mr. Williams was then assigned a number of substitute co-teachers who oftentimes had no previous teaching experience:

Mr. Williams: So I’ve had a substitute and a different sub and a different sub and a different adult and a different adult every day. And I also have one of the most challenging classrooms that I’ve ever had in eighteen years. I would say the most challenging class.

LCS: How many students with IEPs do you have?

Mr. Williams: I have three kids with IEPs and one who is, who’s got a number of issues and we’re trying to, whatever the term is, but we’re trying to, whatever that word is that she’s [specialist] trying, getting him evaluated to maybe put him on an IEP, maybe place him in a normal, in the appropriate setting for himself which this might not be. Eighty-seven days in, we’ve been trying to fit his round body into this square peg and so…

LCS: You said this was probably the most challenging class you have had in all these years, are there other things I need to be aware of before I observe your classroom?

Mr. Williams: No, because you can watch and just see how I do it because all these people here, no social worker, no psychologists have really sat in there with a pencil and said nothing and tried to write it down and this is eighty-seven days today. Eighty-seven days I’ve been working on it and…so it would be cool to see what you could, what you get out of it. Because basically you know I’ve got a really violent situation which has gotten, which I’ve been able to change, incur by myself basically because I’ve had new substitutes, first-year subs, people who were truck drivers last year, they come in, and they could be anybody, so they’re not necessarily trained in this.

Second, in order for inclusion to be effectively implemented requires teachers, co-teachers, and other specialists to have time available to effectively plan curricula in order to meet the needs of inclusion students. This was rarely the case. Indeed, it was the most
commonly cited concern of teachers who worked with inclusion students, including Ms. Norman, the fifth grade “inclusion teacher” at Helis:

We have-the other inclusion teacher-absolutely no common time at all! Even morning and afternoon because, you know, they’ve got, we’ve all got meetings before and after school, too. So it’s been really, really difficult in that regard. I have to say, that’s been one of the bigger challenges, too, is that the [IEP] students themselves are not as great of a difficulty but the ability to like actually work with somebody and have all the resource help for the inclusion, I mean, it’s not, it’s the social worker and the speech pathologist and all of that, it’s impossible to find a time to say this is when we’re going to be working, you know, how this is going to look for you when we’re doing [the curriculum], you know. We don’t do that. We don’t have that ability.

Third, a number of teachers were concerned about the “blanket” nature of District 21’s inclusion policy. Indeed, any student with an IEP was to be integrated into a general education classroom regardless of the nature of their disability. Several teachers expressed concerns as to whether the policy was adequately meeting the needs of the students who it intended to serve, including Ms. Lopez, who felt that rather than throw every IEP child into an inclusion classroom each individual child’s needs should be evaluated:

What is best for the child? What is the least restrictive environment? Are we really doing—we have to look at each individual child and really looking to see if we’re doing them a, a service or a disservice to putting them into a regular classroom. And that, I mean, there’s so many factors. How much of the time in a regular classroom if any, or you know, or how little time out of regular classroom? So are we really doing that? Are we really looking at the individual child? I don’t think so. I think we’re making, they’re making big decisions, you know, sweeping decisions. The other thing is, um, I’ve always enjoyed having special needs children in my classroom. When I was at Helis, I was the special ed bilingual teacher for my grade level. Um, I need, I should have had a full-time assistant. And I should have had then the special ed aid coming in and being there and I had to demand that, okay? So again, it’s the support and it’s not about the teacher, but you know it’s about helping the teacher help meet the needs of not
just that child but then everybody else in the classroom when you have children with severe, severe needs.

Finally, there were also concerns about how to protect and meet the needs of teachers and non-IEP students in inclusion classrooms when problems arose particularly with regard to violence, something Ms. Jackson had firsthand experience of as a teacher in an inclusion classroom:

And like last year I had an, I had a student who is now in a behavioral [program] and he walked in the door and he would have these episodes that were dangerous. And he, at some point, um, actually came after me and like tried to hit me-I mean, he’s in first grade but he was big and strong and he would have to be restrained, physically on many occasions and he had to be hospitalized a couple of times. Um, and it was so stressful for me that I was like having Posttraumatic [Stress Syndrome]. I was just really trying to keep the rest of the kids safe.

I also witnessed episodes of violence concerning a white boy in Mr. Williams’ kindergarten inclusion class. Indeed, once while working in this classroom I placed a picture the boy had drawn out of his reach after it had first been confiscated by the teacher. The little boy clenched his fists and demanded I give him his picture back or he would kick me. I also watched this boy threaten violence against his classmates and destroy classroom property. Further, Mr. Williams had two additional students in his class who would frequently leave the room and have to be brought back, ignore his instructions, and mistreat their classmates and classroom materials.

Teachers’ Perspectives on Race and Gender in the Context of Ruling Relations

In sum, the map of ruling relations (Figure 1) provides a context for teachers’ expression of attitudes about race and gender and their behaviors towards race- and gender-related issues. The devaluing and surveillance of teachers work, and the
numerous demands like inclusion put upon teachers without requisite resources, clearly illustrates the decreasing power and authority of teachers over their work. Further, the system of organizational complexes (Smith 1990; 2005) that teachers participate in rewards them for following the rules, not rocking the boat. As Valenzuela points out, education is a bureaucratically inefficient system that offers no incentives for prioritizing students’ welfare over following “the rules.” (1999, p. 256) Indeed, teachers are at the mercy of the institution at the same time they are agents of the institution. On the one hand, then, the ruling relations represented by the formal system of education actively subverts the potential of teachers’ to address institutional racism and sexism.

On the other hand, however, teachers are not passive agents within the organizational complexes of District 21. There are areas over which teachers clearly can and do assert their authority; this is particularly the case when it comes to their relationships with their students and with parents. It is in this context that the countervailing effects of individual, student, and community-based privileges emerge that, like the organizational complexes of contemporary schooling, mitigate teachers’ efforts to address institutional racism and sexism. Each type of privilege is discussed in detail below.

### Teachers’ Privilege

One underlying factor in teachers’ resistance to acknowledging and addressing institutional racism and sexism is their own privilege. At times this privilege may be a result of their whiteness, their masculinity, their social class, and/or their heterosexuality.
The interaction of these many identities of course creates a unique social location for each teacher in this study; the privilege shared by all the teachers, however, is that associated with their advanced teacher training and socialization into the education system in the U.S. Teachers are essentially highly trained “experts” who are granted significant authority as agents of the educational system to promote and sanction what they believe is the proper family-school relationship (Lareau 1987). The privilege afforded to teachers as a result of occupying this role is particularly evident in their definitions of what constitutes “good” parents and “bad” parents, and their construction and enforcement of a dominant classroom culture.

Good Parent, Bad Parent

When I asked teachers about common obstacles their students faced, inevitably the discussion turned to their students’ family lives. Indeed, teachers’ first line of defense when questioned about their responsibility in the numerous problems associated with contemporary schooling was generally, ‘well, there is only so much we can do in the classroom,’ some version of which I heard on several occasions in the course of my research. As Mr. Swain once told me, “Politicians, you know, speak about teachers…but so much of it is what the kids bring from home, you know, from a very young age because if the parents give it to them its’ easier at school, you know.”

While teachers told me they derived great personal satisfaction from watching their students’ progress academically, socially, and emotionally, they generally cited the amount and the quality of “parental support” students had access to as the single strongest
predictor of student success. The core belief was that despite the efforts of the best teachers, any potential academic progress was undermined by poor parenting. In my time with Ms. Hurley, she shared a number of stories about the problems her past and present students faced. In the following she describes why these types of students represent her greatest challenge:

The, the children who come to school wounded, the kids who come to school without parent support or with parents who are so poor and working six jobs and they have a key when they’re little. (sighs) The kids who come without support, without either material things, without food in the refrigerator, without love, with abuse as part of their background. You know, with uncaring, with parents who don’t know how to parent because they’re just 13- or 14-years-old. Um, those children are always a challenge because you can’t give them what they don’t have, you have to try and teach them to find a way so they can do things differently, so I, you know, I had a little boy who was homeless. Came in one day without his homework and I said ‘why didn’t you do your homework?’ He said ‘I tried to do it but there wasn’t enough light in the back of a car when we were driving around looking for a bed. My grandmother finally let us in but it was 3 o’clock.’ So I said ‘you know what, you do it now. That’s not a good enough excuse for me because you owe it to yourself to get your homework done. Because you have to make better choices than your mother was able to make.’ ‘Cause he could identify the difficult choices-she had children really young, she wasn’t married, she didn’t get a good education. He knew all of that, so he did his homework. I wanted to cry and hug him, but I didn’t, you know.

Interestingly, in this dialogue Ms. Hurley makes reference to several macrolevel factors that underlie the inequalities of her students-poverty, teenage parenthood, homelessness-yet her intervention is a decidedly individual-level one, implicating the bad decisions on the part of her students’ mother.

Title I schools in District 21 like Mason and Helis have a much higher proportion of transient students because so many families in these schools are in crisis, as Ms. Lee described, and are often forced by circumstances beyond their control to move from one
place to another. When I spoke with Ms. Chang, a teacher at Helis, she expressed empathy for the challenges the student population at her school faced, but then revealed her own sense of privilege by questioning the caliber of parents who would move their children from one school to another as if the parents had complete autonomy in the matter:

There’s a bunch of difficult kids in Ms. Norman’s room that were not here in third grade. Yeah, so if you show up in fifth grade, imagine what kind of student you’re going to get because who moves in fifth grade?!?...I mean, who moves in the middle of the year?!? I got a kid in February-who moves?!? Nobody else does, you know? Who moves?...Basic success is if you’re at one school from kindergarten through fifth grade, continued schooling, okay? Um, the teachers know each other, they talk to each other, you’re going to get, you know, what I mean? Now, why is that? Academically that’s stronger; it’s one program that you’re going through. You’re not missing any holes or anything, you’re with the program. Academically. Socially, emotionally, why are kids going to do better? Well, obviously the parents must have, doesn’t matter if your parent stays at home or works, but they have stability. Stability.

Ms. Lee, an inclusion teacher at Helis, also expressed great compassion for her students at Helis, but suggested, like Ms. Chang, that for the most part, parents had significant control over their situations:

LCS: With all the challenges that come with teaching, what would you say this is the biggest challenge for you?

Ms. Lee: (long pause) I’ll have to say when, um, when student’s home lives are challenged. When there’s issues, you know, with the home, um, neglect, of course, abuse. There’s a lot of subtle things, too, that happen, um, you know at home. And I feel that, that’s a constant battle because you know in the classroom in their day, you know, we’re trying to praise and praise and praise and build them up, and then I feel at times when they go home that I have no control over that, you know, I just have to be there the next day and provide that assurance that school’s a safe environment and that learning is fun and wonderful, um, and that everything’s going
to be alright, you know. But I’ll have to say that’s the toughest, you know, challenge, and I’ve worked with a lot of families and, you know, I’ll reach, and we have a great social worker, and interventionists that actually go now to the homes which is new this year.

LCS: Do you think these challenges are more acute here because of the population of Helis?

Ms. Lee: Yeah. Yeah. And not so much the learning issues; it’s the resiliency and survival. You know, because families are in crisis and, you know, kids by law, you know, have to be in school so they come, but at home they’re in crisis. So, that’s the biggest challenge because I feel like I have very little if not, you know, if any control over that.

LCS: It sounds like you wish you could be able to just fix it.

Ms. Lee: Yeah. Yeah, just take them [students in crisis] home with me at night and take them to school tomorrow while they [parents] get their act together at home. Fix everything up, and then, okay.

While several teachers in this study grew up in working-class neighborhoods, only three teachers currently live in the city of Chicago in neighborhoods with large percentages of poor and working-class families. Therefore, whether or not teachers grew up in communities similar to those inhabited by their minority students, almost every teacher currently lives in communities that are geographically and ideologically removed from those in which the majority of their poor, minority students reside. This not only makes it difficult for teachers to empathize with these students and their families but often leads teachers to draw conclusions about the nature and quality of parental support minority students receive without firsthand knowledge (see for example Delpit 2006). For example, in the following discussion of contemporary problems in schooling and the
ways in which they relate to racial inequality, Mr. Gira makes a number of assumptions about minority parents including their inability to form stable family structures in order to support their children. He also lists a number of responsibilities that “good” parents should fulfill, or in the case of reading, “good” mothers should fulfill. The most significant implication of his argument, however, is that “good” parenting and “bad” parenting are a matter of culture:

Well, we need more money somewhere; it’s got to come from somewhere. Um, and, you know, anyway the government can reconfigure where money is being raised, you know, where it’s being utilized and redirect to some of those areas so that, uh, um, they have a chance to be successful. I mean, it becomes a money thing as well as it takes time. It’s, it’s not going to happen overnight and as long as you don’t have that family unit at home that’s supporting these [Black] kids, and making sure that they get a good breakfast in the morning and that they’re really concerned that they’re doing their homework at night, and that the mom started reading to them when they were two or three at least, you know, you know, that’s, that stuff doesn’t happen overnight and it’s going to take a while, but, um, you know, it’s like any other development of cultures, that there is, there are areas of our culture that still need a lot more attention. And I think it’s, you know, we, we’ve made so many gains in the last hundred years; it’ll take another fifty to one hundred to get where we need to be probably.

Similarly, Ms. Stevens presented an interesting paradox when she disclosed that it was through her experiences teaching in an all-white school that she knew she wanted to work in racially diverse environment:

**Ms. Stevens:** And I student taught in Cross Creek, at White Elementary School, which is like the most homogenous group of children, probably that I’ve ever seen in a school. They were like all just white, English-speaking, middle-upper class families, just totally not what I wanted to do, and I knew that when I was student teaching. I’d say ‘this isn’t where I want to be,’ and-

**LCS:** How did you know that?
Ms. Stevens: I don’t know, I just felt, I was, I’ve always felt the reason I wanted to be a teacher is because I want to like help those kids that feel— you know, those kids [at White Elementary] are going to be fine, whether or not they have me as their teacher, really in the long run. They have parents who love and care about them, and help them with their homework. I wanted to be with kids who had challenges at home and saw school as a safe place where they can just have a routine, have someone who cares, you know.

Note the comparisons Ms. Stevens draws between her students at White Elementary and those with whom she now teaches at Helis. Students at White have parents who love them and care about whether or not they succeed in school; poor, minority children do not because they automatically come from “challenged” homes. On more than one occasion Ms. Steven indicated she essentially saw herself in a “white savior” role at Helis.

Interestingly, “good parents” could also present problems for the teachers in this study, particularly if they attempted to usurp teachers’ authority. This was not unusual in a community like Lakeview with a higher than average number of residents with formal education. In the following excerpt, Ms. Stevens draws this parallel:

Ms. Stevens: I think, well, for one thing, especially this year I just see the reflection of all these parents in their kids like every day when I am sitting with them on the carpet. They’re [the students] like negotiating with me, and I’m remembering at curriculum night their parents are the ones who were like trying to negotiate homework or something with me. Like they’ll say, ‘well, Ms. Stevens, how about we do it this way?’ And I’m like, ‘no, this is how we’re going to do it,’ and I see the parents are the same way. Where like a parent who, you know, would make excuses for why they didn’t do the homework or whatever. There’s their child telling me the same thing. For some reason I just feel like this year that’s like a big part of the personality of this group.
LCS: Do you think that that’s reflective of this area? This community?

Ms. Stevens: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I think that, you know, this is a very community-based school. I guess in my previous experiences like when I student taught, for example, I mean the parents were a little bit of the same you know group [white], but there were very strict procedures about how you go to visit your child’s classroom. You needed to stop at the office and sign in, and if you need to bring them a lunch you don’t just come to the classroom and drop lunch off. You leave it in the office. You know they value that sacred time. I’m sure you saw the stop sign out there. I just try to make that clear to my parents at the beginning of the year, like, ‘please, do not come in here in the middle of day to try to talk to me, and have a conversation with me about, you know, whatever, what can you bring for a birthday treat. Just leave it in the office, they’ll call me, and I’ll go get it.’

“Good” parents could therefore assume the role of “bad” parents if their parenting prevented their children from being able to effectively internalize and observe the classroom culture. It was the teachers, of course, who determined the nature of this culture.

The Classroom Culture

LCS: Now, with all the challenges that come with teaching, what would you say is the biggest challenge?

Mr. Foy: I guess, well…. (long pause) Well, certainly kids with serious behavioral issues. I’d have to say that’s the biggest thing. Kids who, um, for whatever reason are not sure how-they don’t really understand the classroom culture and what it’s supposed to be. They don’t understand it. Or they’re not interested in it, or their interests lay elsewhere. Or there’s a lot of stress at home that comes into the class. But it’s the kids who, you know, obviously disrupt and make life hard for me and for other students.

Teachers’ opinions about whether the parents of their students were “good” or “bad” was also related to how well or how poorly parents’ socialization of their children
matched the classroom culture (e.g., Lareau 1987; 2003). Teachers provided several insights into the type of culture they cultivated as they talked about what their students needed in order to be successful in their classes. There were, of course, a number of overlapping themes among the teachers in this study, but there were some interesting differences across schools. At Morgan, teachers emphasized the importance of their students being independent and taking risks, good organizational skills and the ability to stay on task, as well as a desire to learn. Teachers at Helis and Mason also mentioned the importance of many of these traits, however, they were more likely than the teachers at Morgan to stress the importance of students being honest, following routines, taking responsibility for their own behavior, learning self-control, and being kind (e.g., Kozol 1991).

According to Annette Lareau (1987), “the social profitability of middle-class arrangements is tied to the schools’ definition of the proper family-school relationship.” In the following exchange, Ms. Roberts encapsulates this relationship as she highlights the role of the teacher in connection with the nature and quality of parental support students should receive at home:

LCS: The students who in your experience who have struggled to progress academically, are there common obstacles you have seen?

Ms. Roberts: I would say a couple different things at this age level [first grade]. Um, I mean, I think that some kids just don’t come to school grounded. I mean like grounded in the idea of school. You know, most kids are walking in and they expect something good to happen. They expect when they sit on the rug we’re here for a reason and I’m looking to the teacher because she’s going to do something. It’s going to be good, so I’m going to sit here. And if
kids don’t have that then you know…. That comes from going to the library, reading aloud when you’re at preschool, being read to at home, you know, you know all that good stuff that goes on. If that hasn’t happened then they walk in, they’re not grounded in this room. They don’t get what’s going to happen or that anything good is going to happen and so it’s intimidating, and distracting.

Mr. Hamilton also noted that students who struggled in his classes oftentimes could not reconcile the differences between “school culture” and “home culture”:

There’s just different cultures in school and in home life and not really knowing the expectations then come here and trying to apply rules from one universe to another universe don’t always work. And that’s not a necessarily a socioeconomic thing. For example, I have a student who, uh, is able to talk to his parents and to his friends in a way that just isn’t acceptable in school, using words that are just not okay. I have other students who, um, just have different ideas about when work needs to get done or other ideas about what does it mean to show respect when you’re talking to someone and, um, those things have to be explicitly taught and practiced and drilled and even with the sense of you can do whatever you want at home, that’s fine. In this classroom this is how we’re going to do it. It’s easier for us to do what we need to do if we’re all on the same page.

While each school I worked in established a set of rules to govern students’ day, each teacher also had specific rules they expected their students to follow, culminating in a dominant classroom culture, and while a few teachers went so far as to refer to their students as “friends,” teachers were understood to be the “boss.” In the following vignette, Mr. Hamilton is determined to assert his authority by enforcing this aspect of the classroom culture.

Field Notes: Mr. Hamilton’s Third Grade Class, October 11, 2010

Mr. Hamilton asks the students to clean their tables. They do so quickly and then come back to the rug for read-aloud. Mr. Hamilton begins by telling the children that he has been very surprised by their behavior this morning, and that he has not been able to give out a lot of rewards for following the rules. He threatens Vikram, who struggles regularly to stay on task and follow instructions that if his
behavior does not improve he will have to stick with an adult the rest of the day and have no fun. Mr. Hamilton goes back over the rules for read-aloud. Mr. Hamilton places a book under the document camera and tells the kids to sit with their legs crossed, hands in their lap, with their eyes on the Promethean board. He tells Marcus, Thomas, and Vikram, who do not comply, they are going to have to stay in for recess so that he can go back over the rules with them.

“I think that’s fair,” Mr. Hamilton tells the three of them. “Does that mean I think your bad rotten kids?”

“No!” Marcus says. “You think every kid is a good kid.”

“That’s right,” Mr. Hamilton says. He then says to the other children, “Thank you, class, for being patient even though you have lost five minutes of read-aloud time.” He attempts to start the story several more times but continues to stop to give behavioral reprimands to Vikram and Thomas.

All of the kids are growing very frustrated, and I am as well. I wonder if it’s really necessary that the kids must sit with their legs crossed and hands in their laps. Mr. Hamilton begins again, reads two words, and then informs the kids that the time is up and it is time to line up for lunch. The kids who have been doing what he asked are demonstrably frustrated, and I don’t blame them. Mr. Hamilton asks them if they are all going to have a good afternoon, and the kids agree begrudgingly. He is basically telling them they are getting a second chance after lunch.

As this example illustrates, the classroom culture is built on deference to teachers and to the institution of education. Parents who socialize their children to observe the classroom culture teach them to respect their teacher and classmates, to listen to and follow rules and instructions, and they make sure their children arrive at school on time and prepared for the day. Again, whether or not parents did this successfully factored into teachers’ perceptions of how well they performed their job.
Students’ Privilege

When considering inequality in education, inevitably the focus turns to the relationship between poverty and schooling (e.g., Kozol 1991; Farkas 1996; Lent and Figueira 2002). This was reflected in teacher concerns about ISAT scores, for example, since poverty is an underlying variable among the subgroups who fail to meet standards. Indeed, I recorded numerous examples of the tangible effects of poverty I witnessed in my classroom observations at all three schools particularly with regard to students’ inability to grasp basic skills and concepts. Yet, the reason these examples were generally so stark, was because the poverty of students in District 21 schools was at all times juxtaposed to the overwhelming privilege of students in the same district. Teachers were responsible for bridging the chasm between their students, and most talked candidly about this challenge, even making reference to inequalities between the haves and the have-nots in Lakeview. Yet, unearned privilege was not problematized (McIntosh 1992; Hurtado 1996).

While poverty places many students at an obvious disadvantage in terms of mastering the mandated curricula, students who have access to cultural capital, accentuated by their access to social capital via their parent-advocates (e.g., Bourdieu 1986), are consistently at an advantage. These students are generally the better prepared students in class, the students teachers do not worry about compromising their standardized test score averages. Therefore, even though the majority of the privileged students are white, illuminating a clear racial disparity between subgroups, because they
exhibit the traits teachers value and seek to cultivate (Lareau 2003) in their classrooms, to problematize students’ unearned privilege is tantamount to problematizing the foundation of teachers’ educational philosophy (see also Hurtado 1996).

Cultural Capital in the Classroom

According to Orr (2003), children’s learning time can be increased as a result of access to educational resources determined by a family’s wealth, examples of which may include books, computers, or tutors. (p. 283) Indeed, parents at Morgan, and a few other schools in District 21, can literally “buy” a teacher for their child. In the following Ms. Roberts shares her concerns about an annual fundraiser at Morgan:

You know, you have to pay forty bucks to go to it. It’s a, it’s a event for only parents, only adults. Which right away, I mean, a lot of people don’t leave their kids at home for things like that, and I don’t know how much it is. Forty dollars or something per person. Um, and they have an auction where, a silent auction and there are teachers that you can bid on to spend special time outside of school with. So I’ve brought it up several times at staff meetings because I feel like there’s nothing more biased than that event. I mean, the, you know, the only kids that are going to be able to have special time with you are the white privileged or Black [privileged], I mean we do have of course a few, but the privileged kids…that dynamic is ‘my mom bought this time for me.’ I don’t, it just really, really bothers me. Does it, you know, I, I do have in my little circle of support and some people don’t participate [in the silent auction]. But it hasn’t been stopped. You know, and the PTA felt very attacked, like felt like I was not appreciative of all their work and stuff. You know, I, it just wasn’t received well. And you know we have a new principal but I don’t know that he’s-I haven’t even brought it up with him. But the teachers didn’t stop. I mean, most, I don’t know, most, at least half or more still participate after several years and several times of discussing it at staff meetings. Yeah. I was called a socialist.

Further, the ability to travel was another type of educational resource, or form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) parents could “buy” for their children that I frequently observed the benefits of in this study. Indeed, this was an important resource that
enhanced students’ ability to make connections to the curricula, as Ms. Chang explains in the following excerpt:

In order to make the book that they’re [students] reading make sense, they have to have that experience, or a similar experience, and you can’t just get that from watching a movie. Um, which I’m finding a lot of people, that’s all their doing. They’re just watching movies. They’re not going to live theatre. And then, also because of No Child Left Behind…because it’s so much pressure for us to get all this teaching done, we don’t take field trips. But not just because of that one thing. I think also because it’s costly. The gas prices went up, so therefore the bus fees went up. So we don’t take a lot of field trips. Well, we used to always go to a live theatre show. Kindergarten used to always go to the pumpkin patch. Now, again, with the turning of the economy a lot of these places have closed down, so you have to go further. But they [District 21] don’t do those anymore. Which is really too bad because these [low income] kids don’t get the experience from their parents. Well, where are they going to get that experience? Now, um, people who don’t work with this population, they’re like—which are probably the legislators—‘you shouldn’t, they shouldn’t be going on all these fieldtrips. That’s just fun! School shouldn’t be fun! It should be learning! You should be reading! You should be writing!’ But they don’t understand again, that connection. But they’re the ones making the laws. And their kids are fine. Well, of course, their kids are fine. They’ve been taking them to the museum. These kids haven’t been to the museum, you know. It’s really sad. It’s quite, quite sad.

Ms. Parker was another teacher in this study who found that students who had experienced the world outside of Lakeview were able to draw on those experiences to help them understand curriculum. For those students, on the other hand, who had not ventured outside of Lakeview it was difficult at times to conceptualize things like the differences in landforms. Ms. Parker offers a recent example of how she attempted to compensate for the lack of familiarity some of her students had with canyons:

Ms. Parker: Well, we were talking about landforms in second grade right now, so we’re talking about canyons. There’s a certain group of the class that have been to the Grand Canyons, who have been to canyons here and here. And I was reading about canyons in Peru and hands were going up—I’ve been to Peru—what?!? Really?
(laughs) And then you’ve got this part of your class that haven’t
been out of Lakeview. And so bringing that together and trying to
make sure that everybody kind of there are days that I don’t know.
It’s, it’s really a challenge especially with something that’s so, um,
experiential like an understanding of what a canyon is. So we
looked at photos, you know, we looked at books, but again, it’s not
the same-

LCS: This is a challenge I’m hearing other teachers talk about. But I’m
just curious. Do you find among the kids with this, given this
range of experiences, um, is there ever any attempt to make the
other children who don’t have those experiences feel like they’re
left out? Or do you not see that?

Ms. Parker: By the other children?

LCS: Yes. Is there this sense of ‘oh, I know what canyons are, I’ve been
to the Grand Canyon, what’s wrong with you that you haven’t?’

Ms. Parker: You know, I think working with young children they don’t look at
things that way. They’re so egocentric still that it is all about I
want to share about me, you know, and they don’t-I don’t even
think they even think about it in terms yet of that.

While Ms. Parker believed her second graders were still too self-absorbed to
intentionally one-up their classmates, I did witness this occur on a number of occasions in
other classrooms:

Field Notes: Mr. Foy’s Fourth Grade Class, October 26, 2010

The students are instructed to continue working on their stories about a place they
have traveled. As I walk around the room, I stumble upon this conversation at a
table with a white girl, a white boy, a Black girl, and the one Hispanic boy in the
class.

The white boy, talking about flying in an airplane says, “First class is so cool.
They usually have a plasma TV so you can watch stuff.”

The white girl chimes in, “Yes, it’s awesome! I remember one time I got to eat
the pilot’s ravioli!”
I notice the Hispanic boy is not paying attention to this conversation, and the Black girl at the table just looks at the two of them with a confused look on her face as if they are speaking in a different language.

Whenever possible in my classroom observations, I read students’ work, seeking any connections between what they wrote and their social locations, particularly with regard to race, class, and gender. At the elementary level, students’ writing assignments often revolved around their own experiences. A common assignment, for example, asked students to write about a recent trip they took. When Mr. Foy assigned this topic, I read every paper possible looking for variations. One white boy wrote of his trip to Scandinavia the past summer, another white girl wrote about her trip to Cape Cod. I also read white students’ stories about going to New York and other faraway places. The three Black students in Mr. Foy’s class wrote about a trip to Six Flags, a trip to Disneyworld, and an uncle’s birthday party; the one Hispanic boy in the class wrote about visiting his family in Cuba. There were a few white children who wrote about more modest experiences such as going to a block party and getting a new cat, but when access to cultural capital was evident in students’ writing, the students were almost always white.

Finally, Ms. Lopez has firsthand experience of the effects related to the differences in cultural capital among students given her many years teaching in the dual language program where the majority of English language learners in the classroom live below the poverty level and many of the native English speakers are privileged both in terms of their race and their socioeconomic standing. Ms. Lopez also offers a unique
perspective having taught for several years at Helis, a Title I school, before transferring to Morgan, one of the top schools in the state:

LCS: Do you find that your students are better prepared to succeed in the classroom here at Morgan as compared with Helis?

Ms. Lopez: Yes, the children are coming in with more parent participation, um, not necessarily my group-half of children are second language learners. Most of my second language learners are free and reduced lunch, you know, so….

LCS: Would that be fairly typical of the dual language program in general compared to say gen ed?

Ms. Lopez: Yeah. Yeah. You know here most of the kids that are at Morgan, you know, traditionally Morgan’s students-I mean parents know how to function in a traditional school setting. You know, the homes are much more, um, you know used to-the homes and the schools go together, you know, the literacy you know. Some of these other children it’s night and day. They don’t know how the school functions.

LCS: Even in your class here at Morgan?

Ms. Lopez: Yeah, my Hispanics. Right. You see it, I see it, the difference among the children. I mean, you know, I mean, I, I’m at my wit’s end with this, you know. And this group [Hispanic students], I don’t have a lot of parental support. It’s probably one of the least amounts of parental support in my teaching years. So [Hispanic] kids not coming to school because they miss the bus so there’s no one to bring them to school. Or I’m here, you know, Tuesdays and Wednesday mornings to teach extended day. They don’t come. They don’t come. So, what do I do? And the [Hispanic] parents can’t, don’t know how to help. I’ve had parents come in for literacy night and I had to do a mini-lesson with them on parts of speech. They don’t know what a verb is. They don’t know what a noun is. And I don’t think after they left, they kind of seemed like they got it, but I don’t know (laughs). I don’t think they got it completely because the kids are still getting it wrong on the [vocabulary] sort.
LCS: Is the lack of support you’re talking about also on the part of white parents?

Ms. Lopez: No, it’s the Hispanic. The poor. Just, you know, everything from not working phones to not being able to, um, help with the kids. You know, and just or like I said, not sending them to school. Just, before school, or not even sending them to school. I have one little boy whose just, I was doing his report card and it broke my heart. He got a lot of ones, not meeting [standards] in math and he misses once a week. He doesn’t catch up, one day. And he, I see potential. I don’t see a learning disability. I don’t see anything that’s causing a, a difficulty except his environment and the lack of coming to school and just that one day a week. He can’t catch up.

In sum, the disparities between low income students and privileged students in District 21 are vast. Many students live in families who do not have access to basic resources, while many others live in families who vacation in Europe over the summer months. Privileged students, who are most often white, have access to myriad forms of cultural capital that enhance their ability to succeed in school. Poor students, on the other hand, who are most often students of color, are consistently at a disadvantage when it comes to making personal connections to the mandated curriculum, for example. Teachers expressed concern about the disadvantages of these students who through no fault of their own were born into under-resourced families; teachers did not express concern about the students who through no effort of their own were born into privileged families.

Social Capital: The (White) Privilege of Parent-Advocates

Ms. Martin’s second grade class at Helis is very racially diverse. After several visits, however, I noticed there were a number of white students who tended to dominate
most of the class discussions and who often appointed themselves the leaders of group activities. I asked Ms. Martin, who was the only Black classroom teacher at Helis, if there were strategies she used to ensure that minority students also had an equal voice in her room:

I try to create a rapport with the kids first and foremost and build that relationship and ‘look, hey, you might think that XYZ is smarter than you, it’s not true. It’s up to you.’ They’re [white students] more aggressive, they push and they push and they’re not letting go. Kelly, she is not letting go until you answer and, and she’s taking in everything I say. I, I can depend on her to, to reiterate what I’m saying to her to the class, you know, and they push and I’m saying to the, the African American kids, I’m saying, ‘you’ve got to push. You’ve got to be more, raise your hand.’ And I said to them this morning, ‘no question is too big, no question is dumb, this is school. Someone might think it’s dumb or stupid and they’re afraid to ask it, you ask, [then the other student may say] I was thinking that, too.’ Yeah, you know, so you, you have to be as aggressive. They’re [white students] aggressive and I, keep going back to where it starts. At home. [White] parents are in here, their parents are in here all the time. If one thing doesn’t go right, believe me they’re coming, they’re checking on this, they’re doing it...And they constantly see their, their parents and they see that they’re invested, you know.

In essence, parents serve the interests of their children (and themselves) when they perform the role of advocate. Indeed, parent-advocates are an important resource for students, a resource rooted in privilege as Ms. Roberts points out:

It’s just, it’s, you know, parents who can advocate for their kids get what their kids need, and parents who can’t, don’t. But to me that’s an institutional problem. And, in Lakeview it turns out mostly to be also a racial, you know, it’s divided, the haves and have-nots, and here the have-nots are minority, are African-American mostly and Hispanic, so, to me that’s an, that’s an institutional problem. That could be addressed to say you know what, this kid doesn’t have an advocate but that doesn’t matter, and I’ve seen this over and over and over and over again.
At times, the advocacy of privileged parents is revealed through their beliefs about how and what their children should learn as in this example taken from my field notes.

Field Notes: Mr. Foy’s Fourth Grade Class, October 5, 2010

As Mr. Foy goes over the math exercises with the students, I am again reminded of how so much has changed from when I was in school. The students are being taught multiple ways to solve math facts including how to come up with “ballpark answers,” a form of estimation before actually working the problem. One white girl, Natalia, raises her hand and declares that her dad is confused by the partial sums method she is being taught and that he doesn’t like her to do it that way. Mr. Foy calmly suggests that since methods of teaching math have changed maybe Natalia should teach her father some of these new strategies. “No, I don’t think it’s that he doesn’t know how to do it. He gets it, he just doesn’t like it.” I later overhear this same student remarking to another student about the differences between protons and neutrons that she learned from her dad who has a Ph.D. in physics. She tells her classmates that he knows what he’s talking about. I am thinking here of the privilege on the part of this educated, white man to have things (math) the way they’ve always been. I wonder whether not knowing these new math strategies is threatening to him since after all he has a Ph.D. in physics.

At other times, the advocacy of privileged parents includes things they do not want for their children, such as a desire to not have them share headphones with their classmates, something white parents concerned about the hygiene of other students complained about in Ms. Steven’s class. Still, at other times, parent-advocates expressed concerns about special treatment their children may not be receiving compared to their classmates. Mr. Hamilton offered an example of this as he discussed his strategy for addressing behavioral challenges in the classroom:

Yeah, last year, I had some students who received tickets. And how this worked was that tickets were if you needed to be out of your seat, sure, you get three tickets, and you know, you get out of your seat, rip the ticket up, you’re done. This was like an add-on [to the school-wide behavioral modification program],
my own thing I had three kids that just weren’t getting it the [school-wide program] way. They needed this, and so what they got is tickets and the tickets allowed them to leave their seat and if they didn’t use their tickets to leave their seats for like bathroom, for this, for that, at the end of the day they could use it for some extra free time. This was the idea to teach the lesson if you can manage yourself well, you can delay your gratification, then you can get your free time later. Um, being efficient means having more time to do what you want, and so, uh, I have another parent who called and said this was very unfair. ‘How come my daughter doesn’t get tickets, and how come my daughter doesn’t get duh duh duh?’ And what I said was, ‘if you would like me to put your daughter on a behavior plan we can do that but the reality is that these other kids their day is pretty awful. Ninety percent of the time that I’m talking to these kids, it’s to correct their behavior. It’s to say something that’s not so nice, and this is one of the few times in the day they can experience some kind of success. Right now, your daughter experiences success most of the time. She really doesn’t need this behavior plan, so we’re not going to do that.’

In sum, the privilege on the part of the primarily white parent-advocates in District 21 is reflective of the privilege associated with the community of Lakeview itself. Interestingly, the majority of these parents as residents of Lakeview consider themselves tolerant, enlightened, and, essentially, “good liberals.” There are obvious limits, however, to their liberalism.

Privilege in Lakeview

Despite a commitment to the ideals of social justice, Lakeview is a town that is very racially segregated and where distinctions between the poor and the very privileged are readily apparent. Interestingly, when I share that I am a resident of Lakeview with those who are even vaguely familiar with the town, one of the first things they generally express is how wonderfully diverse it is. Indeed, white residents of Lakeview often cite diversity as its number one selling point, especially compared to towns further north where Lakeviewers would never live because it is “too white.” Yet, as a resident of
Lakeview and as a sociologist studying teachers and students in District 21, I uncovered numerous examples of contradictions between the ideology of the “good” (white) liberals who inhabit the town and whose children attend public schools, and their beliefs and behaviors concerning inequality. As Ms. Lopez shared, people say they want diversity, “but not in my backyard.”

Not in My Backyard: The Limits of Liberalism

The teachers with whom I worked frequently shared examples of the degree to which District 21 embraces multiculturalism, yet there were obvious limits. I decided to ask the few teachers who spoke particularly passionately about inequality in schooling and engaged in activities in the classroom to further equality, even if only at the micro-level, how much support they felt they would receive if they were to address institutional racism and sexism. The conversation Ms. Parker and I had encapsulates the parameters of acceptable measures for addressing inequality that emerged after talking with teachers, particularly her examples of how far “good liberals” were willing to go for the sake of diversity:

LCS: You seem very aware of inequality at the individual and institutional level. Um, so if you were-age appropriate, of course-but if you were to say, okay, let’s, you know, maybe use different words with the kids, but ‘let’s address white privilege, let’s address patriarchy, let’s address heteronormativity.’ If you moved beyond addressing inequality at the classroom level, just trying to get the kids to appreciate diversity, do you think you would get support from the parents, your principal, the district? In Lakeview, a town that prides itself on an ethos of social justice?

Ms. Parker: No. No. And it’s funny because we [Ms. Parker and Ms. Roberts] started a parent conversation, um, last year under our former
principal and Ms. Roberts and I had a kind of quick meeting with him [Mr. Brixton] like how can we push that forward.

LCS: Push what forward?

Ms. Parker: There was a big parent movement to have our dual language program ousted from the school.

LCS: The parents didn’t want it?

Ms. Parker: Well, it was ‘we don’t have enough classrooms, and the class sizes in the gen ed are big and blah.’ Okay, granted all that is true, but when people ran the numbers that didn’t change anything. The folks moving into the Morgan neighborhood is what’s causing our building to be stretched to the seams. And, and they have a right to move in also, so it was on the district to provide a more appropriate space for us. But they [parents] didn’t, they didn’t want to go that route first. It was ‘let’s get rid of those [Hispanic] families.’ And it really bothered me. Um, you know, and it bothered me for, all of that but also because they [nonwhite students] bring such a wonderful, something else to our building. So…

LCS: And you and Ms. Roberts initiated the conversation?

Ms. Parker: We, um, well, it, we had, um, we asked our principal to bring in the two ladies [from the anti-bias curriculum training program] to get this conversation started and, you know, very few parents came. It was really disappointing. And so when we said to him [Mr. Brixton] this year we’d like to continue that, his response was, ‘well, they [parents] really feel beaten up about that.’ And it was like, really?!? So I don’t feel like our parent population even wants to hear even just ‘let’s embrace diversity.’

LCS: But dual language is still here at Morgan?

Ms. Parker: Dual language is here. Well, the district is building. So the district is building an addition.

LCS: Has that quieted the talk of having dual language done away with?

Ms. Parker: It has. Yeah. It has for the time being. Um, but that would have been the second petition to oust the program, so-
When was the first?

Right after it [dual language program] came some parents started a petition, um, to get rid of it. I don’t remember their reasoning at that point. I think that if I were to try to have those conversations in the classroom [about institutional discrimination], I don’t really know what the parent reaction would be-

Yes, that’s what I keep bumping up against as I talk to all the teachers. And living here myself. It seems so hypocritical to say we value diversity but we don’t want those children at our school.

‘We moved to Lakeview for the diversity. We love the brown children in my child’s class!’ But those are also the parents at this grade level that don’t have those kids over for the play dates, don’t invite those kids to the birthday parties because, ‘well, they probably wouldn’t be able to get there.’ First, how do you know that? And so you just don’t invite them? I find that to be so offensive. And, I have a very hard time holding myself to parents sometimes, but I’ve had parents say to me, ‘well, I see on your birthday chart that it’s so-and-so’s birthday [a racial minority child] and so I thought I would bring in a treat?’ Why? You’re assuming that that parent isn’t going to? I feel like there’s a judgment put on that parent. And, uh, only once did I have to have an argument. I did because-

I bet you gave it to him-

You know, I just felt so offended and, and I had known this parent and had really a good relationship with this parent and it, and it was like you don’t know, you don’t know anything. I, I just… that bothers me.

Mr. Swain, a Black teacher at Mason, thought there might be some support for discussing institutional racism and sexism, but only if certain protections are first put in place. He discusses what some of those supports might be in the following excerpt:

I think you would get some support but I think politics would definitely come into play. And I think, um, once people felt that the political, um, once they felt the politics it would cut a lot of people off from having an open discussion. I think
that you could if you, um, if you started off and you sort of built the, the right type of, I guess, committee or what not, um, but you would definitely have to have, um, some really strong planning in place before you, before you started. I think if you just jumped out there with it [institutional racism and sexism], I don’t think it would be, you probably wouldn’t get the results that you were looking for. And I would feel like the teachers and people in the community would take some things the wrong way. Um, but I do think regardless of that fact, it’s something that would be beneficial to everyone to actually do.

Because Mr. Swain was originally from the South as was I, I asked if he thought there was less racism in Lakeview as opposed to the South, something a number of people whom I met in Lakeview assumed:

No, it’s, it’s the same. And I think that’s the thing you’ll find. Or that I’ve found in Lakeview, too, or many places, I mean. I felt the same way about Texas. I think there you sort of know where people stand, but I think here it’s a lot more subtle. And so you may not, um, people don’t say how they feel and I prefer to know. (laughs) I like that about people in Texas because I knew where they stood. And I prefer people to be honest about what they think. I think here you do find that hypocrisy or just, just not being out front makes it harder to communicate those things, you know, which is why I was saying with the committees you would have to do it in such a way that you could try to reach the people that you’re trying to reach because a lot of people will join it and say they’re in favor of it, but, you know, you’re not really sure what their motives, or what they’re trying to get from it.

As Ms. Parker and Mr. Swain point out, an expression of a commitment to addressing inequality is part and parcel of living in Lakeview. Yet, without the problematizing of privilege and institutional racism and sexism, it is a commitment that ensures little more than superficial gains towards equality.

**Conclusion**

Interestingly, with the exception of two, the teachers in this study did not need to be convinced that race was still a problem in schooling. Racial inequality was something
that practically every teacher I worked with expressed concern about, particularly with regards to the white-nonwhite test score gap. Indeed, in chapter three I suggested that because inequalities in District 21 are measured largely in terms of test scores, gender inequality is not problematized to the extent that racial inequality is, as disparities in test scores by gender in the district are either not statistically significant or tend to favor girls. While several teachers provided examples of the enduring negative effects of traditional gender role socialization, gender inequality was not something most teachers were convinced was still a major problem. This was generally the most significant barrier to teachers addressing institutional sexism; the belief that it by and large did not exist.

When it came to race, on the other hand, teachers were willing to admit that racial inequality was still a problem in schooling, but teachers did not necessarily believe it was an institutional problem. For those teachers who did, any potential attempts to address it as such were consistently undermined by both the organizational complexes in which they worked and the countervailing forces of privilege.

First, the teachers I worked with participate in a system of ruling relations that shape and constrain their everyday experiences (Smith 1990; 2005) in District 21. While teachers continue to maintain some degree of autonomy, the structure of schooling in the district and in general is consistently moving towards the usurpation of teacher control over their own work: teachers are expected to utilize mandated curricula, implement best practice policy dictates, and submit to random surveillance, all while their career mobility is increasingly tied to student performance on standardized tests despite the diminishment
or alleviation of teacher planning time and classroom supports. Even so, teachers remain the most likely scapegoats when students fail to progress academically.

For example, at the community meeting I attended with Carol Ann Tomlinson, the overarching message of the lecture was that “good” teachers are those who differentiate their classrooms, and by doing so teachers can overcome any barriers their students face in their ability to grow academically, socially, and emotionally. Indeed, Tomlinson shared personal anecdotes of disadvantaged students of color she helped to steer onto a path of success as a public school teacher. As I looked around at the almost-all white audience, many nodded in agreement while others voiced their support under their breath. The parents in attendance appeared visibly moved by stories Tomlinson shared of students of color who came from overwhelming circumstances and turned out to be fine upstanding citizens thanks to the dedication of “good” teachers. Even so, parents’ questions at the end of the lecture generally focused on Tomlinson’s suggestions for how teachers could best serve their children.

Second, the countervailing forces of privilege consistently work against the possibility of educators in District 21 attending to institutional racism and sexism in schooling, let alone society. First, individual privilege associated with teachers’ social locations I believe undermined the ability of several white teachers to even recognize the pervasiveness of racism in schooling, and in the case of sexism, most of the women and men in this study to acknowledge the enduring effects of gender inequality as well. As intersectionality theory warns, teachers’ positions of privilege cannot be added or
multiplied, however, the three white, straight male teachers I observed were the most resistant to acknowledge white privilege and male privilege. On the other hand, every teacher of color expressed concerns about racial inequality in schooling. Again, there was not a similar parallel with regard to gender inequality; clearly, even most of the women teachers did not think that sexism was still a significant problem.

For those teachers, however, who were cognizant of enduring racism and sexism, privilege was still a mitigating factor in their reluctance to raise and address concerns about inequalities. Here, the overarching reason was that unearned privilege was simply not problematized. Teachers, administrators, and parents viewed privilege, particularly the influence of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) in the classroom, as a “good thing.” These students reflected teachers’ core beliefs in the proper family-school relationship (Lareau 1987; 2003), something that appeared to trump teachers’ concerns about the homogeneity of this group of students. Instead, the problem was disadvantage whether associated with race or poverty or both. In the end, as long as unearned privilege is understood to be inherently beneficial (McIntosh 1992), there is no space for teachers to critique systems of power like white privilege, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and ableism.

Further, while Lakeview has a reputation for being progressive, enlightened, and concerned with matters of social justice, the privilege associated with certain (white) residents also creates parameters around what are “acceptable” means to address race- and gender-related issues. For example, the brand of multiculturalism in District 21 that
receives community support is not critical in nature, challenging systems of privilege and institutional discrimination, but a palatable way to attend to the needs and desires of students of color while increasing the “cultural competence” or cultural capital of white students (see also Darder and Torres 1998; Perry 2001; Lewis 2005). There are no programs in place to attend to the needs and desires of girls, although based on the perspectives of most of the teachers in this study, this would be unnecessary since gender inequality is no longer a problem in schooling.

Paradoxically, it is Lakeview’s reputation for social progressiveness, I believe, that shields many privileged residents from being forced to acknowledge the pervasiveness of racial and gender inequality. Living in Lakeview as a white person allows one to claim an identity marked by racial, gender, and sexual progressiveness, without necessarily having to confront and attend to racial, gender, and sexual inequality. This same phenomenon occurs when whites believe they can reject the label of racism and claim insider status on racial matters because they have a “Black friend” (Bonilla-Silva 2006), or straight people believe they can speak authoritatively about matters of homosexuality because they have a “gay friend”: white residents of Lakeview need not prove their commitment to diversity, equity, and justice; they are residents of Lakeview, after all. This is a reality I am familiar with as a white resident of Lakeview, and, indeed, throughout this project I was consistently confronted by my own privilege.
Confronting My Own Privilege

I began this project critical of a number of school-related initiatives including the pressure placed on children to compete and succeed. I fancied myself as the anti-helicopter parent who turned my nose up at those “liberal elites” who enrolled their children in lacrosse and orchestra, feigned concern over the quality of every organic morsel their children placed in their mouths, and demanded their children receive every enrichment opportunity in schooling they deserved. Yet, in many ways undertaking this research project served as a consistent and needed reminder of my own privilege.

Despite my overarching concerns about the new forms of tracking I observed in classrooms and the common wisdom that gender inequality was no longer a problem, I also found myself perturbed by the lack of time teachers’ had available to challenge high-achieving students. Indeed, while there were demonstrable problems with a number of the strategies for attending to lower-achieving student needs, this was a mandated priority in District 21, especially given the reality of high-stakes testing. As a number of teachers in this study indicated in one fashion or another, pushing higher-achieving students to move to the next level was oftentimes not a priority given teachers’ time and human resource constraints. I was not the only person to raise this concern, as Ms. Stevens noted:

Ms. Stevens: It’s like the number one question I get from parents of these, you know, students who need enrichment. And I agree. They do need something, you know, further than what I’m able to teach them, and I, I mean we do work as hard as we can to like teach them how to do like peer coaching or I don’t know. It’s like, you know, we always tell the parents ‘oh, we’re working on this. We’re going to
try this out,’ but I mean really, there’s like no guarantee. I have written in my lesson plans meet with this enrichment group or meet with that enrichment group. But if I don’t get to my lowest group, then like I’m sorry, but I just can’t see the enrichment group today.

LCS: And isn’t it the case that you have to meet with lower-achieving students a certain amount of time each day?

Ms. Stevens: Uh-huh. Like the kids who are reading below grade level, we have to see them either in a small group or one-on-one at least once a day, every day.

LCS: So that demand has to be met regardless of whether you get to spend time with the higher-achieving students?

Ms. Stevens: And I have nine students in here like that [RTI-Tier 2 students] so by the time I meet with nine kids whether it be in a group or independently, I mean my day is over, you know.

Even as this project drew to an end, I struggled with on the one hand wanting poor children, who were most often children of color, to have all the resources available to help them to be successful in school and in life, and on the other hand contemplating pulling my children out of District 21 schools despite our families’ overwhelmingly positive experiences with my daughters’ teachers. I did not want to be that white, educated parent who was advocating for more resources for her children despite the reality of living in a white supremacist society. Yet, there I was, spending practically every day in a classroom setting and not only seeing higher-achieving students often receive less one-on-one time with teachers but at times learning how to use their resources to navigate the classroom environment in order to appear as if they were working when they were really goofing off. Indeed, a basic tenet of differentiation is that
children should be offered increasingly challenging ways to complete a task. Yet, when left to their own recognizances, students often choose the less taxing strategy so there is more time to do what they want to do, even if includes reading for pleasure.

In reality, District 21 does not have a “gifted” program. Students are supposed to receive various types of enrichment opportunities before, during, or after the school day that perhaps substitute in some ways for a comprehensive gifted program. Other enrichment opportunities are available on the caregiver’s dime, leaving poor children at a disadvantage once again. Even so, a concern I found myself struggling with was the fact that lower-achieving students were often able to garner a larger proportion of teacher time and resources than those who were easily bored by the standard curricula because they were not being adequately challenged. Teachers often talked about the benefits of students learning from one another, but I was shocked by the lack of time some students actually spent interacting with their teacher during a typical school day.

While I supported the funneling of resources to struggling students and, indeed, highlighted in my research the shortcomings of current strategies for attending to these needs so they might hopefully be addressed in more effective ways, the lack of resources available for higher-achieving students was an issue that forced me to admit that perhaps I was one of those parents, wanting to know were my children receiving every resource they deserved? It is the same argument I find among my college students when I teach about inequality and privilege and the same argument Peggy McIntosh (1992) wrote about in her influential article on white privilege and male privilege: we are more willing
to acknowledge inequality than privilege, and for those of us who acknowledge
inequality, we generally want injustice to be addressed but do not necessarily want to
give up our own unearned privilege in the process. This is but one example of the ways
in which this project forced me to grapple with my own privilege, and while I continue to
ask myself tough questions for which I do not always like my answers, asking these
questions is my responsibility as a sociologist committed to feminist, antiracist goals.
CHAPTER SIX

ADDRESSING OBSTACLES TO EQUALITY IN SCHOOLING

Racial and gender inequality remain persistent problems in schooling today (Oakes 1985; Kozol 1991; Thorne 1993; Jenks and Phillips 1998; Bobbitt-Zeher 2007; Noguera 2008). District 21 is attempting to address racial disparities in test scores by implementing policies such as differentiation that in theory attend to individual learners’ needs, but in practice bring serious problems including new forms of tracking. Further, as this research shows, teachers’ “common wisdom” on race and gender continue to shape everyday experiences in classrooms in many ways (see also Abu El-Haj and Rubin 2009). For example, concerns about sexism as opposed to racism are practically nonexistent as only one teacher in this study believes that gender inequality is still a major problem in schooling. The belief that institutional sexism has by and large been alleviated allows teachers’ to continue to group students by gender with little if any attention to consequences (see also Orfield and Eaton 1996). In sum, institutional sexism is treated as a non-problem in District 21 and policies to address institutional racism tend to create latent disparities. What, if anything, then can be done to address racial and gender inequality in District 21 and in schooling in general? To address this question first requires careful consideration of the obstacles to equality. In the following, I challenge contemporary scholarship that views the lack of authentic caring on the part of teachers as the source of the problem and reconsider whether teachers should in fact be
expected to serve as the conduits for social equality as many social scientists would like.

I then discuss the importance of including teachers’ in the conception and implementation of educational policy and offer a critique of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Finally, I discuss the contributions and limitations of the current study and offer suggestions for policy reform.

**Rethinking the “Challenge to Care”**

Of the scholarship that has looked to the culpability of teachers in the perpetuation of inequalities in schooling, what has been particularly interesting is the argument that the inability of schools to provide a nurturing environment for their students (see for example Kozol 1991; Noddings 1992; Harry and Klingner 2006) and the inability of teachers to authentically care (Valenzuela 1999) are to blame. According to Noguera (2008), for example, “There is no doubt that if schools were to become more nurturing and supportive, students would be more likely to perceive schools as a source of help and opportunity rather than an inhospitable place that one should seek to escape and actively avoid.” (p. 42) Noguera argues this is particularly important for the success of African American boys (see also Delpit 2006).

In 1992, Nel Noddings challenged, “The traditional organization of schooling is intellectually and morally inadequate for contemporary society. We live in an age troubled by social problems that force us to reconsider what we do in schools.” (p. 173) According to Noddings, the ultimate goal of education should not be to teach students how to read and write, but to teach students how to care: caring should be the foundation
of education. This, of course, challenges the common assumption about the role of teachers in the educational system of power; indeed, according to Valenzuela, “For the most part, teachers enter schools with the notion that their central preoccupation is to impart their expert knowledge. Layered over this expectation is a bureaucratically inefficient system that offers no incentives for prioritizing their students’ welfare over ‘the rules.’” (p. 256) For teachers to authentically care for their students, according to Valenzuela, requires them to seek and develop connections with their students making trust the foundation for learning.

Of the inequalities I noted in the course of this research, I do not believe the source of the problem is the lack of caring on the part of the teachers’ with whom I worked. In addition to observations in which teachers demonstrated a great deal of care for their students, I asked a number of questions in teacher interviews that revealed the extent to which caring as opposed to the ability to teach was understood to be the central function of the teacher. For example, when I asked teachers what qualities they possessed that they believed made them good teachers the responses included traits such as patience, dedication, empathy, understanding, and the love of children. Similarly, when I asked teachers if they could tell me about the qualities of an excellent teacher they had while growing up, teachers shared stories of a former teacher who stayed after school to work one-on-one with them, a teacher who did not give up on them even when they did not believe in themselves, a teacher who saw potential in them that had gone unnoticed by others. The general consensus was that excellent teachers were teachers
who cared.

To argue that teachers fail to authentically care suggests that caring for students is simply not valued as highly as teaching students to read, for example. However, when I asked teachers to tell me what they believed was the most important thing they did as teachers, rarely did someone mention teaching students basic curriculum, even though teachers’ livelihoods depended on the ability of their students to master these skills. Instead, what the majority of teachers mentioned in one fashion or another was the importance of building relationships with their students:

LCS: You do many important things as a teacher. What would say is the most important thing you do?

Mr. Swain: Um, I just think that the most important thing for any teacher would be to support and develop the relationships with the kids because I think once you have that, it makes it a lot easier to actually, um, to teach them. And I think they’re more willing to listen to you, so I think it’s really important to just get to know the kids, um, as people, um, and then teaching kind of falls into place. But without it, I just think it makes it almost impossible if you don’t know the kids and understand where they come from.

Similarly, Mr. Gold expressed greater concern for the emotional as opposed to academic well-being of his students. When I asked Mr. Gold what he thought was the most important thing he did as a teacher, he talked about the importance of helping kids to overcome their anxiety about school:

I think the emotional needs are the number one thing. You’ve got to have kids who like coming to school and feel trusting of the teacher, that they can say things to the teacher. I think in life we want to know that we can trust the people that are leading us or guiding us, our bosses or anything. So I think that getting kids to really, uh, feel comfortable with the teacher and love to come to school and, you know, and then the learning falls into place.
Teachers also demonstrated care for their students by their dedication to the profession. Despite the myriad demands placed on teachers in District 21, teachers willingly gave up free time in the summer to work on their classrooms and regularly brought work home at night and on the weekends because, as so many of them told me, they loved teaching. Indeed, inclusion co-teachers like Ms. Lee, as compared to regular classroom teachers, only have twenty minutes for lunch every day and no breaks when students are in fine arts, yet are not compensated any additional salary. Still, Ms. Lee stated that she would teach for free if necessary because she loves her job and dreads retiring. Ms. Stevens also believes her love of teaching allows her to cope with the demands of her profession:

Well, I think I’m lucky, and teachers in general are lucky if they enjoy doing what they do because we’re one of the few professions that we wake up and look forward to going to work in the morning knowing that every day’s going to be a little bit different. I cannot imagine sitting at a desk all day, so I think that for me being such an active person this is the perfect job for me. I love interacting with families and kids and, I mean, of course, there are those days of paperwork and professional development that sometimes you do just have to kind of sit through while you’re thinking about the million other things you could be doing, but I think those days come…less often. And so I guess it’s everything I hoped it would be, and I pretty much live in here during the summer. I’ll go home for about a month, and then I just start thinking I’ve got to get back in my classroom and get things set up for the kids. I spend a lot of time in here. (laughs)

Finally, when I asked teachers to tell me the greatest reward they received from teaching, they consistently referenced the delight they felt when they could tell students enjoyed coming to their classroom each day, or parents shared with them how much their children loved coming to school. In addition, teachers often talked about how much they enjoyed when former students would return to visit, like Ms. Hurley:
Oh, the greatest reward is when you meet them [students] years later. When I was at [another school in the district] I got lots and lots and lots of gifts because there are parents with a lot of money. Here, I don’t get anything and it doesn’t really matter because it’s not the gifts of the coffee mugs from the dollar store. You know, it’s, you know, what you get years later. You don’t see it. You’re planting seeds, and you just have to be happy with that. And that’s the hardest part of being a teacher I think.

In conclusion, the teachers in this study clearly exhibited an ethic of care. As Mr. Gold said, “Look, it’s nice when they’re [the students] learning, and they get high scores and so on, but that’s not all of it.” Therefore, the problem was not a lack of authentic caring as some scholars have suggested, but about the ways in which authentic caring is manifested in the teachers’ classrooms-through the creation of racial and gender utopias that ultimately impede the ability to attend to structural inequalities. Teachers genuinely care for their students to the point perhaps they are afraid to address institutional racism and sexism for fear of how their students (and parents) will respond. However, in the end, the structure of schooling in District 21 generally protects teachers from this potential anxiety by embracing multiculturalism and keeping teachers overextended with countless responsibilities and the specter of standardized testing. Indeed, the problem in this case is not a lack of caring, but a lack of time, in-depth knowledge about privilege and oppression, and an environment conducive to advocacy, that generally undermines teachers’ ability to care about addressing institutional racism and sexism. These challenges along with the countervailing effects of privilege beg the question as to whether teachers are in fact ideally situated to serve as advocates for social justice in education.
Letting Teachers off the Hook

Much scholarship on inequality in schooling, including this study, has looked to teachers as both the source and potential solution to racial and gender disparities in education and society (e.g., Lortie 1975; Noddings 1992; Rasmussen 2004; Allard 2004; Delpit 2006; Noguera 2008). Indeed, as Tyack (1974) points out:

Critics are so intent on exposing the racism and obtuseness of the teacher that it is difficult to understand her [sic] view of the world. Like welfare workers and police, teachers in the urban colonies of the poor are part of a social system that shares their behavior, too. It is more important to expose and correct the injustice of the social system than to scold its agents. Indeed, one of the chief reasons for the failures of educational reforms of the past has been precisely that they called for a change of philosophy or tactics on the part of the individual school employee rather than system change— and concurrent transformations in the distribution of power and wealth in the society as a whole. (pp. 10-11)

While we continue to expect teachers to serve as the conduits for social equality, this is not what the teachers with whom I worked indicated inspired them to pursue careers in teaching. In fact, while several teachers expressed a desire to help children overcome contextual obstacles and a few wanted to work with populations of color in particular, not one teacher associated a career in teaching with alleviating institutional racism and sexism.

Even so, social scientists who assert that teachers are uniquely positioned to both advance and help alleviate social inequalities often look to teacher education programs as vehicles for training teachers to be sensitive to racism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativity (e.g., Aronowitz 2004; Delpit 2006; Abu El-Haj and Rubin 2009). However, when I asked teachers about courses they found particularly helpful once they
entered the classroom as well as courses they found particularly useless, almost every teacher indicated what they remembered most about their teacher training programs came from coursework that provided opportunities for hands-on experiences in the classroom. As Ms. Parker told me, “It’s like what we know with kids-hands-on is always better!” Indeed, a number of teachers like Ms. Hurley, Mr. Hamilton, Mr. Swain, and Mr. Gira, indicated that if there was any problem with contemporary teacher education programs it was not the lack of training in multiculturalism for pre-service teachers but that pre-service teachers had to wait too long in their programs before entering the classroom to gain “real-world” experiences.

Interestingly, according to Aronowitz’ (2004), “Teacher training should be embedded in general education, not in ‘methods,’ many of which are useless; instruction should include knowledge other than credential and bring the union/movement/organic intellectuals into the classroom.” (p. 33) This argument, however, is contradicted by what the teachers in this study expressed about the value of methods classes over general education coursework. Indeed, Mr. Foy indicated that the most beneficial classes were ones that taught pre-service teachers to organize and manage the classroom, including the basics of lesson planning, for example. According to Ms. Mendez, a first grade dual language teacher at Morgan:

I would say, um, because I’m a big advocate of having kind of residency [for teachers], kind of like the way doctors do it. I think that you, at least speaking for myself, I learned best when I see what people are doing. So taking these classes about theory and, you know, this is that, and this guy said this, and this guy said that. I mean that, you know, you can remember, but does it help you teach? Did
it help me teach? I don’t think so. But going and observing, you know, people and observing teachers [helped].

Mr. Hamilton, a third grade general education teacher at Morgan, agrees:

The ones [courses] that I found best were the ones where, ‘okay so I want you to do this with your students in clinical tomorrow’ or ‘what you’re going to do is I’m going to come to your class. I’m going to watch you do this. I’m going to teach you what the strategy is; I’m going to watch you do it; and we’re going to come back and talk about it’…You know, just good teaching, the nuts and bolts of good teaching, so those classes where the teachers were able to do that I found very applicable so it had less to do with the content of the class then it had to do with the teacher’s modeling the kinds of behaviors that I was supposed to be exhibiting anyway.

In fact, when teachers did mention benefits they derived from non-methods classes such as Mr. Hamilton’s educational philosophy and educational psychology classes or Mr. Gira’s foundations of education class, it was generally considered beneficial because it helped pre-service teachers understand the basic underpinnings of contemporary pedagogical approaches, not serve as an impetus to addressing institutional racism and sexism. Indeed, when asked about courses that helped teachers once they were in the classroom, no one mentioned classes they took that focused on race or gender with the exceptions of Ms. Parker who said she had drawn extensively on a class she took in multicultural children’s literature and Ms. Smith who majored in inner-city studies and English as a Second Language. In actuality, Ms. Smith was the only teacher who stated that teacher training programs should focus more on teaching pre-service teachers how to respond to race- and gender-related needs in the classroom:

LCS: Do you think this is missing by and large in teacher training programs today?
Ms. Smith: Yeah. Yeah. Um, and those teachers who are identified as not being able to do that [work effectively with minority groups], need to get the training and then if they can’t cut it, I’m sorry, but, you know, don’t ruin generations of kids.

Despite the desire on the part of some scholars to have teacher training programs emphasize social inequalities in education (Valenzuela 1999; Delpit 2006), no teacher I worked with other than Ms. Smith indicated this was as important to pre-service teachers as methods courses, and, of course, hands-on training in the classroom. Further, as Parks and Kennedy (2007) point out, exposing pre-service teachers to concepts such as institutional racism and sexism is not sufficient to ensure they will integrate a focus on social justice into their teaching philosophy: pre-service teachers must first recognize their own biases and seek to reduce them. Ms. Roberts and Ms. Parker learned this lesson firsthand when they sought to incorporate some of the strategies they acquired from their participation in the anti-bias curriculum series at Morgan. Ms. Roberts and Ms. Parker voluntarily took part in the series for professional and personal reasons as both are interracially married with biracial children. Because of their personal investments both teachers were receptive to addressing bias in the classroom including their own. Their colleagues, however, did not appear to be as receptive:

LCS: And so was the expectation that after the anti-bias training you would come back and try to implement it at Morgan?

Ms. Roberts: We [Ms. Roberts and Ms. Parker] were working on it. We worked on it in our classrooms quite a bit and we also did some work at staff meetings. We invited the [anti-bias curriculum] facilitators to come to our school, the facilitators from the program...It’s very, it was really very…. (sighs) It’s a very good opportunity because it’s something that can be put on the back burner, you know? And
kind of also something that can be uncomfortable to talk about, so I think we [teachers in the program] all felt empowered every time we went to a session to keep it alive in our classrooms, the discussion about, you know, stereotypes, racism, you know all that—

**LCS:** How was it received in the staff meeting?

**Ms. Roberts:** Um…it was good (sounds skeptical). It wasn’t enough, it’s never enough is the problem.

**LCS:** Do you think the other teachers were receptive, or…?

**Ms. Roberts:** (pauses) For the most part, yeah. Yeah. But again it’s one of those things like you have to make a conscious effort to keep it [anti-bias focus] alive.

When I asked Ms. Parker about her perceptions of how the staff at Morgan received the strategies for addressing bias in the classroom and in curricula, she was more skeptical than Ms. Roberts:

**Ms. Parker:** We were really encouraged [at the anti-bias training] to share with the staff [at Morgan]. She [Ms. Roberts] had the two [anti-bias curriculum] leaders come in and meet with our staff.

**LCS:** How did that go?

**Ms. Parker:** Um…hmmm... It felt like mixed reviews. I think teachers really do feel like their time outside of the classroom is precious, and I don’t think anybody thought this isn’t valuable, but—

**LCS:** But maybe not on top of my priority list, or there are other things that…

**Ms. Parker:** You know, the presenters were trying to give, like lay that foundational work, and I feel like people felt like ‘we’ve heard all this,’ you know…and so that was unfortunate I think.
While in the end there are certainly reasons to let teachers off the hook for not systematically addressing institutional racism and sexism, perhaps first and foremost because it is not the fundamental reason why most people go into teaching, there are important reasons to not let teachers off the hook. Despite education’s role in perpetuating race- and gender-based prejudices, it is also an institution uniquely positioned to challenge inequality, and teachers are therefore uniquely positioned to serve as social justice advocates. In reality, no other institution monopolizes to such a consistent degree young people’s lives from approximately kindergarten through twelfth grade. While teachers may want to avoid being on the hook for fear of guilt, shame, or retribution, being on the hook also means they are committed, obliged, and involved in addressing social inequalities in schooling (Johnson 2006). Indeed, there is great potential for utilizing the system of education to address social inequalities, and because teachers are education’s functionaries, it is imperative they remain on the hook when it comes to their role in perpetuating and alleviating social inequalities. If teachers remain on the hook, however, it is critical they are afforded much greater input in the development of educational policy than is currently the case.

**Addressing Racial and Gender Inequality in Schooling**

Keeping teachers on the hook does not mean teachers alone are expected to solve the problems of racism and sexism in schooling. Indeed, what is required is a restructuring of contemporary public education, and society. Keeping teachers on the hook at the most fundamental level reflects the recognition that teachers’ hold a unique
position within the ruling relations and organizational complexes (Smith 1990; 2005) of schooling as potential advocates for social justice-oriented policies that best serve all their students. However, teachers cannot be expected to bear the responsibility of addressing racism and sexism in education if the disconnect that exists between those who make educational policy and the teachers who are expected to enforce it, most often with very little input, goes unchallenged. Keeping teachers on the hook, therefore, requires that teachers have a much greater voice in shaping educational policy initiatives and in challenging current reforms like No Child Left Behind.

The Importance of Listening to Teachers

A running theme throughout this research is the breakdown that exists between theorizing educational policy and putting it into practice in the classroom. This breakdown often occurs because of the lack of influence teachers’ have over their own work. This, of course, is not a problem unique to District 21. As Mr. Swain who works with the teachers’ unions pointed out, it is a problem that extends well beyond the local level:

You know. That’s the thing, just the power base. Even the fact that legislation can pass that teachers aren’t in favor of. Even with the national union, there was even one union that was sort of in favor of the, uh, Race to the Top, but, uh, the NEA [National Education Association] wasn’t, um, a strong supporter of it. But, you know, these things pass anyway. Um, you know, with the votes in congress, even when you try to put pressure on them [politicians]. I know that a good number of teachers, even that were meeting in the summer, um, weren’t, um, we didn’t get the vote of confidence for, for the legislation but it, it still passes, you know, so, it’s, it’s interesting.
I was also surprised to learn how removed administrators in District 21 and the school board were from everyday life in the classroom. Throughout my classroom observations from September through March, I never saw the superintendent or a member of the school board sitting in with classes. When I asked the teachers I worked with if this ever happened, I was told that it did not. In the following, Ms. Hurley speaks eloquently about this ideological and geographic separation:

LCS: What do you think is the most pressing problem in education today?

Ms. Hurley: The increasing chasm of disconnect between those who make decisions about what we’ll do and how we’ll do it and, and the practitioners, the teachers. I would love, I would love to see the superintendent and the board pick a teacher, a master teacher, somebody who’s willing to form a partnership and then to make a commitment to spend several days a week in a classroom just to see what a teacher’s life is like. I would, as I was saying earlier if I made a log of when I get up, and I brush my teeth, I mean, everything I do in my life, even the personal things, I watch TV, you know, I call two parents, whatever. If I made a log I think they would be appalled to see that I don’t have time to plan and to really use the data.

The realization of the chasm to which Ms. Hurley refers served as the impetus for my decision to offer teachers some time in our final interview to talk about what they thought were the most critical problems currently in education given their unique experiences in the classroom every day. Interestingly, a number of the teachers talked about problems in public schooling that did not directly affect them, especially concerns about Chicago public schools including large class sizes and lack of curricular resources. Teachers also, however, shared concerns about other teachers in the profession. Mr.
Hamilton, for example, described the biggest problem in schooling as the acceptance of failure related to the system of tenure, and stated that if students were not learning, then teachers needed to be fired.

Unfortunately, very few teachers mentioned institutional racism and sexism as the most critical problems currently in education. One exception was Ms. Parker who spoke passionately of her concerns about the plight of African American boys:

I’m not sure if this is an educational problem but it’s a societal problem for sure, and it sometimes keeps me up at night. Um, but we are failing our African American children. We’re failing them, especially our boys. It just, you know, when you look at the, the percentage of young boys who drop out, who, who then turn to other things I… (tears well up in Ms. Parker’s eyes) you know, it just is heartbreaking. Anyway, we, we went to a progressive educator conference, um, and Marian Wright Edelman gave the keynote and she talked very passionately about the cradle-to-prison pipeline and I thought, oh, my God! I’m a little chink in that pipeline! It’s awful! It’s awful! And it bothers me to no end that when I look at my numbers, not necessarily how I’ve mixed my groups, but when I look at my numbers, my low kids are all my African American kids. Why?!? Why?!? And if I really keep everybody moving at a steady clip then they’ll still be my lowest kids if everybody progresses. That is such a problem!

Interestingly, the purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is to address the vast inequalities in schooling to which Ms. Parker refers. Yet, in many ways NCLB is the prototypical example of the breakdown in educational policy and practice. Despite NCLB’s stated intent, the policy itself and its implementation have resulted in numerous demonstrable pitfalls. As Noddings (2007) points out, “Like so many reform movements, NCLB and its immediate predecessors started on the moral high ground—an expressed intention to close the achievement gap. But almost everything that followed by way of planning and implementation reveals a shocking level of moral obtuseness.” (p.
79) NCLB may intend educational equality, but its sanctions are clearly underpinned by inequality. The teachers with whom I worked generally supported the policy’s goal of equity in education, but were quick to point out its many problems and the reasons it should be abandoned.

The Problems with No Child Left Behind

When I asked the teachers I worked with for their feedback on No Child Left Behind, the responses were overwhelmingly negative. However, if there was any redeeming quality teachers saw in NCLB it was the legislation’s emphasis on accountability. Teachers like Mr. Hamilton, for example, like the mandates for empirical data attached to NCLB that he believes allows him to better meet the needs of his students:

> Although I started my, uh, teaching career with this idea that No Child Left Behind was a very awful thing, that it was a very awful kind of like wow, all these unfunded documents, wow, all these things it expects teachers to do. Yeah, there’s some very serious problems with what’s expected, but some other things like, um, having honest, actual data that lets me know how my students are doing, making sure that, um, I’m responsible for my students and their learning, um, making sure that I’m aware of how students of different flavors are doing in my room, like I’ve got to know that. I have to know that, and I can’t be using my psychic powers to find that out. You know, I’ve got to have some real, actual evidence, um, to support the kinds of things that I’m doing. Um, I mean, I think that teachers, we tend to resist this idea that we should be judged on outcomes.

Overall, however, even teachers who work at Morgan which consistently meets adequate yearly progress (AYP) had more criticisms than praise for No Child Left Behind. Indeed, some teachers like Ms. Hurley, believe this reform has created a climate in schools that can deter potential teachers from entering the field:
I can’t imagine it being worse [than No Child Left Behind]. If I meet a young person who wants to be a teacher, I say, ‘look, let’s talk about what you’re getting into.’ And when I see young teachers in the hallway and I go ‘how are you doing?’ and they go ‘overwhelmed. I’m just’-and they have tears in their eyes, you know. They say ‘has it always been this way?’ And I go, ‘no, teaching used to be joyful!’ It’s not anymore most of the time. I have to create those moments and when I do I feel like I’m neglecting some responsibility somewhere, some paperwork, some, you know, pretest. You know, some, you know, something that’s being demanded of me that I can’t possibly do and bring joy to learning.

Of the problems teachers referenced with regard to No Child Left Behind, one significant area of concern was what they believed were unrealistic expectations for student progress. According to the legislation, by 2014 all students are expected to be performing at grade level in reading and math. Mr. Foy is among several teachers I worked with who found this expectation ridiculous:

Every kid, every child learns differently at a different pace, so to think that by-whatever it is-2012 [sic]-to think that every child is going to be reading at grade level is completely-it’s a ridiculous expectation to make! I think its politicians who are making education policy not educators.

Another significant area of concern for teachers with regard to NCLB was the increased amount of testing in schooling, especially with regard to high-stakes tests like the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). This is a concern shared by a number of scholars as well (i.e., Aronowitz 2004; Duncan 2005; Noddings 2007). One consequence of the emphasis on testing is that it has forced teachers to focus on particular curricular areas to the exclusion of others. According to Ms. Roberts:

From the time that I started [teaching] kindergarten until now is just like, um, a tremendous change. Now, at our school we always, always, always had protected a block of time for play. Um, and I feel proud about that and I think that’s important, but, um, you know, we didn’t do guided reading. We didn’t expect the kids [to know] how to read by the end of kindergarten. We didn’t give reading
tests. We didn’t have kids, you know, trying to, we didn’t try to teach kids to work independently for big chunks of the day. So that’s all changed and I would say kindergarten looks more like a first grade classroom did many years ago…That bleeds over into first grade, too, because I think that the young mind, and especially the need for them to develop vocabulary can’t happen when their sitting by themselves, so it’s just not how, how people, people learn words. I mean, you know, when you get old enough, yes, of course, you can because you have so many other things to attach meaning to, but so I mean the whole point of playing is that there’s a, there’s a reciprocal relationship going on with somebody and that you’re, you’re acting out the world and so then you’re incorporating things that you’re learning and when you’re doing projects, and, you know, there’s a lot of discussion with the teacher and the other children, so…it [not having time for play] concerns me.

There were also several teachers like Ms. Parker who were skeptical about the ability of standardized tests to accurately assess student growth:

Um, I think that when we look at kids just based on the test score, just based on the ISAT or whatever standard of test we’re giving them and when it’s a very cut and dry, “doesn’t meet”, or “meets” or “exceeds,” we don’t take into account perhaps this child’s growth. I mean, a child could come in and make more than a year’s worth of growth and still “not meet.” So that’s problematic I think. And I think, um, it, it can turn some students off instead of saying ‘let’s celebrate all this progress you’ve made…’ Those tests don’t tell you anything really about that child as a learner.

In addition, teachers were concerned about the amount of time they had to spend preparing students to take the ISAT, especially since it often came at the price of giving up time spent on other curricular areas. In my classroom observations, for example, science and social studies were always the subjects to get short shrift. In the following excerpt, Ms. Lopez discusses the consequences of the emphasis on testing:

What I believe is, um, what’s happened since No Child Left Behind, um, is that I’ve had to focus more on testing, assessments where I didn’t have to before. It was more making sure that the children learned, you know, it was a focus, you know, differentiating, enriching…but definitely what I’ve seen, how it’s affected me here in this district is that, um, I’ve had to learn how to, uh, create
spreadsheets. I’ve become a data expert. Um, [I] used to focus [on] integrating curriculum and working on, on all that, you know, and enriching my curriculum and in, and making it fun and meaningful and learning and I think what it’s done-I have less time to do that, um, a lot more time [spent] analyzing scores.

Similarly, while Ms. Chang did not believe teachers in the district were teaching to the ISAT, she argued that at Helis a good deal of time was required to teach the students how to take the test:

We do have to teach what the test is going to be like. That’s different from teaching to the test. Um, because actually as I showed you what I’m [teaching my students], that’s over what you need, that’s over and beyond what you need to, um, pass [the ISAT]. But, um, I think, so I’m not teaching to the test, yet I know that I need to teach them the skills to pass the test because we know that the people who make up the test, they are, um, generally, white, um, men, women, you know, but they’re from a different socioeconomic group then the children here [at Helis], and so therefore, um, we have to teach them the language, the format, and these children are also not as adaptable, I think, to subtle changes. Um, [need things to be a] little bit more concrete.

Finally, what I found particularly appalling about the effects of No Child Left Behind in the course of this research was the differential ways it affects teachers depending on the school where they work. For example, there is far more pressure placed on teachers at Mason and Helis to produce students who meet standards on the ISAT than at Morgan. This is not to say that teachers at Morgan are not as hard-working or that they are able to just coast through their careers, however, because Morgan meets AYP every year, there is less stress associated with high-stakes testing for Morgan teachers. The teachers I worked with at Morgan like Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Gold, were far less likely to identify significant changes to their pedagogy as a result of NCLB, than teachers at Mason and Helis. Ms. Lopez, who taught at Helis before transferring to
Morgan, offers an interesting perspective of the differences between the two learning environments:

Ms. Lopez: Well, it took, uh, it took a while to get used to it [teaching at Morgan]. I used to [teach at] Helis um, so, um, actually Helis was on academic warning the whole time I was there-

LCS: What does that mean?

Ms. Lopez: Not meeting annual yearly progress, academic warning. So we were, it was very strict and lots of requirements and, um, everything was looked at, um, with a fine tooth comb, you know, our, our assessments and this and that. And I came here [to Morgan] it was just kind of really laid back you know cause this is a top-performing school. They don’t have anyone like a-ha you know, so it was-

LCS: So you don’t feel that kind of pressure as much here at Morgan as you did at Helis?

Ms. Lopez: Yeah, but it was kind of, it was weird to come from that, here was like so-wait a minute! We need to [be] doing this and, you know, and so, um, it took a while and I missed my friends and my co-workers and so. And then all of sudden it was like, wow, I like this-it’s a small school and this staff is so professional and so friendly and, you know, and it’s okay to be, you know, a little laid back and so this has been really good for me.

LCS: Having worked in the two different environments what has made the difference in your opinion between Morgan as a top-performing school versus being on academic warning at Helis?

Ms. Lopez: Well, I think there’s, um, several factors, you know. Um, I think it comes down to the, the poverty, you know. I think Helis has a higher, um, number of children of poverty to and, um, that’s what I see as [the] difference, you know. I see fabulous teachers in both schools, and both schools you know practicing best methodology, best practices, right? Um, but to be honest, I think here at Morgan we, we have a different population.

LCS: It seems like NCLB is much more of a concern for teachers who
are at schools in the district that are not meeting AYP. Would you say that’s true?

Ms. Lopez: Definitely. Definitely, it’s a stressor…it’s not fair.

LCS: Especially since your performance is tied to test scores, right?

Ms. Lopez: It’s [test scores] tied to performance. It’s tied to performance.

LCS: So it seems to me then that any teacher would be immediately at a disadvantage if they are working with a population of students who are struggling.

Ms. Lopez: Uh-huh. Poverty. It’s about poverty. Uh, I had a teacher, um, who I will not identify but who was very upset because, um, it was, he or she was getting a, um, new student who was way below grade level and it was going to effect the whole dynamics of the classroom. And so I, um, said well, you know (laughs). You know, you can’t have everybody, I mean, that’s just life and I was told that well, I signed up for this [to work with poor students]. I went into, uh, you know, bilingual. And, you know, this isn’t about being bilingual or learning a second language. You don’t see what I see. Like let’s say with middle-class children in Northbrook who are perhaps of Asian descent and learning, you know, or ESL, even some of the Polish immigrants and other, um-I’m dealing with poverty. So it’s not because I deal with ESL. It’s because there’s such a high level of poverty.

Not only are teachers and students at Title I schools at a disadvantage when it comes to the ability to meet AYP, but they are also more likely to deal with language barriers as well since native Spanish speaking students also generally fail to meet standards on the ISAT. This is yet another strike against schools with a higher proportion of non-native English speakers as these students are required to take the ISAT in English, which according to Ms. Chang “anybody with a brain” should know does not make sense. There are in fact linguistically modified math and science versions of the ISAT, however,
dual language teachers like Ms. Lopez told me they opted to not use these versions because if they do, they are not allowed to go over the test instructions with the students. In Ms. Lopez’ experience, non-native English speaking students tend to do better when she can go over the instructions and repeat them if necessary. Perhaps one saving grace of the Illinois state budget cuts this year is that the writing portion of the ISAT is not being administered in the lower grades. One consequence of this, however that Ms. Smith, a dual language teacher at Mason shared with me, is that some teachers are not teaching writing to their students.

Not only does administering the ISAT in English unduly affect the test scores of native Spanish speakers, but it also tends to compromise the mission of the dual language program. According to Ms. Lopez, “I think that’s the hardest thing, how to really be…help these children…become bilingual, all of them, when I have such a demand to teach English and to prepare them for the test-you know for testing such as ISATs. I think they don’t go together; it’s like oil and water.” Ms. Stevens, a dual language teacher at Helis, also discusses this challenge in the following excerpt:

I think, you know, with that whole thing and with like the ISAT testing and all the assessments that we’re required to do, especially in our situation as dual language teachers, it’s a really hard spot to be put in because we’re giving these kids, you know, the state of Illinois has bilingual and dual language programs and they’re not supporting those programs when they’re giving, you know, all of the children the same exact [ISAT] test in English, expecting them to perform just as well as their monolingual peers. That’s just not going to happen…I mean, it’s not fair for the teachers, not fair for the principals because you know when we don’t make-like, for example, we were just talking about the ISATs and how that test doesn’t really measure the knowledge of some of our students because they’re just not there yet. Well, we didn’t make AYP because our bilingual subgroup didn’t make progress where they were supposed to. So now we have all these things that are
being mandated by the state that we need to do. The dual language teachers are like starting to, you know, prep the kids for the ISAT in English so that totally defeats the purpose of the dual language program for like two months because we’re trying to prep these kids on how to take this test. And it is important that kids know how to take a test. I agree with that, like there’s a whole genre of like learning how to, you know, take tests. That’s important. That’s just a life skill. On the other hand, they’re in third grade. Like why do they need to be, you know, being prepped so hard for this test? And there’s just so much pressure, you know, put on the kids and on the teachers.

In his 2011 State of the Union Address, Barack Obama indicated that No Child Left Behind will be replaced by another educational reform. What that reform will be remains to be seen as does the amount of input that will be welcomed from teachers who are currently in the classroom. Unless teachers are allowed more control over their work, however, it is unlikely the current disconnect between policy and practice will be resolved.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Intrigued by the common wisdom that education is a panacea for racism and sexism despite empirical evidence to the contrary (Oakes 1985; Foster 1990; Kozol 1991; Lorber 1994; Ferguson 1998; Valenzuela 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Delpit 2006), I undertook this study in an attempt to identify elementary school teachers who were (1) acutely aware of the pervasiveness of racial and gender inequality in schooling; and (2) actively engaged in measures to address institutional racism and sexism, hypothesizing that students interacting daily in classrooms in which privilege and inequality are problematized has far more potential for alleviating inequalities than current manifestations of multiculturalism, for example (e.g., Darder and Torres 1998; Perry
2001; Bush 2004; Lewis 2005). I theorized that teachers committed to feminism and antiracism would be the teachers most likely to structure the learning environment in ways that attended to microlevel prejudices as well as engage students in dialogue and activities aimed at macrolevel solutions. Utilizing strategic intersectionality, I hypothesized women teachers, teachers of color, teachers from working-class backgrounds, and/or gay and lesbian teachers as those most likely to support feminist and antiracist ideals given their social location. Aware of the various overlapping identities to which teachers belong, I also sought to identify any and all types of privileges, the countervailing effects of which undermined potential measures to address racism and sexism. In the following, I identify the major findings of this research, the contributions and limitations of the study, and suggest some important considerations for policy reform, both locally and nationally.

First, one major finding of this study is that while social location was related to teachers’ attitudes about race and gender, the complexities of teachers’ numerous intersecting identities made it impossible to predict with any degree of certainty how teachers would treat racial and gender inequalities. For example, strategic intersectionality suggests that teachers with marked identities are the most likely to be sensitive to inequalities and privileges related to race and gender. In this research, I did find a number of correlations between teachers’ social location and their attitudes. Every teacher of color I worked with, for example, believed that racial inequality remains a major problem in schooling, and the degrees to which white teachers acknowledged
racism in schooling reflected their social location as well. This was not the case with sexism as attitudes were mixed. Further, while identifying a teachers’ social location may indicate how sensitive they are to racial and gender inequality, I could find no consistency between teachers’ awareness of inequality and their commitment to address inequality.

This lack of consistency underscores the second major finding of this research: the identification of numerous types of privileges that undermine teachers’ potential for addressing racial and gender inequality in schooling. Institutional ethnography served as a particularly useful model of inquiry for mapping the ruling relations in which teachers’ participate in order to connect organizational complexes to the countervailing effects of privilege (Smith 1990; 2005). Three types of privilege were particularly salient in understanding teachers’ resistance to addressing institutional racism and sexism: their own privilege, the (white) privilege of their students and parents, and the privilege associated with the affluence of Lakeview.

These findings point to a number of contributions this research makes to the literature on inequalities in schooling. First, because the teachers I worked with vary across several dimensions, this study offers a nuanced look into teachers’ perspectives on race and gender. For example, the teachers in this study differ in the number of years they have taught; as well as in their age, race, gender, social class background, and sexual orientation (see Table 3 and Appendix C). In addition, all three schools I worked at differ in the populations of students they serve (see Tables 1 and 2). Morgan, a top-performing
school is predominantly white, while Mason and Helis, both Title I schools, are predominantly Black and Hispanic, respectively. Finally, I was also able to observe teachers “doing gender” and “race” (West and Zimmerman 1987; West and Fenstermaker 1995) in general education and dual language settings from kindergarten through fifth grade.

The second major contribution of this study is in the selection of diverse schools within the same school district. While a number of studies examining racism and sexism in schooling have included schools from different geographic locations within their sample (e.g., Thorne 1993; Lewis 2005), by working with schools with differing student populations within a single school district I was able to control for a number of important variables frequently implicated in research on inequality in schooling, for example, class size, per pupil expenditure, and curricular resources (Kozol 1991). Indeed, despite having smaller average class sizes than Chicago Public Schools, particularly at Mason; despite a per pupil expenditure higher than the state average; and despite the presence of highly qualified teachers, all of whom in this study had at least one master’s degree or a law degree, stark disparities continue to exist between the three schools, particularly with regard to the achievement gap. These disparities are in many ways related to factors beyond the control of individual teachers, such as students’ prior skill sets before entering school (Harris and Robinson 2007), a variable clearly linked to poverty-level.

A third major contribution of this study is in the selection of Lakeview as the setting for data collection. Lakeview is unique in several ways. It is racially diverse,
politically liberal, residents have higher than average levels of formal education, and it is a town committed to an ethos of social justice. One might reasonably ask if addressing institutional racism and sexism are not at the top of the priority list in Lakeview public schools, then where is it a priority? If critical multiculturalism is absent in Lakeview, where is it present? If gender inequality is not considered a problem in Lakeview, then where is it problematized? I believe the findings of this research concerning teachers’ attitudes towards race and gender as well as their behaviors in the classroom are all-the-more compelling because they unfold in a town like Lakeview as opposed to a predominantly white, conservative suburb farther removed from the city of Chicago.

In addition to the contributions of this research, there are also important limitations. In my original proposal for this project, I envisioned spending two entire months with one teacher at Morgan, one teacher at Mason, and one teacher at Helis. My hypothesis was that by spending a concentrated amount of time with one teacher I would be able to more fully identify connections between a teachers’ social location and their attitudes about race and gender. District 21, however, did not approve this methodological design. Instead, District 21 agreed to approve the project if I would spend less time with any one teacher, not to exceed approximately fifteen hours of formal observation, in order to include more teachers in the study. In addition, District 21 only allows researchers within its schools after the first twenty days of the academic year through the beginning of spring break. Given these parameters, it was only possible to
include at the most twenty teachers in this study, and in the end eighteen volunteered to participate.

While eighteen teachers is a small sample size overall, interestingly I was able to compensate for the limited number of hours I was allowed for observation by conducting the research in the same school district. There were a number of continuities across schools and classrooms including standardized curricula, best practices, daily schedules, for example, that allowed me to transition much more seamlessly through the eighteen classrooms than I would have been if I were spread across different school districts. Further, working in the same three schools allowed me to stay in touch with all the teachers in the study including those with whom I worked early in the school year. These continuities ultimately allowed me to focus more attention on identifying racial and gender patterns by eliminating time that might have been spent acclimating myself to different districts.

In addition, while I wanted to include teachers from every curricular program in District 21, despite a number of attempts to solicit participation, no teacher in the African-Centered Curriculum program volunteered to participate. This was particularly unfortunate given the widespread criticisms of the program by the teachers who did take part. While this study benefitted from the differences across general education classes and through working with several dual language classes, I believe observations in the ACC program would have further enriched the findings and perhaps allowed important counterclaims about the program.
Finally, as a feminist sociologist, it is my desire to utilize my research in ways that hopefully advance progressive social change. At the conclusion of this project, I find reasons to be skeptical that education can play a critical role in the alleviation of institutional racism and sexism, but also reasons to be hopeful. On the one hand, it is easy to dismiss the social justice potential of education. After all, in order to systematically address racism and sexism requires focusing on more than one social institution. “Urban schools did not create the injustices of American urban life, although they had a systematic part in perpetuating them. It is an old and idle hope to believe that better education alone can remedy them.” (Tyack 1974: p. 12)

As Mr. Swain told me, we tend to expect schools to fix all the problems of society which it is not equipped to do. Indeed, Karen (2005) points out that simply looking within schools to address social inequalities is futile as schools are but one part of the problem:

In thinking about why children perform differentially, we need to examine the larger patterns of resource distribution in the society: unequal access to medical and dental care; unequal access to housing; unequal access to labor markets and adequate incomes; unequal access to vibrant communities with high levels of social capital; and, yes, unequal access to educational resources. The proponents of NCLB (even the often-liberal Education Trust) have suggested that any attempt to distract attention from students’ learning by moving away from a focus on tests, classrooms, and schools is tantamount to the "soft bigotry" of Bush's campaign. Forty years of sociological research on the contextual factors that shape students' learning suggest otherwise, however. (p. 168; see also Dworkin 2005)

Still, despite what may seem like overwhelming odds, as Tyack (1974) points out, there is a legacy within education that is essential in any quest for social justice (p.11). I believe addressing inequalities in education can be an important first or tandem step in
working towards progressive change in other social institutions. Revising a number of reforms at both the local and national level can serve as catalysts. For example, there are several incongruities associated with the NCLB legislation that demand attention. Because NCLB measures equality in terms of test scores, equality is understood within a finite set of parameters. However, the definitions of equality teachers’ offer are far more nuanced:

LCS: What does an equitable classroom look like to you? What does that concept, “equitable classroom,” mean to you?

Mr. Foy: An equitable classroom? What does that mean to me? I guess every child has equal access to the learning that’s going on. They get the same materials, they get the same opportunities for learning that everyone else does. There’s the same expectations for every for every child, you know in spite of what kind of background they have, you have that same expectation. Um, but it means that you have to, you certainly have to adjust things for kids who struggle, to make it so that they can be successful. It might mean that equitable means that you make a change or an adjustment in what one child has to do because you know that for them to be successful the expectation has to be different than what [it might be for their classmate].

The teachers I worked with tend to believe there are many paths to student success, yet the end goals are rarely problematized. Further, NCLB, while intended to address inequality in education, by defining disparities by test scores paradoxically establishes what types of inequalities are deemed important and which are not. Since test scores vary by racial group and by native and non-native English speakers in District 21, for example, racial inequality is problematized. However, because there do not appear to be the same
stark differences with regard to gender in District 21, institutional sexism flies under the radar.

In addition to macrolevel measures such as addressing problems with No Child Left Behind, at the local level District 21 could benefit immensely (as I believe almost all school districts could after this project) by employing two full-time certified teachers in every classroom. While the breakdown in policy and practice I often witnessed in classroom observations was at times the result of teachers’ prejudicial attitudes, I am convinced there is no way to effectively carry out policies such as inclusion or differentiation without additional highly qualified staff, and in terms of addressing prejudicial attitudes, opportunities do exist to challenge teachers’ common wisdom about race and gender given the mandates for professional development. This might actually prove to be more beneficial than focusing exclusively on teacher training programs where pre-service teachers are not able to immediately employ strategies for addressing race- and gender-related issues in the classrooms.

In the end, education is not a panacea for racism and sexism. Yet, as Gutmann (1987) argues despite the problems of contemporary schooling, most disadvantaged children would be even worse off without access to public education. Further, Noguera (2008) points out that education is the only system that turns no child away regardless of social location: “For this reason, public schools are perhaps the only institution that is positioned to play a role in addressing the effects of poverty and social marginalization and furthering the goal of equity.” (p. xxvii; see also Tyack 1974)
In conclusion, I believe the recruitment of feminist, antiracist teachers can increase the probability of greater social justice advocacy in education than is currently the case. Non-critical multicultural add-ons that remain peripheral to the dominant Eurocentric curricula endemic to contemporary schooling, for example, do not seem nearly as effective means for addressing micro- and macrolevel racism as students interacting on a daily basis with educators who are committed to antiracism and structure the entire leaning environment to reflect this commitment. In the interim, scholars must continue to both listen to and challenge teachers’ perspectives on race and gender, recognizing that as long as systems of power are not problematized, the countervailing effects of privilege along with the increasing demands placed on teachers and their decreasing control over the profession are likely to impede any consistent efforts to address institutional racism and sexism.
APPENDIX A

DESCRIPTION OF TEACHERS
Helis Elementary Teachers

**Ms. Lee** is a biracial woman who co-teaches in a second grade and third grade dual language classroom at Helis. She has been teaching for twenty-two years and is the only special education teacher in this study. According to Ms. Lee, she knew from a very young age that she wanted to be a teacher who works with special needs children. She is married and has two grown children. While Ms. Lee was raised in Lakeview with both parents and one sibling, she now lives in a community just west of the city. Her father, a college graduate, worked as a medical researcher while she was growing up, and her mother, who has a master’s degree, taught elementary school.

**Ms. Stevens** is a white woman who teaches second grade in the dual language program at Helis. She has been teaching for four years, and at twenty-five-years old is the youngest teacher in this study. According to Ms. Stevens, she knew she wanted to be a teacher from a very young age, and has always wanted to work with low-income students. She is engaged and plans to have children one day. Ms. Stevens currently lives in downtown Chicago, but grew up in a wealthy, predominantly white suburb west of Chicago. She was raised in a household with both of her parents and her siblings. While growing up her father, a college graduate, managed a chain of family-owned businesses, and her mother, who has a master’s degree, taught elementary school.

**Ms. Jackson** is a white woman who teaches in fifth grade in a general education classroom at Helis. She has been teaching for ten years, and though she chose a path other than education as an undergraduate, according to Ms. Jackson, she knew from the
time she was in second grade that she wanted to be a teacher. She is married and has three school-aged children. Ms. Jackson was raised in California by her mother and stepfather, and currently lives in Lakeview. Her stepfather, who raised Ms. Jackson from age five, is an optometrist, and her mother, who has a bachelor’s degree, works as a nurse.

Ms. Norman is a white woman who teaches fifth grade in the general education program at Helis. She has been teaching for twenty-one years. According to Ms. Norman, she knew from a very young age that she wanted to be a teacher, but chose a different path in college only to return to teaching several years later. She is married and has grown children. Ms. Norman lives very close to Lakeview in Chicago, and while she grew up in several states considers herself from the Midwest. She was raised in a household with both of her parents and her siblings. Her father pursued a doctoral program but stopped short of completing his dissertation. He worked as a dean in a college. Her mother has two master’s degrees and worked as a social worker while Ms. Norman was growing up.

Ms. Chang is an Asian woman who teaches third grade in the general education program at Helis. She has been teaching for nineteen years. According to Ms. Chang, she knew from a very young age that she wanted to be a teacher and went to college to pursue a bachelor’s degree in education. This was later followed by a master’s degree in education. She is married and has three school-aged children. Ms. Chang was raised in an affluent community north of Lakeview with both of her parents. She currently lives in
a community about twenty-five minutes from Lakeview. Both of her parents graduated from college with bachelor’s degrees. Her father worked as an actuary while Ms. Chang grew up, and her mother managed the kitchen of a convalescence home.

**Ms. Martin** is a Black woman who teaches second grade in the general education program at Helis. She has been teaching for twenty-six years. According to Ms. Martin, she knew she wanted to be a teacher from a very young age. Ms. Martin grew up in Jamaica which is where she earned her bachelor’s degree in education and taught for several years before coming to the United States. She earned a master’s degree in education after she relocated. Ms. Martin currently lives in a town just west of Lakeview. She was raised in a household with her mother and two siblings. While growing up her mother who had less than a high school education worked as a homemaker. Ms. Martin is married and has two grown children.

**Mason Elementary Teachers**

**Ms. Hurley** is a white woman who teaches third grade in the general education program at Mason. According to Ms. Hurley, early experiences babysitting set her on a path to teaching, and she has now been teaching for more than thirty years. Ms. Hurley is sixty-years-old, divorced, with grown children. She is currently in a long-term cohabiting relationship with a man she refers to as her husband. She lived for many years in Lakeview where she raised her children, but recently moved to a neighboring Chicago community. She grew up in a wealthy, predominantly white suburb north of Chicago which, according to Ms. Hurley, she hated because it was so cliquish. She was raised in a
troubled household with both parents and her siblings. While growing up her father, who had less than a high school education, moved from job to job. Her mother, a homemaker, had one year of college and was severely depressed.

**Mr. Swain** is an African-American man who teaches third grade in the general education program at Mason. According to Mr. Swain, he never planned to go into teaching, but after a number of years working in another industry decided to change career paths. He has now been teaching for five years. Mr. Swain is thirty-seven years old, married, and he and his wife, are currently trying to conceive a child. He lives in a Chicago community close to Lakeview, but grew up in the southern part of the United States. Mr. Swain’s parents are divorced, and while he maintained a relationship with his father, he lived primarily with his mother and siblings. His father has a bachelor’s degree and though frequently unemployed, worked primarily as mechanic while Mr. Swain was growing up. His mother has a master’s degree and worked as a social worker.

**Ms. Smith** is a white woman who teaches fifth grade in the dual language program at Mason. She is married and has no children. Ms. Smith did not originally plan to go into teaching, but an experience in college working with disadvantaged youth led her to the profession; she is not in her nineteenth year of teaching. Ms. Smith was raised in Chicago and now lives in a Chicago neighborhood not far from Lakeview. She spent part of her childhood living with her parents and part living with grandmothers. Her father, a high school graduate, managed a chain of automotive supply stores, while her mother earned two masters degrees and did not work outside the home.
Mr. Williams is a biracial man who teaches kindergarten in the general education program at Mason. Mr. Williams started college as a psychology major but changed to elementary education after volunteering in a school. He has now been teaching for eighteen years and has since earned a master’s degree in education as well. Mr. Williams is forty-six-years-old and in a long-term relationship. He lives in a Chicago community close to Lakeview, but grew up in Lakeview. Mr. Williams grew up in a household with both of his parents and one sibling. His father has a bachelor’s degree and worked as a technician in a hospital. His mother has some college education and worked as a nurse and as the owner of a small business.

Morgan Elementary Teachers

Mr. Foy is a white man who teaches fourth grade in the general education program at Morgan. He left a job in another industry to pursue teaching, and has now been teaching for seventeen years. Mr. Foy is fifty-seven-years-old, married, with grown children. He lives in Lakeview, but moved around a lot as a child living, among other places, on the west and east coasts. Mr. Foy grew up in a household with both of his parents and a sibling. While growing up his father worked as an attorney after earning his law degree, and his mother despite holding occasional part-time jobs was primarily a homemaker with a bachelor’s degree.

Mr. Hamilton is a white man who teaches third grade in the general education program at Morgan. He did not plan to go into teaching originally, but shortly before graduating college he decided not to pursue his original field of study. Mr. Hamilton has
now been teaching for seven years. He is twenty-nine-years old and married to a same-gender partner, both of whom are currently looking for a birth mother so they can add a child to their family. Mr. Hamilton currently lives in a neighborhood west of Chicago, but grew up in the western part of the United States with both of his parents and siblings. His father, who has a master’s degree, served in the Air Force and then transitioned to retail while he was growing up; his mother has an associate’s degree and worked as a nurse.

**Ms. Roberts** is a white woman who teaches first grade in the general education program at Morgan. Ms. Roberts was pursuing another field of study in college, when she decided to change her major to teaching. She has now been teaching for sixteen years. Ms. Roberts is forty-three-years-old, interracially married to a Hispanic man, with a biracial, school-aged child. Ms. Roberts lives in a neighborhood just west of Lakeview, but actually grew up in Lakeview with both of her parents and a sibling. Her mother and father have master’s degrees, and her father worked as a college professor while she was growing up while her mother worked as a teacher and administrator in District 21.

**Ms. Parker** is a white woman who teaches second grade in the general education program at Morgan. Ms. Parker decided to go into teaching several years after graduating from college; she has now been teaching for six years. She is thirty-eight-years-old, interracially married to a Black man, with a biracial school-aged child. Ms. Parker currently lives in Lakeview but grew up in the northeastern part of the United States with her parents and a sibling. Both her mother and father dropped out of high
school and earned their G.E.D.’s. Her father worked in a factory while she was growing up while her mother worked as a waitress. After Ms. Parker became an adult, however, her mother went to college, earned her bachelor’s degree, and now works as a nurse.

**Mr. Gold** is a Middle Eastern man who teaches third grade in the general education program at Morgan. He left a successful career in another industry to pursue teaching, and has now been teaching for thirteen years. Mr. Gold is sixty-one-years-old, divorced, with grown children. Mr. Gold has lived in Lakeview for many years, but grew up in the Middle East with both his parents and his siblings. His father, a small business owner, had less than a high school diploma while his mother completed the equivalent of high school and though she worked primarily as a homemaker did occasionally work part-time outside the home.

**Ms. Lopez** is a Hispanic woman who teaches third grade in the dual language program at Morgan. According to Ms. Lopez, she knew from an early age that she wanted to be a teacher, however, she pursued a career in another industry before going into teaching. She has now been teaching for sixteen years. She is forty-eight-years-old, married, with grown children. Though her husband is white, her children racially identify with her. Ms. Lopez lives in a community just west of Lakeview but was born in Cuba and moved to a North Chicago neighborhood when she was still very young. She grew up in an extended family with both her parents and a set of grandparents. Her father, a high school graduate, was employed as a factory worker while she grew up and her
mother, also a high school graduate, was a homemaker. After Ms. Lopez reached adulthood, her mother earned an associate’s degree and transitioned into clerical work.

**Mr. Gira** is a white man who teaches fifth grade in the general education program at Morgan. He left a career in another industry to pursue teaching, and has now been teaching for eight years. Mr. Gira is sixty-years-old, married, with grown children. He lives in Lakeview, but moved lived in a few other states growing up generally in the Midwest. Mr. Gira grew up in a household with both of his parents and a sibling. While growing up his father worked as an industrial engineer after earning a college degree, and his mother, a high school graduate, worked as a secretary.

**Ms. Mendez** is a white woman who teaches first grade in the dual language program at Morgan. Ms. Mendez was a lawyer before she decided to change careers and pursue teaching. She has now been teaching for five years. Ms. Mendez is thirty-nine-years-old, interracially married to a Hispanic man, with three biracial children, two who are school-aged child. Ms. Mendez lives in a neighborhood just west of Lakeview, but actually grew up in an affluent suburb north of Lakeview with both of her parents and two siblings. While she was growing up her father worked as a surgeon and her mother as a housewife. Her mother has a college degree.
APPENDIX B

INITIAL INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT
INTITIAL INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

PART I: Questions about Career Trajectory

Q-1  Tell me about when you knew you wanted to be a teacher.

Q-2  Thinking back to when you decided to become a teacher, what qualities did you feel that you possessed that would serve you well as a teacher?

Q-3  Did you major in education as an undergraduate?  If not, what field did you major in?

Q-4  Tell me about any post-baccalaureate experience you have in education.

Q-5  Thinking about your teacher training program, do you remember a favorite course or courses that you took?  In what ways would you say this course(s) helped prepare you for the classroom?

Q-6  Do you remember a course or courses that you liked least in your teacher training program?  Did you find this particular course(s) not applicable to your classroom experience?  How so?

Q-7  How long have you been a teacher at this school?

Q-8  What grade do you currently teach at this school?  Have you taught other grades at this school?

Q-9  Had you taught at a previous school or schools before coming to this school?  If so, did you teach the same grade?

Q-10  What attracted you to this school?

PART II: Questions about Teaching Pedagogy and Philosophy

Q-11  What would you say is the most important thing that you do as a teacher?

Q-12  What abilities or qualities would you say students need to possess in order to be successful in your class?

Q-13  In your experience teaching, what would you say have been the most common obstacles that students who have not done well in your class have faced?
Q-14 What is the greatest reward that you receive as a teacher? Why?

Q-15 What is your greatest challenge as a teacher? Why?

Q-16 What does an “equitable” classroom mean to you? Tell me about some of the things that you do to ensure there is equity in your classroom.

**PART III: Demographic Questions**

Q-17 What is your current age?

Q-18 Do you live in this community or do you have to commute? Where do you commute from?

Q-19 Did your family live in this area of the United States while you were growing up?

Q-20 What family members did you live with while growing up?

Q-21 What was your father’s primary occupation while you were growing up?

Q-22 What was the highest level of education that your father completed?

Q-23 What was your mother’s primary occupation while you were growing up?

Q-24 What was the highest level of education that your mother completed?

Q-25 Are you currently in a long-term relationship? Are you married?

Q-26 Do you have any sons or daughters? If so, are your children preschool age, elementary school age, middle school age, high school age, or college age?

Q-27 What racial or ethnic group do you identify yourself as belonging to? Is this the same racial group that you would identify for your children?
APPENDIX C

FINAL INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT
FINAL INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

Q-1  What effects of NCLB do you see in your classroom?

Q-2  What is your overall opinion of NCLB? Benefits? Disadvantages?

Q-3  What is your opinion of differentiated learning?

Q-4  How do you do differentiated instruction in your classroom?

Q-5  What strategies do you use to determine groups and partners?

Q-6  What do you think are the benefits of differentiation?

Q-7  What are the biggest challenges you have found with implementing differentiation?

Q-8  What do you think about the district’s inclusion policy?

Q-9  What would you say are the benefits and disadvantages of inclusion for IEP students?

Q-10 What would you say are the benefits and disadvantages of inclusion for non-IEP students in an inclusion classroom?

Q-11 Historically, gender inequality has been a significant problem in schooling. Do you think gender inequality in schooling is still a major problem? Why not or how so?

Q-12 Recently, some parents and educators have advocated for a return to single-sex public education, and NLCB made available 3 million dollars in grant money to experiment with such options. As a teacher, do you think this is a good way to address issues associated with gender in schooling? Why or why not?

Q-13 Do you consider yourself a feminist teacher? Why or why not?

Q-14 Historically, racial inequality has been a significant problem in schooling. Do you think racial inequality in schooling is still a major problem? Why not or how so?

Q-15 How would you define an anti-racist teacher? Do you consider yourself an anti-racist teacher?
Q-16 What do you think is the most pressing problem in education today?

Q-17 Is this a problem at this school?

Q-18 What do you think should be done to address it?
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VITA

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Cooper Stoll’s research appears in *Review of Religious Research* and *Research in Social Movements, Conflict, and Change*. She has presented her work at several professional conferences over the years and has received a number of awards including the Peter Whalley Award for outstanding graduate scholarship and the Ross Scherer Award for research in the sociology of religion. Her dissertation work was supported by a Schmitt Dissertation Fellowship. In addition to her experience conducting both qualitative and quantitative research projects, she has taught undergraduate and graduate sociology courses for several colleges and universities including Loyola University Chicago. Cooper Stoll currently lives in Illinois with her husband and two daughters.