

Where Their Children Belong:
Parents' Perceptions of the Boundaries Separating "Gifted" and "Non-Gifted"
Educational Programs

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ABSTRACT

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In recent years, there has been a growing body of research demonstrating that the way parents make choices about schools is anything but colorblind. In fact, some research suggests that parents, particularly middle- or upper-middle-class white parents, make choices about where to live and send their children to school based on perceptions of public school quality and the race and class composition of the school district and/or schools (see Johnson and Shapiro, 2005; Cucchiara, 2008; Lewis, 2003; Holme, 2002; Posey, 2012; Roda & Wells, 2013).

This qualitative case study extends this body of literature by not only examining parents' choices between highly segregated schools and school districts but also within an urban elementary school that offers two self-contained academic programs—a majority white Gifted and Talented ("G&T") program and a majority black and Latino General Education ("Gen Ed") program. It asks how the meanings that parents make about their available school choice options and their sense of "place" within the school system and larger society help to perpetuate and legitimize the separate, stratified system and how this "sense making" is intertwined with the inertia working against changing the system.

This study begins to address these questions by examining the ways that "advantaged" parents—namely white, higher income and highly educated parents (see Bilfulco, Ladd and Ross, 2009)—make sense of their child's place[ment] within a demographically changing New York City elementary school with a G&T and Gen Ed program. Interviews were conducted with 41 advantaged parents with similar degrees of economic and social advantage whose children were enrolled, based on one test score, in the G&T program, Gen Ed program or both to understand the ways in which these social actors simultaneously embody, resist, and reproduce the social structures in which they live their lives and educate their children.

Findings indicate that parent's struggle for high-status positions in the status hierarchy across

programs and classrooms in their school. Meanwhile, they embody contradictory dispositions related to their sense of the “place” where they and their children belong within a segregated two-track school, their desire for their children to be exposed to racial/ethnic and socio-economic “diversity” – at least in the abstract and if their children are not in the minority, and their drive to provide their children with the “best” education, even when they are uncertain about what that means within this context.

In contradictory ways, parents say they would prefer to enroll their children in diverse schools that have strong educational programs. But, for most of these advantaged parents, having their children enrolled in a program with other students “like them” in terms of their social status and privilege and thus being associated with other parents “like them” was the most important factor, superseding all other desires, including “diversity.” They continue to make choices that privilege their children and perpetuate the status quo. Therefore, studying the contradictions that result from their school choices in a highly segregated system can tell us important information about why social conditions change or get reproduced and how policies could be altered to create fewer distinctions between schools and programs.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction To Where Their Children Belong

...[In our zoned school] it seemed like there was a big difference between the Gen Ed and the G&T [Gifted and Talented]...I remember that the person that toured us they would hold up a sign before we entered the class about whether it was Gen Ed or G&T. Oh, I know what it was, it was just the racial make-up of the G&T was not nearly as diverse as the Gen Ed, and I remember thinking oh, she doesn't even have to hold up the sign, you know? (Upper-middle class, White mother; November, 2006).

Walking down the hallways of a New York City neighborhood public school with a self-contained Gifted and Talented (G&T) program, provides visitors with a visual image of how racially separate the G&T versus General Education (Gen Ed) programs are in this so-called “colorblind” and post-racial era¹. Historically, in large urban school districts like the New York City Public Schools, G&T programs, which enroll students based on some constructed definition of “giftedness,” usually measured by a single score on a standardized test,² start as early as kindergarten and tend to result in racial and socio-economic (SES) segregation between academic tracks (see Borland, 2003, 2009; Sapon-Shevin, 1994, 2003). Indeed, this method of within-school segregation by ability grouping has been called the “silent segregation in our nation’s schools” (Losen, 1999).

In recent years, despite efforts by the New York City Department of Education (DOE) to diversify the G&T program³, the racial disparities between the two separate programs have gotten worse. This is evidenced by the fact that in the New York City School System, which is only 15 percent White and 15 percent Asian overall, G&T enrollments for the 2010-11 school year were 73 percent White and Asian students up from 68 percent the year before (See Table 1 in Chapter 4). Meanwhile, although

¹ I use the terms “G&T” and “Gen Ed” because those are the labels that parents use in the school I am studying.

² The student scores from the OLSAT (Otis-Lennon School Ability Test) and the Bracken School Readiness Assessment (BSRA) are weighted and averaged to produce one score. If the student scores above the 90th percentile, they are guaranteed a spot in one of the G&T programs in their district.

³ The old system (before 2008) relied on multiple criteria for G&T admissions, like teacher recommendations, interviews and observations, which allowed community school districts to admit a more diverse population into the G&T program. The new centralized policy in 2008 was changed to use a single test score as the sole criterion, which resulted in more White students and half as many Black and Latino students admitted to G&T programs than before (Gootman and Gebeloff, 2008).

Black and Latino students make up about 70 percent of the total student population, they constitute only 11 and 12 percent respectively of the students in G&T programs across the City (Otterman, 2011).

In NYC, just like in many school districts across the country, racial and socio-economic (SES) segregation along “gifted” and “non-gifted” lines is a problem because the “gifted” and “Gen Ed” students are placed in self-contained classrooms in the same schools, literally across the hallway from each other. This creates a visual image, as the quote above suggests, that is evident by simply looking at the color of the children’s skin in the classrooms. In our post-civil rights era, this racial segregation within a school building has been something that White parents have said they are uncomfortable with, but they still choose the G&T program anyway because it is considered to be the “best” program for their children in a constrained school choice environment (Roda & Wells, 2013). Therefore, in the context of a segregated school that has recently been changing demographically as the General Education program had started enrolling more White students, how parents display contradictory dimensions of their choice making” (Ball et al., 1996, p. 98) needed to be explored in more depth.

Thus, my goal was to examine how “advantaged” parents’---namely the White, higher income and highly educated parents---made sense of and interacted with the “structure of schooling” in their local context, especially when making elementary school choices based on where they see their children fitting into a school sharply divided by this structure. For decades, sociologists of education have shown that the “structure of schooling” reproduces social inequalities based on a student’s background characteristics (see Arum & Beattie, 2000). In my study, I use the term “structure of schooling” to refer to a constellation of factors, from the unequal pre-school opportunities, the centralized admissions criteria for gifted programs, especially the standardized G&T exams; the extra prepping and tutoring for the G&T tests that higher income parents can afford and others cannot; the separate G&T classrooms located in particular school buildings; and the distribution – or perceived distribution – of resources and opportunities across those classrooms, etc. My aim is to broaden our understanding of the “structure of schooling” by examining how parents interact with school policies and practices in a manner that consistently leads to social reproduction, and racial and SES segregation within and between schools.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

While patterns of race and class school segregation have been widely documented across neighborhoods, school districts, schools and tracked classrooms, particularly in secondary schools (Clotfelter, 2006; Orfield et al., 1996; Wells & Crain, 1997; Oakes, 1985/2005), there have been few studies that explicitly focused on the tensions that some parents face when they are trying to make sense of the boundaries between gifted versus general education programs within the context of a racially and socio-economically diverse school with segregated tracks. For instance, my study extends the sociology of education literature on educational stratification within schools (see Lareau, 2003), and, more specifically, detracking studies that examine parents' social constructions of ability, intelligence and giftedness in racially diverse schools, which were found to be linked to race and class ideologies and became barriers for detracking initiatives in some schools (see Oakes et al., 1997; Rubin, 2008).

My study also fits within a growing body of literature that examines how White, higher income parents make choices about where to live and send their children to school and the contradictions within those decisions related to perceptions of public school quality and the race and class composition of the school district and/or schools (see Posey, 2012; Roda & Wells, 2013; Cucchiara, 2008; Johnson & Shapiro, 2005; Holme, 2002; Lewis, 2003; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012). This qualitative case study extends this body of literature by not only examining parents' choices between highly segregated schools and school districts but also within an urban elementary school that offers two self-contained academic programs—a majority White G&T program and a majority Black and Latino Gen Ed program. My research broadens the literature by examining a school site that is starting to enroll advantaged families into two separate and hierarchical academic programs.

Therefore, in a school that is enrolling White students into two separate and hierarchical G&T and Gen Ed programs, I sought to understand how parents make meaning of their available school choice options and their sense of “place” within the school system and larger society, how those understandings help to perpetuate and legitimize the separate, stratified system and how this “sense making” is intertwined with the inertia working against changing the system.

This study begins to address these issues by examining the ways that advantaged parents² make sense of their child's place[ment] within a demographically changing urban elementary school that is well known for being segregated by race and SES status across classrooms. Interviews were conducted with 41 advantaged parents with similar degrees of economic and social advantage whose children were enrolled, based on one test score, in the G&T program, Gen Ed program or both to understand the ways in which these social actors simultaneously embody, resist, and reproduce the social structures in which they live their lives and educate their children.

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study in one elementary school is to examine how advantaged parents with similar degrees of privilege in the school system and larger society 1. use their dispositions (e.g. *habitus*), cultural capital, and knowledge of the school system to assist them in their school choice decisions, 2. make sense of where their children belong versus where they are placed within a school that divides students into racially distinct G&T and Gen Ed categories, and 3. continuously engage in "boundary work" to create, recreate, and reproduce boundaries between the G&T and Gen Ed programs within a school. Because so much of the literature emphasizes the institutional effects of ability group categories (see Pallas et al., 1994), one of the goals of this study is to discern whether the process by which parents construct a sense of where their children belong may be an act of resisting as well as embracing and internalizing the official categories.

My research findings indicate that advantaged parents struggle for high-status positions in the status hierarchy across programs and classrooms in their school. Meanwhile, they embody contradictory dispositions related to three key factors:

1. their sense of the "place" where they and their children belong within a segregated two track school, which is constructed by either resisting or internalizing the official labels that their children, based on one test score, are given within the school;
2. their desire for their children to be exposed to racial/ethnic and socio-economic "diversity" – at least in the abstract and if their children are not in the minority; and
3. their drive to provide their children with the "best" education, even when they are uncertain about what that means within this context.

² I use the term "advantaged" parents here to reference the parents in my sample who all tested their children for kindergarten G&T and had the knowledge and resources to navigate the school choice system. In general, the advantaged parents in the school choice system tend to be the White, higher income and highly educated parents (see also Bifulco, Ladd and Ross, 2009).

In contradictory ways, parents say they would prefer to enroll their children in diverse schools that have strong educational programs. But, for most of these advantaged parents, having their children enrolled in a program with other students “like them” in terms of their social status and privilege and thus being associated with other parents “like them” was the most important factor, superseding all other desires, including “diversity.”

Located within the “City Limits School District,” the urban elementary school that was selected for this study, which I call “The Community School,”³ is the site where these conflicting desires converge and advantaged parents grapple with the contradictions between what they want and what they think they need, given the existing choices or the structure of schooling and where their children have been placed within it. Ultimately, they continue to make choices that privilege their children and perpetuate the status quo. Therefore, studying the contradictions that result from their school choices in a highly segregated system can tell us important information about why social conditions change or get reproduced and how policies could be altered to create fewer distinctions between schools and programs.

What I also found was that the parents I studied differed in important ways regarding how they constructed their sense of “place” within the structures depending on whether or how many of their children are in the high-status G&T program. In fact, I found that parents want to be with other similarly advantaged parents like them in the G&T program, not because they necessarily “buy into” the labels and categories in the school or are certain that the G&T program is the “best” educationally, but rather because it matches their relatively high-status position in the social hierarchy, despite the seemingly paradoxical value they also place on “diversity.”

As a former public school parent in the New York City community school district I studied, my unique vantage point into this segregated system provided me with “insider knowledge” of the school choice options that the advantaged parents in my sample were choosing among. Studying parental school choice within this large “community” school district several years after my own child had left the system allowed me the unique vantage point of being unknown to my respondents and yet aware of their larger

³ The school and school district for this study were given pseudonyms in order to protect confidentiality.

context.

Theoretical Contribution

In terms of this study's theoretical contribution, I have woven together three bodies of literature that are often examined in isolation —namely the school choice, tracking and gifted education research. Therefore, this dissertation will provide a unique contribution to the sociology of education literature since it crosses the boundaries of these three bodies of research and situates itself in a local school district context where parents are confronted with constrained and stratified school choices and, in this case, are required to make a decision between two hierarchical programs within one elementary school.

While there has been more overlap between the G&T literature and the research on tracking/detracking, I am adding to this mix my familiarity with the research and writing on how parents make choices about schools. Within this school choice literature is a growing body of work that helps us understand the relationship between school choices and students' and parents' "*habitus*" as it relates to their perceptions of school quality based on the race and class compositions of the schools. Because "*habitus*" is a sociological term that enables us to better understand how people internalize and embody the social structures that shape a person's way of 'knowing' who they are and their sense of place within the stratified social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986), I am connecting this concept to an examination of parents' sense making in relation to where they said their children belonged given their privileged background and their child's placement within the school's race and class based hierarchy.

Because the parents I studied had similar degrees of advantage, but their children received different placements in the gifted-nongifted hierarchy within this school, I learned what parents with resources and valued cultural capital do when their children are *not* placed in what they consider to be the appropriate program for someone like them. The interview data suggest that for advantaged parents with at least one child in the Gen Ed program, they develop a "*habitus*" or a process of internalizing external social structures (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986) that is conflicted between where they say their children "belong" and where their children are actually placed within the system. In fact, this mismatch between where advantaged parents say their children belonged based on their position in the status hierarchy and where

they are placed in a hierarchical two-track school leads to what Bourdieu called a “fractured” or “cleft” habitus (2000). On the other hand, for advantaged parents whose children are in the G&T program, even though contradictory dispositions emerge because of their desire for diversity and the level of segregation between programs, they still imply that they are ‘in their right place,’ thus, matching their relatively high status position in the status hierarchy.

Similar to Lamont’s (1992; Lamont & Molnar, 2002) theories related to boundaries, I found that parents’ distinguished where they belonged in this segregated and hierarchical school setting by drawing social and symbolic boundaries around what constitutes “us”---advantaged parents, versus “them”---lower income parents of color who enroll their children in the Gen Ed program. According to Lamont and Molnar (2002), symbolic boundaries are the “conceptual distinctions” that are used to categorize people into groups based on group similarities (p. 169). On the other hand, social boundaries are patterns of “social exclusion and race and class segregation” that result from symbolic classifications and unequal access to resources and opportunities (p. 169). In this context, the social boundaries include the physical, academic and social separation of students in separate classrooms within their school, which correlates to the race, class, and academic backgrounds of the students.

These boundaries included not only the physical separation of students into different classrooms and the resulting academic and social consequences of this separation (e.g. social boundaries), but also the symbolic distinctions of being in the G&T program with the higher status and reputation that it bestows on parents and their children (e.g. symbolic boundaries). As parents explained, the G&T program was considered the place where the White, higher income and highly educated parents who were more involved in the school enroll their children, while the Gen Ed program was where the lower income, Black and Latino students and parents belong. The G&T program, then, became a symbol of where the more advantaged families in this segregated system should be, even as all the parents interviewed touted the importance of diversity.

Thus, I argue, that this study fills an important gap in the literature that examines how advantaged parents with children enrolled in two different hierarchical programs perceive the stark racial and SES

segregation between gifted and Gen Ed programs within one school building and their school choice process that requires them to decide where their children “fit in.” And yet it is within such contexts that we can most clearly see or understand the multiple ways that social reproduction is perpetuated year after year, how boundary maintenance is controlled, and how parents’ *habitus* shape their school choice preferences and sense making of their child’s placement in the race and class based hierarchy. Therefore, studying how parents make sense of the boundaries between G&T and Gen Ed programs is key to illuminating the effects of school structures on parent’s school choice practices.

Research Questions

By studying the interrelationships between *habitus* and boundaries, I examined the process through which parents distinguish where their children belong. I argue, therefore, that this process is shaped by their *habitus* and symbolized by a commonsense notion of inclusion and exclusion that relates to the process by which they create, recreate, and reproduce boundaries between the G&T and Gen Ed programs or their “boundary work.” For parents, knowing their “place” in the system by acting according to what seems natural to them when raising their child and determining educational placements serves to rank them in the stratification system because they are rewarded or not in this struggle for resources and “status.” This stratified system ultimately gives advantages and entitlements to the parents who have their children in the G&T program and creates tension for the advantaged parents whose children do not receive a G&T seat. Therefore, the focus of this study is the complex interplay between advantaged parent’s *habitus* as it relates to their understanding or sense of where their children “belonged” across the two distinct programs versus where they are placed in a sharply divided and highly stratified education system.

Using Bourdieu and Lamont’s theories as a lens through which to examine this social phenomenon, I conducted a study to answer the following research questions:

1. How do “advantaged” parents—namely White, higher income and highly educated parents, who are either in the process of choosing schools for their children or have elementary school children already enrolled in a G&T, Gen Ed, or both⁴ programs, distinguish where their children belong in a demographically changing urban public school that divides students into two separate, hierarchical academic programs?
 - 1a. How are their understandings about where their children belong aligned with where their children are placed within the school’s racial and class-based hierarchy?
 - 1b. How do those understandings relate to parents’ *habitus* and their perceptions of the families who enroll their children in the different programs, as well as their understanding of their own social status and the construction of their children’s intelligence and ability?
2. What “boundaries” most strongly influence how advantaged parents in the G&T and/or Gen Ed program define themselves, their children, and the “other” group (those in the other classrooms)?

Since my goal was to understand the possible contradictions in advantaged parents’ sense making when choosing schools and school programs for their children within a stratified system, I interviewed parents who had been actively involved in the school choice process, had their children tested for G&T in preschool, and were mostly middle to upper-middle class, college-educated White mothers. Out of the 41 total parents in my sample who had their children enrolled in The Community School, 16 parents had their child[ren] enrolled in the G&T program only, while another 16 parents had child[ren] enrolled in the Gen Ed program only. Meanwhile, 9 out of the 41 parents studied, had at least one child in each of these two programs. In this way, I analyzed the multiple ways that The Community School parents embody, resist, and reproduce the social structures in which they live their lives and educate their children. In order to triangulate the parent interview data and contextualize my findings, I also interviewed a school choice consultant and observed school-level functions to see whether the school played a part in the maintenance of boundaries among parents.

Why Study Parental School Choice in NYC?

Within this G&T policy context, many parents say they would prefer to enroll their children in diverse schools that have strong educational programs. But because of the lack of such options available,

⁴ Some parents that I interviewed had older children in the G&T program and younger children in the Gen Ed program (or vice versa) within the same school.

they continue to make choices that privilege their children and perpetuate the status quo (see Roda & Wells, 2013). Thus, this case study in one elementary school goes beyond individual parent's choices by highlighting how the G&T policy itself, not only shapes the distribution of opportunities, but also creates the status distinctions between parents, students and programs in this local school district. I highlight the parents' strong drive to provide their children with the "best" education, even when they define that based more on symbolic boundaries of distinction than on actual information about G&T classes.

This research is especially important and timely now since there has been a recent influx of White, higher income New York City parents utilizing the public school system (see Stillman, 2012; Roberts, 2011; Rérat et al., 2010), therefore, studying the contradictions that result from their school choices in a highly segregated system can tell us important information about why social conditions change or get reproduced and how policies could be altered to create fewer distinctions between schools and programs (Roda & Wells, 2013; Michelson et al., 2008).

This study also contributes to social theory by building new knowledge on the interrelated but complex relationship between parent's habitus and boundary maintenance strategies. By studying how advantaged parents make sense of their children's placements in a segregated school context, I captured how their choices are simultaneously shaped by their *habitus* and the social and symbolic boundaries that they use to define "us" (advantaged parents) and "them" (lower income families of color who choose the Gen Ed program)—even when their own children are placed in the "other" Gen Ed category.

In order to do this, I illustrate the ways in which the three key factors of *place*, *desire for diversity*, and *wanting the "best" educational program* described above create contradictions and tension within the advantaged parents I interviewed. I relate these internal struggles within these parents to Bourdieu's concept of "fractured habitus" because it captures the sense of division that they embody between who they are, where they say they belong and where their children are placed within the social hierarchy, even if they also appreciate the diversity in the school overall, for G&T parents, or in their own children's classrooms, for parents with children in the Gen Ed program.

Through this qualitative case study, I heard the struggles and contradictions that emerge when advantaged parents who say they value diversity for their children's education interact with a policy context that gives them the choice between mostly segregated schools and programs. In fact, the advantaged, White and upper-middle-class parents I studied chose (or strove to get their children into) majority White G&T classrooms because of *who* is enrolled there, not because they necessarily believed their children were "gifted." I saw how the "social construction" of children, their ability, and their parents' understanding of what is the "best" education for them, is related more to how parents make sense of where they fit in this segregated two-track system than it is any objective assessment of the curriculum and teaching available in each of the two programs. I also heard how those understandings of where they say they belong can shift and become redefined as a growing number of White, advantaged parents are choosing the Gen Ed program.

Overview of Dissertation Chapters

In Chapter Two, I develop a theoretical framework for my research that connects Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 2000) social reproduction theories to Lamont's (1992; Lamont & Molnar, 2002) theories on boundary work. In this way, I was able to thoroughly capture how advantaged parent's *habitus* interacts with both the social and symbolic boundaries that separate the gifted and Gen Ed program and guides parents into the places where they said they belonged. This interaction not only assists parents in distinguishing where their children belonged in this stratified school context but later helps them make sense of where their children are placed in the gifted-Gen Ed hierarchy. This is where I applied Bourdieu's concept of a fractured habitus, which emerges within these advantaged parents when there is a mismatch between where they say their children belong in the school and their children's placement within the social hierarchy.

Chapter Three explores the relevant research literature that most closely relates to my theoretical framework on habitus and boundaries. Connecting this often less theoretical body of empirical research on school choice, tracking and gifted programs to my theoretical framework allows me to a theoretical as

well as an empirical contribution to the field of education, and to the sociology of education more specifically. In particular, I have woven together three bodies of literature that are often examined in isolation — namely research on how parents choose schools and the literature on student tracking and G&T programs. The theme running through both literatures reveals how students are sorted into different schools or tracks within schools based on parents or, in the case of tracking/G&T, teacher’s perceptions of student’s academic ability (based on standardized test scores, and teacher or parent recommendations to a certain track), race, and SES backgrounds compared to other students. This theme relates to my framework on how parents’ social construction of “good” schools and programs within schools is affected by their habitus, and they use social and symbolic boundaries to define “us” and “them” categories, which helps guide them into the places where they say they belong.

In Chapter Four, I describe the research methods I utilized when conducting this qualitative case study, which was designed to allow me to study educational processes and the boundaries that divide and stratify students. This study, situated within a social and political NYC community school district context of residential and school segregation, SES bifurcation, and a test-driven G&T admission system, is a key site to study these issues of social reproduction and boundary maintenance with advantaged parents whose children get placed into two different hierarchical academic tracks. This study’s methodology is framed by an inquiry-based research paradigm with a constructivist and pragmatist worldview. In other words, I sought to understand how parents make sense of their lives and experiences within the constraints of the school choice field.

In Chapters Five through Seven, I describe the three main findings that emerged from the parent interviews and school-level observations that speak most directly to my theoretical framework. Starting with Chapter Five, I illustrate the multiple ways that parents use social and symbolic boundaries to distinguish the G&T and Gen Ed categories and labels in their school. I show how parents go through all necessary steps to get their children placed in the G&T program, which better matches their advantaged position as signified by plenty of people “like them,” despite the seemingly paradoxical value they also place on “diversity.” The distinctions that parents make between “us” (advantaged parents) and “them”

(lower-income parents of color in the Gen Ed program) reinforced the feeling that advantaged parents belonged on the G&T side of the boundary line and contributed to the fracturedness that developed inside them if they were not where they said they believed they belonged (e.g. their “place”).

In Chapter Six, I show how even advantaged parents – particularly those with at least one child in the Gen Ed program who have resources to help get their children into G&T programs -- struggle with the meaning of the measures used to define “giftedness” in this context, namely a single score on a standardized test. The parents with children in both programs, in particular, best articulated their belief that the “gifted” label is socially constructed, meaning that “giftedness” in this context is related more to student’s advantaged backgrounds and G&T test preparation than their “true” intelligence. In fact, they often noted that they do not believe one of their children is more “gifted” than the other. Again, we see how parents want to be with other people like them, not because they “buy into” the labels and categories in the school or are certain that the G&T program is the “best” educationally, but rather because it matches their relatively high-status position in the social hierarchy.

In Chapter Seven, the third and last findings chapter, I demonstrate how the findings discussed in the prior two chapters can shift and become redefined as a growing number of White, advantaged parents were choosing the Gen Ed program. Thus, I learned that the advantaged parents made sense of and adapted to the changing social and symbolic boundaries within the school by choosing the Gen Ed program when that was their only option in The Community School and then redefined what the symbolic boundary of the two programs meant. In this moment of recreating the boundaries, parents on both sides of the boundary line considered the “diversity” in the Gen Ed classrooms as “positive” and a sign that the school could (and should) phase out the G&T program. But, regardless of what they said about the positive benefits of diversity in the younger grades, the boundary between G&T and Gen Ed in the upper grades gets reproduced because the advantaged Gen Ed parents retest their children for G&T, and most of these White students then move over to the G&T program. In this way, these same advantaged parents who would support the G&T program being phased out, also argue that the G&T program is still “needed” at their school to attract the right kind of parents to the school and create distance from the

“other.” In the current, post-civil rights era, where White racial attitudes seemingly have improved, parents simultaneous desires to phase out the G&T program and hold onto it highlight how their habitus becomes fractured in this segregated two-track school.

And finally, in Chapter Eight, I will describe how the policy context that parents are operating within creates the status distinctions between schools and programs in this district, and further, how policies could be implemented to combat the segregation that this system maintains. I also discuss the theoretical and empirical contributions of this research, critiques of the G&T policy, and propose ideas for future research on this important topic.

CHAPTER TWO

The Interrelationships Between *Habitus* and Boundaries

In order to answer my research questions and make sense of parent's understandings of their child's place in this stratified educational system, I used sociological theory to frame my study and interpret the empirical findings through a theoretical lens. In particular, Bourdieu's social reproduction theories (1977, 1984, 2000) and Lamont's theories on boundaries (1992; Lamont & Molnar, 2002) helped me explore how advantaged parent's *habitus* (internalized knowledge of social hierarchies and their place within them) shape or mold their understanding (or sense making) of their child's placement in a segregated G&T and/or Gen Ed program. Furthermore, I examined how *habitus* interacts with and supports the racial and social-class segregation that is prevalent across the G&T and Gen Ed categories and labels. The boundaries separating G&T and Gen Ed programs within demographically diverse schools with racially divided classrooms are much more than walls and doors. They are symbols of different lives, lifestyles, opportunities and privilege. In this way, these structural boundaries not only maintain the separation of students across racial and social-class boundaries, they concretize it and legitimize it in ways that help parents and students find their way into the places within the educational system where they "belong."

In order to consider this legitimization as an iterative process that plays out as parents interact with the school structures, my study, questions how advantaged parents in the system—namely the White, higher income and highly educated parents-- despite their similar degrees of economic and social advantage, make sense of their children's placements in two very different and unequal programs within one diverse school setting-- the "Gifted and Talented" (G&T) program versus the regular, "non-gifted" or General Education program. In order to contextualize parent's experiences in the school, I also examine how the school itself produces boundaries among parents.

In this way, I was able to thoroughly capture how parent's *habitus* interacts with both the social and symbolic boundaries that separate the gifted and Gen Ed program. This interaction, not only assists

parents in distinguishing where their children belong in this stratified context, but helps them make sense of where their children are placed in the gifted-Gen Ed hierarchy. Through this research, I will broaden the knowledge base related to issues of boundary work in education. Such an analysis is helpful in understanding how individuals determine their sense of place and exclude the “other,” but is less clear about how certain individuals and groups act based on group membership.

This is where Bourdieu’s concept of practical action—the *habitus*-- is helpful in explaining how individuals internalize the social structures that sort people based on their possession and activation of different levels of capital, and further, how they act in certain situations based on that internalization (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In other words, Bourdieu (1977) would postulate that through this process of choice making between two hierarchical academic programs, parents come to understand each program and their children’s “fit” with one or the other through the lens of their *habitus*. By integrating the conceptual ideas of boundary work with *habitus*, I not only learned what decisions parents make and why, but also how their decisions are grounded in a larger stratified social context that encourages and rewards more affluent parents in particular, in order to create distance and maintain boundaries between themselves and others and, at the same time, reinforce status hierarchies and distinctions between groups. Furthermore, as their *habitus* interacts with the many boundaries that divide students and opportunities in this school – e.g. the G&T tests, the social separation of students into different classrooms and curricula, and the material and socially constructed distinctions across the two types of classrooms, etc. -- parents develop contradictory dispositions between their sense of “place,” their desire to expose their children to “diversity,” and their drive to give their children the “best” education.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will elaborate on Bourdieu’s theories of social reproduction, in particular his theory of practical action, by briefly outlining his key concepts of capital, *habitus*, and field. In addition, I will explain the interrelationships between *habitus* and educational boundaries, which are important interlocking theoretical concepts that will enable me to connect Bourdieu’s theories to other theoretical constructs in new ways. I will do this by centering my analysis on

these advantaged White parent's "habitus" or the ways in which they internalize and act upon the social structures that sort people based on their possession and activation of different levels of capital. More specifically, I learned what happens when parents do not get their children in the placement that matches their advantaged position in the larger system and society, even when they activate their cultural capital, thus leading them to be conflicted or fractured in terms of their internalization of the social structures. Lareau (2003) notes, "to understand the character of these moments [of cultural and social reproduction] researchers need to look at the contexts in which capital is situated, the efforts by individuals to activate their capital, the skill with which they do so, and the institutional response to the activation of resources" (p. 277).

Bourdieu's Theory of Practical Action

In general, Bourdieu's work (1977, 1984, 1986) explains how members of the upper classes in France sustain their power and privilege by passing along their status to their children in a stratified, unequal social system, while legitimizing their privilege and their children's accomplishments in the educational system. Indeed, Bourdieu believed that the educational system, through the "transmission of cultural capital, pedagogy, and academic selection processes," was the main institution to reproduce social class stratification and inequality in society (Swartz, 1998, p. 191).

Bourdieu applied the term "capital" to his analysis of social class stratification in multiple, but overlapping ways (Swartz, 1998). Thus, according to Bourdieu (1984), there are four different types of capital that individuals possess at different levels and capacities—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital—which through habitus are activated and exchanged to maintain or enhance their status positions and advantages. Like Lareau's study (2003) of families from different social class groups, I also examined the relationship between habitus and capital by looking at the "invisible but powerful ways" parents' *habitus* and activation of capital influence their children's life experiences, including attitudes about education. Related to this study, I will focus the discussion below on cultural capital since in the field of education and the discussion of its role in social reproduction, cultural capital is central.

Different forms of cultural capital also have the ability to represent status distinctions, and, Bourdieu maintains, is the biggest distinction between social class groups (Swartz, 1998).

Habitus and Capital Exchange

Bourdieu (1984) believed that individuals possess differently valued forms of cultural capital that correlate with social class in an economically stratified society. He defined the distinctions between these different forms of cultural capital as cultural signals used for social and cultural exclusion. In other words, individuals are trained from birth to embody cultural dispositions that set them apart, particularly in the field of education where academic success and failure is established to the extent which students cultural capital is rewarded by the schools (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This embodied cultural capital that is accumulated over time is then transformed into the internalized dispositions and tastes of the individual (the habitus), which unconsciously affects how individuals act in certain situations and tends to reproduce the social structure.

Cultural capital was more visible and could be applied more neatly in France because French culture is steeped in a hierarchy of cultural distinctions from birth based on an individual's social class position (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). That said, in the U.S., even though there are not as rigid social class boundaries, there still are cultural distinctions that help to form an individual's habitus. For instance, one of the ways that cultural capital is related to the U.S.'s stratified system is through the use of culturally biased standardized test scores for G&T admission (Ford, 2004). In this way, through the use of standardized tests, and knowing which students get rewarded for their "high class" culture, I found that parents' *habitus* or sense making about their place[ment] within The Community School leads them to either internalize (to varying degrees) or resist the categories or labels that their children are given based on their score on a standardized test (Bourdieu, 1984).

More specifically, as I noted above, *habitus* is conceptualized as the internalized embodiment of external social structures that shape a person's way of 'knowing' based on her early class-specific socialization in the family, which is not static and constantly being molded to her current social standing,

opportunities and limitations within the educational field (Bourdieu, 1984 and 1986). Lareau (2003) explains that, “differences in *habitus* give individuals varying cultural skills, social connections, educational practices, and other cultural resources, which then can be translated into different forms of value (i.e. capital) as individuals move out into the world” (p. 276). Additionally, Burawoy and Von Holdt (2013) clarify, “Habitus accounts for the practical sense, learned capacity to innovate, to play the game, to have a feel for the game – a creativity defined by accumulated dispositions, internalized from previous social structure, at the same time a creativity channeled by the actually existing social structure” (p. 29).

Habitus, then, only becomes active in contested spaces or fields thought of as hierarchical and competitive social spaces that are structured by specific types of economic, cultural and social capital among social actors. In this study, the school choice educational field is where the struggle for resources (e.g. better schools or school programs) takes place. Therefore, my study explores parent’s struggle for high-status positions in the status hierarchy across programs and classrooms in their school. Meanwhile, it reveals the ways that some advantaged parents and children consistently “win” the game if they are deemed to be more deserving of a seat in the G&T program because of their privilege and accumulation of high-status cultural capital. And, for other advantaged parents that have their children initially enrolled in the Gen Ed program, they essentially “lose” out by not getting their children into the G&T program, even though they follow the rules of the “game.” Thus, for this set of parents whose children start out in the Gen Ed program, they know how to activate their cultural capital by prepping-- either at home with workbooks or by hiring a private tutor, and retesting for the G&T until they eventually get in.

Thus, I learned what parents with resources and valued cultural capital do when their children are *not* placed in what they consider to be the appropriate program for someone like them. The interview data suggest that parents with at least one child in the Gen Ed program develop a “habitus” that does not quite fit with where they say their children “belong” and where their children are actually placed within the system. In fact, this mismatch between where advantaged parents say their children belong based on their position in the status hierarchy and where they are placed in a hierarchical two-track school leads to what

Bourdieu described as a fractured or cleft *habitus* (2000). On the other hand, for advantaged parents whose children are in the G&T program, even though they may seem contradictory about their desire for diversity and bemoan the level of segregation between programs, they still say they are ‘in their right place’ within the school, thus, matching their relatively high status position in the larger system.

Fractured Habitus

Bourdieu’s theory of fractured *habitus* relates to and helps to explain these parent’s struggles and seemingly contradictory or divided beliefs and actions when choosing between segregated schools/programs for their children’s education. Given the segregated school choice field that parents are operating within and the different placements that their children are given within the race and class based hierarchy, when analyzing the interview data, I found Bourdieu’s (2000) concept of a “fractured” *habitus* most helpful because it demonstrates how social actors can simultaneously embody, resist, and reproduce the social structures in which they live their lives and educate their children. In the current post-civil rights era, this concept captures the sense of division that advantaged parent’s embody between who they are, where they say they belong and where their children are placed within the social hierarchy, even if they also appreciate the diversity in the school overall, for G&T parents, or in their own children’s classrooms, for parents with children in the Gen Ed program.

For instance, in Bourdieu’s later work he discusses his own ‘split habitus’ or ‘cleft habitus,’ which evolved from his working class upbringing---which he calls the “primary habitus”--- into an upper class intellectual elite---what he terms “specific habitus.” In fact, Bourdieu (2000) stressed that *habitus* continuously changed over the course of a person’s lifetime, beginning with the “primary habitus” shaped by early family experiences and evolving into “specific habitus” (plural) acquired later through education, training and an individual’s relative position in the particular field setting. Burawoy and Von Holdt (2013) explains, “We can think of habitus as layered, with the deepest and more profound layers acquired early on in life.” Thus, through this internal and evolving process, Bourdieu believed that it was possible for individuals to develop a fractured *habitus* based on whether the transition from the primary *habitus* to

the specific *habitus* caused little tension or whether there was a mismatch between the two. As Bourdieu (2000) points out,

...the degree to which one can abandon oneself to the automatisms of practical sense obviously varies with the situation and the area of activity, but also with the position occupied in social space: it is likely that those who are in ‘their right place’ in the social world can abandon or entrust themselves . . . to their dispositions . . . [more] than those who occupy awkward positions... and the latter are more likely to bring to consciousness that which for others is taken for granted... (p. 163).

In other words, when a person’s “dispositions are out of line with the field and with the ‘collective expectations’ which are constitutive of its normality” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 160), a fractured *habitus* can develop because there is a mismatch between ‘their sense of place’ and ‘sense of placement’ in the social hierarchy. The context of this study, then, provides a perfect site to learn about parents’ contradictory dispositions by comparing advantaged parents with children in the G&T, Gen Ed, or both programs about the different ways that they struggle with their place[ment] in the school choice field. Thus, parents use their *habitus* to guide them into the places where they and their children belong in a segregated two-track school. Furthermore, their sense of place is constructed by either resisting or internalizing the official labels that their children, based on one test score, are given within the school. In addition, I learned how these parents’ placement clashed with their stated “beliefs in diversity” if they were in the G&T program, or, conversely, with their sense of “place” if their children were enrolled in the Gen Ed program. My analysis went one step further by also showing how these advantaged White parents reconcile their seemingly contradictory beliefs and actions. I also found how parents differed in important ways in terms of their and their children’s positionalities in relation to their choices and the structure of schooling.

For example, even though advantaged parents in the G&T program say they feel like they are ‘in their right place’ and may take for granted their privileged position, contradictory dispositions emerge between their espoused beliefs in diversity, equality, and segregation and giving their children the best education available with other similarly advantaged families like theirs. In fact, G&T parents said that

out of all the school choice options, the G&T programs in The Community School and elsewhere are the least diverse (even compared to private school). Still, they rationalized that since The Community School overall is diverse their children are being exposed to school-level diversity.

Meanwhile, the advantaged parents I studied with at least one child in the Gen Ed program --- those I call “Gen Ed parents” ---find themselves in the ‘awkward position’ of being affiliated with the Gen Ed program alongside parents who are not like them. These parents, therefore, “bring to consciousness” what G&T parents take for granted. Because they imply that they are not ‘in their right place’ in the social hierarchy, a fractured habitus develops, as they struggle to modify their social location in the field by prepping and retesting their children for the G&T program in order to be with other similarly advantaged parents and students like them in the G&T program. The parents with children in both programs are especially torn because their children are placed into two different hierarchical programs within one school. This set of parents straddle the boundary line and perceived the lower income Black and Latino Gen Ed parents and students to be the “other,” and clearly identified with the G&T parents who are more like them. Thus, they all strove to be in the majority White G&T program to avoid the stigma of the Gen Ed label, what they perceived to be more severe behavior problems in the older grades, and, most importantly, to be surrounded by other families like theirs, even if they simultaneously espouse the benefits of diversity in the Gen Ed classrooms.

To illustrate, based on Lareau’s (2003) in-depth research with middle class, working class and poor parents’ interactions with institutional settings (including schools), Lareau would argue that the middle class parents are more proactive and “assertive” when interacting with school professionals by making sure that their children have certain opportunities no matter what—what Lareau calls, “concerted cultivation.” For instance, Lareau gives an example of one middle class, African American mother using her concerted cultivation, who when told by school officials that her child did not initially make the G&T test score cutoff, did not take ‘no’ for an answer. In fact, she used her cultural capital to have her child tested again by a private tester, which cost hundreds of dollars to administer. The results from the private tester came back and this time her child made the test score cutoff and was enrolled in the G&T

classroom the following year—an occurrence that was not uncommon among middle class parents in the same situation. In Chapter 6, I relate Lareau’s concerted cultivation concept to parents in my study since, for example, Gen Ed parents will retest for G&T because they want to give their children “every advantage” in the system because “that’s what you do.” Ironically, they retest their children for G&T even if they said that they do not believe in the G&T label or are not even sure if G&T is the “better” program.

Lareau’s work (2000, 2003) is helpful because it illuminates the processes through which parents from different social classes activate different forms of capital in order to maintain or improve their children’s social class status. Further, she discusses how this uneven capital exchange is shaped by parent’s habitus. Thus, my study is related to Lareau’s work, but makes the connection between race and class backgrounds more salient to the analysis of parental school choice among a group of parents with similar degrees of advantage, but different placements in the gifted-nongifted hierarchy within this school. As I discuss in the next section, it also adds to the literature on the ways that parents’ habitus interacts with the social and symbolic boundaries that are created between G&T and Gen Ed programs, which help guide parents into the places where they say they belong.

The Relationship between Habitus and Boundary Maintenance

In fact, I found that the boundaries between G&T and Gen Ed tracks become signifiers of parent’s cultural capital and *habitus* in the school choice field, which are initially based on race, class, their perceptions of their children’s academic ability, which preschool they send their children to, and where they live, etc. Once their children are enrolled in the G&T and/or Gen Ed program, the boundaries become more about the symbolic meanings of race and class in this context, which are related to children’s scores on standardized tests, perceptions of student behavior in the different programs, and parent involvement in the classrooms, etc. As Bourdieu explains, “...each field prescribes its particular values and possesses its own regulative principles. These principles delimit a socially structured space in which agents struggle, depending on the position they occupy in that space, either to change or to preserve its boundaries and form” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 17).

In the following sections, I will briefly connect Lamont's (1992; Lamont & Molnar, 2002) work on symbolic and social boundaries to the construct of *habitus* and classification systems. By integrating the conceptual ideas of boundary work with *habitus*, I learned how parents' construct a sense of where they belong by creating distance and maintaining boundaries between themselves and others and, at the same time, reinforcing status hierarchies and distinctions between groups.

Boundaries

Many social scientists define boundaries as the point where group similarities end and differences begin (Zerubavel, 1991; Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Molnar, 2002). "In this sense, a boundary can be seen as a juxtaposition of what "we are" and what "we are not." (Delale-O'Connor, 2009). Lamont's work goes a step further and distinguishes between social and symbolic boundaries that separate individuals and groups on different social, cultural, and moral levels. In fact, Lamont and Molnar (2002) define symbolic boundaries as "objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources...[and] only when symbolic boundaries are widely agreed upon can they become social boundaries, i.e., translate, for instance, into identifiable patterns of social exclusion or class and racial segregation" (p. 168 and 169; see also, Barth, 1969; and Lamont, 2000).

Lamont's (1992; Lamont & Molnar, 2002) theories on boundaries can help us understand how advantaged parents determine where they belong in a segregated two-track school in a more conceptual way. According to Lamont & Molnar (2002), symbolic boundaries are the "conceptual distinctions" that are used to categorize people into groups based on group similarities (p 169). On the other hand, social boundaries are patterns of "social exclusion and race and class segregation" that result from symbolic classifications and unequal access to resources and opportunities (Lamont & Molnar, 2002; p. 169).

In this study, the social boundaries include the physical, academic and social separation of students in separate classrooms within The Community School, which correlates to the race, class, and academic backgrounds of the students. The symbolic boundaries, meanwhile, include perceptions of student's classroom behavior in either program, the degree to which parents were involved in their children's education, etc. Thus, to help advantaged parents determine where they belong in this stratified

system, parents would use social and symbolic boundaries to define “us” (e.g. advantaged parents) and “them” (lower income parents of color who choose the Gen Ed program)—even if they were technically in the Gen Ed program themselves. The Community School’s advantaged parents, then, compete for status and resources in the form of G&T placements. In this hierarchical school setting, the G&T program is considered the place where the White, highly educated and higher income parents from across City Limits School District send their children to school, while the Gen Ed program has, historically, been the place where the lower income, Black and Latino parents belong. These social and symbolic distinctions are determined by where parents choose to live, whether they get their children tested for G&T or not, etc.

Thus, parents knew they had to prep and test (and retest) their children for the G&T program to be with other similarly advantaged parents like them. Thus, getting your children tested for G&T and securing a G&T placement became a social and symbolic boundary between typical G&T and Gen Ed parents and students.

These symbolic boundaries go beyond race and class distinctions, though, since, for example, the majority White G&T program became a status symbol of where the better-behaved students, more involved parents, and higher achieving students, were located. This meant that if there are more White, highly educated and highly involved parents in the school or program, then advantaged parents knew that it must be a good and “comfortable” place to send their children.

Additionally, Lamont & Molnar (2002) suggest that only when symbolic boundaries are “widely agreed upon,” do they take on a “constraining character” and become social boundaries. Thus, through the parent interviews, I heard that G&T parents as a group were mostly White, highly educated parents who were more involved in the school and got their children tested for G&T. Therefore, if parents felt that they and their children belonged in the G&T category with other similarly advantaged parents like them, but got placed in the Gen Ed program instead, their sense of place within the hierarchy, does not match with where they say they belong.

Thus the boundaries that are formed within The Community School, come to be viewed as signifiers of parent’s *habitus* as a G&T or Gen Ed parent—e.g. knowing who you are and your place

within the larger social context-- since the boundaries between the two programs are rigid and divided by race/ethnicity and social class lines, which also become symbolic of parent involvement levels, parent donations to the school, importance of their child's education, and other background family characteristics. As Bourdieu (1984) would argue, their sense of 'place' within the social hierarchy guides them into the places where they say they belong based on their privileged position in the larger system of inequality.

Therefore, within this context of school choice that results in racial and social class isolation between G&T and Gen Ed programs within the same elementary school, parents classify themselves and others into categories that relate to their race and class backgrounds, as well as what they perceive to be cultural values and attitudes about education—all definitions and classifications that distinguish themselves by 'marking differences' that set them apart from others.

Bourdieu would definitely relate this to class, but in the U.S. context and in this school in particular this is highly intertwined with race as well, since the two programs are sharply divided by race and class. In this way, my study will add to a smaller body of literature that has applied Bourdieu's framework to studies of race in the U.S. context (see MacLeod, 1995; Mickelson, 1990; Carter, 2005; Wells & Crain, 1997). For example, MacLeod found that through *habitus*, the educational and occupational aspirations of two groups of low-income boys was mediated, not only by their social class background, but also by their race/ethnicity and family influences. Thus, my research combines the racial component with the social class element in order to discern how advantaged, NYC parents make meaning of the choice process and its end result of sorting children into racially and socio-economically distinct G&T and Gen Ed classrooms. This is similar to *habitus*, which Bourdieu (1984) describes as being like a classification system when he writes, 'classification classifies the classifier.'

Boundary Maintenance

These 'typification systems' or classification systems are related to Bourdieu's *habitus* in terms of how individuals categorize themselves by identifying with a group's SES, cultural and moral characteristics, which by default places all other people into the "other" category. Lamont's work (1992)

on boundary maintenance is helpful here because it relates to a person's sense of place or habitus since it entails "...an intrinsic part of the process of constituting the self; they [boundaries] emerge when we try to define who we are: we constantly draw inferences concerning our similarities to, and differences from, others, indirectly producing typification systems" (p. 11).

Lamont's (1992) research with French and American businessmen makes this classification system clear when she found that they employed different frameworks to categorize others' social status, all the while creating and maintaining social and symbolic boundaries around themselves at the same time. These upper-middle-class men used cultural distinctions, like intelligence and manners, and SES frameworks, like how much wealth and power others possessed, and finally they evaluated others by moral standards, such as an individual's honesty and integrity in order to classify themselves and also place other people into groups.

Like Lamont, Bourdieu (1977, 1984) also connects the classification process with boundary maintenance strategies when he argues that social class boundaries hold a lot of power since they not only play a part in determining group membership, but they also establish and perpetuate the power dynamics between groups and maintain group differences over time. More specifically, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), in the educational sphere, dominant groups define their culture as superior—as evidenced by their extensive vocabularies, knowledge of music and art, etc.--which is then valued and rewarded by the school in the form of educational placements.

As Epstein (1992) notes, there is work that has to be done to maintain boundaries and keep social divisions in place over time. First, advantaged groups or local elites invest in boundary distinctions such as higher status educational placements, like G&T or Advanced Placement, to maintain their advantage. Second, in this context, school district policy officials maintain not only attendance boundaries between schools, but also G&T/Gen Ed boundaries within schools. Some have argued that self-contained G&T programs within NYC schools "are bastions of White privilege" (Gootman & Gebeloff, 2008b). According to Baker (2013) critics of G&T programs also claim that:

...gifted admissions standards favor middle-class children, many of them White or Asian, over Black and Hispanic children who might have equal promise, and that the programs create castes within schools, one offered an education that is enriched and accelerated, the other getting a bare-bones version of the material. Because they are often embedded within larger schools, the programs bolster a false vision of diversity, these critics say, while reinforcing the negative stereotypes of class and race.

Furthermore, policy makers in New York and other cities have admitted that these G&T programs were created primarily as mechanisms to keep White, more advantaged families in the public schools by providing alternatives to neighborhood schools enrolling large numbers of low-income Black and/or Latino students (see Borland 2003, 2009; Sapon-Shevin 1994, 2003). It is well known in New York that G&T programs were established in schools that were not attracting “neighborhood,” especially White, more affluent families (Gootman 2009; Gootman and Gebeloff 2008). Thus, social structures keep boundaries (Lamont, 2000) and categories or labels (Bruner, 1991) in place. In this context, the NYC school district has implemented a G&T admissions process using standardized tests that result in a separation of children by ability (e.g. social boundary), based on whether their parents decide to have them tested for giftedness (e.g. symbolic boundary) and they score above the cutoff on the G&T test. Therefore, the NYC G&T context is uncommon since it uses G&T test scores when children are in preschool to determine and legitimize rigid track placements for their entire elementary school careers, which may be the biggest boundary mechanism in place. This rigid tracking system, then, serves to strengthen the categorical boundary separating Gen Ed families from G&T families.

In fact, by relying on a single test score for admission into G&T classrooms, one thing that is increasing the segregation between G&T and Gen Ed programs is that parents who have the resources and time are signing their four-year-old children up for private, G&T test-prepping sessions—a new industry that is cropping up in NYC since the 2008 changes to the G&T admissions process. According to a NY Times article, for about \$1000, parents can have their four-year-old children attend a two-month “boot camp” at a newly opened test prep company, Bright Kids NYC (Winerip, 2010). This “boot camp” includes eight private tutoring sessions and two test prep booklets. The company’s founder replied in the article that many middle to upper-middle class parents rely on the tutoring, and claimed that 80 percent of

the children that received the tutoring passed the 90th percentile cutoff score.

On the other side, the article featured parents and teachers from a Head Start program that enrolls low-income Black and Latino students. The teachers at the preschool program said they believe that the Head Start parents are at a disadvantage since they cannot afford or sometimes do not even know about the test prep materials or tutoring for the G&T tests. One Head Start parent stated that she and her son practiced the online practice test that the DOE provides, and tried to find other practice tests online, but everything cost \$50 or more, which she could not afford. Her son, unfortunately, did not pass the 90th percentile score. Thus, combined with the centralized G&T admission process and culturally biased standardized tests, this G&T test prep boundary maintenance practice is likely contributing to the disproportionate share of White, higher income students and the lower overall enrollments of Black and Latino students in the G&T programs citywide. Therefore, this test prepping industry is yet another example that serves to strengthen the boundary line between G&T and Gen Ed programs and children and leads to the reproduction of this stratified system.

To conclude, the theoretical framework for my research combines two interrelated social theories—*habitus* and boundaries. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to question the ways in which parents' *habitus*, or their internalized understanding of social hierarchies and their place and children's placement within them, interact with the social and symbolic boundaries within one school that separates two hierarchical and racially distinct academic programs. Altogether, I explored how *habitus* and boundaries assist The Community School parents in distinguishing where their children belong and make sense of where their children are placed in this stratified school context.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter illuminates the theoretical framework that I used to guide this study, which will build new knowledge on the interrelated but complex relationship between parent's *habitus* and boundary maintenance strategies. As I described in the above sections, the process that parents go through when distinguishing where their children belong in this stratified school choice context is shaped by their *habitus* and at the same time symbolizes social and symbolic boundaries between “us”---

advantaged parents, and “them”---lower income families of color who choose the Gen Ed program. In fact, for decades, White, higher income students have been disproportionately placed in G&T programs and lower income, students of color are more likely to be in the Gen Ed programs within the same schools (through boundary work).

Because advantaged parents were starting to enroll their children in The Community School’s Gen Ed program at the time I conducted this research, they felt like they were *not* in their right ‘place’ according to their privileged position in the larger system and society. As a result, they develop contradictory dispositions between their sense of place, their desire for diversity and their drive to give their children the “best” education. In fact, a fractured *habitus* emerges when there is a mismatch between where parents say they belong and where their children are placed within the school.

Therefore, in the City Limits School District context, this sorting process that parents partake in—based on their habitus around issues of race, class, and perceptions of their child’s ability-- connects to the school choice literature and the ways that parents use student’s race and class backgrounds as proxies for school quality when making school choice decisions, and the tracking literature related to parent’s social constructions of ability and influence over track placements. In the following chapter, I will provide descriptions of these three literatures-- school choice and tracking/G&T-- that connect to my research and the theoretical framework highlighted above.

CHAPTER THREE

The Relationship Between Parental School Choice, Tracking, and G&T Around Issues of Race and Class

The theoretical framework for my research, described in the previous chapter, combines two interrelated social theories—*habitus* and boundaries. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to question the ways in which parents' *habitus*, or their internalized understanding of social hierarchies and their place within them, interact with the social and symbolic boundaries within one school that separate two hierarchical and racially distinct academic programs. These boundaries and the programs they divide simultaneously shape the *habitus* of the parents within them. Altogether, *habitus* and boundaries assist “City Limits” parents in distinguishing where their children belong and how they made sense of their child's placement in this stratified school context.

In this chapter, I review the empirical research that most closely relates to my theoretical framework and proposed study. In particular, I have woven together three bodies of literature that are often examined in isolation — namely research on how parents choose schools and the literature on student tracking and G&T programs. While there has been more overlap between the G&T literature and research on tracking/detracking, by weaving in the literature on how parents make choices about schools, I discovered how *habitus* and social and symbolic boundaries influence parent's decision-making process when making public school decisions within a context of a racially and socio-economically diverse school with two hierarchical academic programs.

Within the school choice literature is a growing body of work that helps us understand the relationship between school choices and students' and parents' *habitus* around issues of academic achievement and intelligence (see Roda & Wells, 2013; Holme, 2002; Brantlinger et al., 1993; Johnson & Shapiro, 2005; Saporito & Lareau, 1999). In addition, some of the research on tracking/G&T students and their parents also implies that their *habitus* are linked to status distinctions (e.g. G&T or Gen Ed “student” or “parent”) and the rigid boundaries between different tracks and/or G&T/non-G&T programs (Oakes et al., 1997; Wells & Serna, 1995; Sapon-Shevin, 1994; Watanabe, 2008; Crozier et al., 2008).

These boundaries include not only the social separation of students into different classrooms and the resulting academic and social consequences of this separation, but also the symbolic distinctions of being in the G&T program with the higher status and reputation that it bestows on parents and their children.

In other words, we have learned from prior research that the curricular choices that parents, teachers, and students make are both about the different opportunities available across educational contexts and programs – perceived and otherwise -- *and* the symbolic meanings of the differences as they relate to their social constructions of ability related to both race and class, and how the two are tightly intertwined and reinforcing. Since my study is focused on parent’s sense of where they children belong in this stratified school context, the following literature review is organized around these themes and how my study adds to that literature.

Therefore, in the City Limits School District context, the sorting process that parents partake in— based on their habitus around issues of race, class, and perceptions of their child’s ability-- connects to the school choice literature and the ways that parents use student’s race and class backgrounds and recommendations from their social networks as proxies for school quality when making school choice decisions, and also the tracking literature related to teachers and parent’s social construction of ability and influence over track placements.

Thus, the outcomes of parental school choice and tracking mechanisms within schools are similar because both often lead to racial and SES segregation, but the specifics of the process are slightly different. For instance, when parents are choosing between schools/school districts they often rely on their social networks for information on the “quality” of the school. On the other hand, when students are tracked into separate classrooms within schools, the school will use some sort of measure of student ability or merit to place students. Therefore, my study is unique since it questions how and why parents choose a school and a track within a school--with both leading to higher segregation levels between and within schools.

The research that most closely overlaps with my study examines these issues of parental choice and/or stratification between G&T magnet programs and the regular programs within larger high schools

(Staiger, 2004), pullout G&T programs in suburban elementary schools (Sapon-Shevin, 1994), and G&T programs in secondary schools (Watanabe, 2008). As I discuss below in my review of this and related research literature, my study builds upon this existing literature in important ways by providing a new theoretical framework for the examination of an advantaged group of parents' choices between gifted and Gen Ed programs within one school building that is starkly divided by race and SES. Such choices require these parents to decide where their kindergarten children "fit in" to a highly stratified and unequal educational system. In this way, my study will further the existing research on detracking, which examines parents' social constructions of ability, intelligence and giftedness in racially diverse schools. This prior research has unveiled how such choices were linked to race and class ideologies that became critical barriers for detracking initiatives within racially diverse schools (see Oakes et al., 1997; Rubin, 2008).

Therefore, my research study adds to the small body of literature that explores how school structures and practices create, maintain, and possibly legitimize segregated gifted tracks (see Sapon-Shevin, 1994; Staiger, 2004; Oakes, 1985/2005; and Margolin, 1994, 1996). As Sapon-Shevin (1994) argues, there is a need for more research on the interplay between diverse parent constituencies in schools and the policies and school practices that help to legitimate and perpetuate resegregation of students in separate and unequal classrooms within these same schools: "For parents to become a positive force in building successful integrated schools that do not reproduce social inequities and social stratification, understanding of the interplay among diverse groups of parents and schools must increase. In particular, a more comprehensive understanding of inequalities in social and cultural capital among parents and the role of schools in the reproduction of advantage is needed" (p. 33).

Indeed, my study provides a deeper understanding of how parents make meaning of a school that is divided by race, class and academic ability both when they are making school choices and later as their children are placed in the G&T, Gen Ed, or both programs, which contributes to the ways we make sense of these specific educational policies as well as broader social phenomena of racial/SES segregation and stratification.

In the sections that follow, I will provide a brief review of the most relevant school choice and tracking/G&T literature related to my study of parents' perceptions of separate and unequal G&T and Gen Ed programs. I begin with a discussion of the literature on how race and class matters when parents are making school choices and how White parents, in particular, will contradict themselves about what they value in schools with what they actually choose for their children's education.

Race and Class Matter When Parents Make School Choices

The extant body of school choice literature on charter schools, voucher programs, and open enrollment plans have documented a clear and consistent relationship between parental school choice and racial/ethnic segregation (Holme & Wells, 2009; Mickelson et al., 2008; Wells & Roda, 2008). In other words, when school choice policies are *not* designed to promote racial integration and school diversity, they generally manage to do the opposite – namely, lead to greater stratification and separation of students by race and ethnicity across schools. Thus, many of the theoretical frameworks and insights as well as empirical findings from these prior studies can inform choice-based research on within-school segregation across programs. This is where my study, informed by this other work, offers new understandings because so many other contextual factors – e.g. district, school, neighborhood, etc. are held constant in my work. Furthermore, while the studies reviewed below are helpful in understanding how White, higher income parents make school and neighborhood decisions, my study adds to this literature by also questioning how they make sense of the boundaries separating the hierarchical two-track school system.

Given the large body of literature on different school choice plans, it is interesting to note that what has been less carefully examined is another form of school choice in many large, urban school districts—namely, the “choice” between G&T⁵ and Gen Ed programs within the same school. These G&T programs are touted as being solely based on merit, but often become perceived as safe-havens for White, higher income parents in a highly segregated system where White students are in the minority (see

⁵ Like the NYC self-contained G&T model, other separate G&T programs (self-contained models or “schools-within-schools” G&T magnet programs) and Gen Ed programs can also be found in Chicago's GEAP Program or Los Angeles' GATE Program for gifted/talented students.

Mickelson, et. al., 2008; Roda & Wells, 2013). Indeed, I found from a prior research study on the City Limits School District and the kindergarten choice process, that this parental choice-based racial segregation is disconcerting in a society with an increasingly diverse school-age population and a growing number of parents who say they want their children to attend racially diverse schools (Roda & Wells, 2013). Survey and opinion poll data also show that the vast majority of White parents support the idea of racially “diverse” public schools in the abstract (Farkas et al., 1998). This is especially true of parents who attended racially diverse schools themselves and who generally valued that experience (Wells et. al., 2009). However, when it comes to making choices for their own children, these parents become more fixated, concerned and even extremely anxious about preserving their children’s privilege and advantage in a highly stratified society, which legitimizes and reinforces the need for policies and practices that allow separate and unequal educational opportunities to be maintained.

The two overlapping themes that I can draw from the existing school choice literature that relate to my framework and research design include, first, how White, higher income parent’s socially construct the differences between school quality when choosing a school, and how that is related to the race and class compositions in the schools which leads to segregation between schools. These racialized decisions often become legitimized by parent’s social constructions of ability, which is largely influenced by their social networks.

For example, instead of using test scores, curriculum and pedagogy, teacher quality, etc., parents will use the reputation of the school and the status of the students within the school as proxies for the school’s quality. In other words, and like this study also found, who parents are surrounding themselves with is more important than what type of school it is or who the principal is, etc. Second, for many White, higher income parents they say they want their children exposed to diversity in schools in the abstract, but when it comes time to choose a school they choose the school (or program within the school) that is more White and higher SES overall. In other words, parents may value racial diversity in their child’s school because it will prepare them for our global society, but those values are overridden by the perceived “quality” of the school. These two themes relate to my framework on how parents’ social

construction of “good” schools and programs within schools is affected by their *habitus*, and thus how they sort their children into G&T or Gen Ed programs. Therefore, since we know from the existing literature that offering parents more school choice results in consistent patterns of racial segregation between schools, my study provides some explanations of how and why this happens by looking at these same choice and segregation processes within one school.

How Being With “People Like Us” Influences Parental School Choice

To illustrate the first theme in the school choice literature, several studies concluded that many high-income parents perceive predominantly White schools as the “best” based solely on these schools’ superior reputation amongst their social network of similarly affluent parents and the belief that low-income schools would negatively affect their children’s educational experience (see Brantlinger et al., 1996; Johnson & Shapiro, 2005; and Holme, 2002). Thus, one of the strongest themes to emerge from the existing school choice literature is how parents are influenced by other people in their social networks and what Holme’s calls “status ideologies”—how parents make sense of their school choices and their place within the stratified and segregated school system—when they are choosing between schools/school districts for their children’s education (Holme, 2002). This theme from the school choice literature speaks to my theoretical framework on *habitus*—e.g. how people internalize social structures and stratification, which is likely influenced by what other people in their social networks are doing, their cultural capital, and social constructions of their child’s ability, etc. These assumptions are, more often than not, legitimized by the schools’ accountability or outcome data, which also tend to be higher in more affluent schools with fewer Black and Latino students, but parents are not always aware of specific test scores when they make their choices. In addition, they often fail to look at other school-level comparisons, like extra-curricular offerings, curriculum, or quality of instruction (Holme, 2002).

In fact, in many qualitative school choice studies, largely conducted in the 1990s, researchers documented that parents rationalize their decisions for choosing non-diverse schools in non-racialized terms, and since the “best” schools tend to be in the Whiter, higher income areas, the school choice system rewards children from families with highly valued cultural capital. For example, Holme’s (2002)

qualitative study of school choice in a suburban area, explored the beliefs of 42 “high-status” (White, higher income) parents on their reasons for moving to certain school districts or school attendance zones to assure their children would be enrolled in the “best” schools based on their friends’ perceptions and the reputation of the schools, which correlates with the schools that have more White, higher-income students (p. 3). Like other researchers, she also found that race and class were important mediating factors for parents when they chose schools (see also Johnson & Shapiro, 2003; Wells, et al., 2009; Lankford and Wyckoff, 2000; Sinkkink and Emerson, 2007; Weiher and Tedin, 2002; Garcia, 2008).

Yet, instead of justifying their choices based on the quality of education in the schools that they were either leaving or moving to, Holme(2002) reported that the parents in her sample used “status ideologies,” which she defines as “commonsense beliefs about attributing the motivation, behavior, and academic ability of students to their race and socioeconomic status” (p. 11). In fact, only one parent that she interviewed had toured the former school that they moved away from, and the majority of parents did not check the test score data of the “rejected” school district. On the other side, most of the parents did not tour any of the schools in their new school district either or check the test score data before moving their family there. Therefore, the school choices these parents made reflected what other high-status parents were doing and their beliefs that lower income schools would negatively affect their child’s education. These understandings directly related the school’s “assumed” quality to the status of the parents and students within them, not on any actual objective measures.

Therefore, Holme’s “status ideologies” helped me understand the real and symbolic distinctions that parents in my study gave for choosing one program over the other as it relates to both their level of understanding of the different opportunities across educational programs and their social constructions of ability related to what other parents might tell them about the school’s reputation. Like Holme, I also found that perceptions of school quality become symbolic of the race and class compositions of the school/program, and also classroom behavior, parent involvement, etc. In addition, using a qualitative case study design allowed me to probe deeper into 1. the underlying motivations and behaviors of both sets of parents when sorting their children into a certain school/school program, and 2. how parents

create and maintain the social and symbolic boundaries between the two stratified programs over time by prepping, retesting, and eventually getting their children into the G&T program if their children are originally placed in the Gen Ed program.

Another research study that found that White parents will equate school quality to the racial composition of the schools was Johnson and Shapiro's (2003) qualitative study on three cities and surrounding suburbs; Boston, St. Louis and Los Angeles. Like Holme's (2002) findings, Johnson and Shapiro (2003) found that for the 75 White parents in their sample, they chose where to live based on where the "good" schools are, which are also more White. Even in the city, the parents considered the "good" schools to be the White magnet school programs. Unlike Holme's (2002) study though, Johnson and Shapiro (2003) explicitly asked questions and probed respondents about race and their decision making process. From their in-depth interviews, they came to the conclusion that race is a "primary dimension" of parents' sorting process with race and racism woven into ideas about school quality. For example, they found that race was a proxy for school quality and the reputation of the school. This came out through the parents' commonsense knowledge that the "nicer" schools are located in the "White" neighborhoods, that lower income schools with a majority of students of color are to be avoided, and also the fact that if the school is majority White then it is considered to be "good."

In addition, racist attitudes against Blacks was translated into creating a certain amount of distance from schools and neighborhoods where they reside, which serves to reward White families for these attitudes and their higher cultural capital (e.g. higher home values and higher quality schools in the White neighborhoods). Even though, Johnson and Shapiro (2003) do not discuss the role of social networks in their work, possibly because they studied families who were just moving into neighborhoods, clearly habitus and status ideologies were important to the parents when choosing a place to live and send their children to school.

Therefore, Johnson and Shapiro's (2003) study connects to my study by tapping into the habitus of White parents and their perceptions of school quality relating to the racial composition of the schools, with Black/Latino schools being equated with poor reputations while the Whiter schools and programs are

considered to be the “best.” Their study also points to the cultural capital and boundary maintenance strategies that these White parents activate and that the larger stratified social structure rewards and legitimizes, which in the end rewards their children since they can afford a house in a more expensive area and they get into the higher quality schools as a result-- all by creating distance from nonwhite neighborhoods and schools. In fact, for some White parents they implied that by maintaining a certain distance between themselves and nonwhites, the better the school and neighborhood are going to be. Johnson and Shapiro (2003) concluded that White parents accept that segregation just happens naturally, and “this logic is encouraged by a social structure that rewards White families for perpetuating segregation through their racialized decisions” (p. 183).

While Johnson and Shapiro’s (2003) study is helpful in understanding how White parents create and maintain distance (boundaries) between themselves and families of color through their racialized sorting process and cultural capital exchange, my study extends their findings since the within school boundaries separating the G&T and Gen Ed students and their families are in closer proximity. For example, instead of choosing a school or school district that is in a different neighborhood and thus further removed from sight and mind, in NYC racial and SES distinctions are more blatant because the “gifted” and “Gen Ed” students are placed in self-contained classrooms in the same schools, literally across the hallway from each other.

In our post-civil rights era, this racial segregation within a school building has been something that White parents are uncomfortable with, but they still choose the G&T program anyway because it is considered to be the “best” program for their children in a constrained school choice environment, which oftentimes means having their child labeled correctly as “gifted” and “talented” (Roda & Wells, 2013). Therefore, the tension or contradiction these parents experience between their “place” within the social hierarchy, their values about “diversity” and preparing children for a global society, and giving their children the “best” education was the central theme to emerge from this study.

White Parent's Contradictions Related to School Diversity

This leads to the second prominent theme in the school choice literature related to my study, which is that many parents say they believe in integrated schooling in the abstract, but when they actually choose a school their actions do not match their beliefs (See Orfield, 1996; Roda & Wells, 2013; Wells et al., 2009; Brantlinger et al., 1996). For instance, Roda & Wells (2013) interviewed 59 White parents from the City Limits School District, and heard how they made sense of their school choice options for kindergarten placements and how those options too often clashed with their understanding of the type of education they want for their children. Many parents described the tensions and contradictions they felt while touring and choosing between the City Limits elementary schools. These parents said, as the vast majority of polled parents do, that it is either “very” or “somewhat” important for their children to attend a racially/ethnically diverse school to prepare them for a global economy and society. And yet, when it came time to choose schools for their children, White parents in this district sort their children into neighborhood schools or separate G&T programs within racially diverse schools that are more White, and thus more racially homogeneous than the district as a whole. Despite the value that most parents place on diversity, their reality when it comes to diverse school choices in City Limits School District is quite limited with most of the schools being majority Black and Latino, low-income schools. As one White mother explained, across the whole school district there is a big difference between the G&T classrooms and the Gen Ed classrooms. She said:

I want real diversity. I don't want my daughter to be the only White kid in the class. I don't want her to be in a class with all White kids. I don't want either. I wanted it to be mixed and there's enough kids that it just should be mixed... it's a messed up thing in her school, and she's like 'why did they put all the White kids in one class'? (Roda & Wells, 2013, p. 284).

In other words, some parents felt uncomfortable sending their child to a school that segregated the White students into the G&T classrooms and the rest of the children, who were predominantly Black and Latino, into the Gen Ed classrooms. Another White mother said, “I want my kids to grow up in New York City, not in a tiny enclave that doesn't look like the city. If I wanted that, I would live in the suburbs. I want them to be exposed to different people and that doesn't happen in the G&T. It's a two-

tiered system... The G&T at [a certain school] doesn't have an interest in diversity or cannot choose anymore which students they admit so there's mostly White students." (Roda & Wells, 2013).

In the current post-civil rights era, this mother seemed to struggle with her decision to choose the segregated G&T program at this school, but ultimately chose it anyway. Another White, middle-class mother who was interviewed in 2006 for the Roda & Wells (2013) study, who ended up choosing a G&T classroom, said she would prefer a school that did not have the gifted versus non-gifted distinction between classes because she could see the "classism and racism" in her daughter's school. "Her class is really White. There's hardly any diversity... I definitely think there is a sense of the gifted program versus the regular school... It's something that maybe you can't avoid" (Roda & Wells, 2013, p. 279).

What's different now than the policy context in 2006 is that more White families are choosing public schools and Gen Ed programs within schools that also offer G&T programs, than before when children were placed in G&T and Gen Ed "based on skin color alone." This is creating a more "diverse" Gen Ed program in the younger grades, but since these advantaged "Gen Ed" parents all retest for G&T, the older grades remain segregated by race and class between programs.

Another example that taps into the contradictions that some higher income parents apparently feel when they are making school choices that perpetuate SES segregation is Brantlinger et al.'s (1996) school choice research on middle-class "liberal" mothers. In the context of a Midwestern city with "residential class bifurcation," the authors interviewed 20, White, middle-class mothers and found that even though they were perceived to be "liberal" and said they believed in integrated schooling in the abstract, they chose one of the four high-income schools for their children because they perceived them to be the "best" schools. This, in turn, led to the perpetuation of segregated school environments.

These mothers said that they believed that if their children attended schools with lower income children it would disadvantage them because children from low-income families do not value education and the teachers would have to deal with more problems in the classroom. On the other hand, middle-class mothers had more time to spend with their children, bought them toys and other school-related resources, and chose homes in high-income school areas (i.e. forms of cultural capital). They also

distinguished their children's academic achievements as superior to lower-income students, with labels like "gifted and talented," "honors student," "high-achiever," etc. (Brantlinger et al., 1996, p. 584).

Also, without referencing Bourdieu and *habitus*, the authors write that these so-called middle class, liberal mothers associated their children's higher academic success to their superior cultural tastes and dispositions related to education. Therefore, similar to Holme's (2002) study, through their class privileges and higher status, middle-class mothers in Brantlinger et al.'s (1996) sample justified their decisions to isolate their children in higher income schools because of negative perceptions of the "other," all the while maintaining their liberal identity "as just and compassionate people" (p. 586). Thus, the contradictions between what parent's say and what they do is brought to the foreground with the mother's saying they value integrated school environments, as long as it does not jeopardize obtaining advantaged school spaces for their own children and keeping boundaries between low-income children and their own children in place.

We see a similar theme about the contradictions of White parents related to racial diversity from Wells, et. al.'s qualitative research on 150 White graduates of desegregated schools from the 1970 and 80s. The authors found that these graduates harbor extremely fond memories of their own experiences in racially diverse schools. Yet in this new era of high-stakes assessments, a highly competitive college admissions process, and growing income inequality, many of them are drawn to the public and private schools that they see as the most selective and highest status for their own children. And, at a time when fewer public policies support the creation or maintenance of racially diverse schools, these high-status schools are more often than not predominantly White and affluent. Therefore, Wells et al. (2009) saw this tension within White parents in a very blatant form since these were graduates of desegregated schools who understood first-hand the benefits of racially diverse schools, and thus what their own children were missing when they chose to put them in more segregated schools.

In framing my case study of The Community School, I questioned advantaged parents on the reasons for choosing a particular school/program over another related to how they made sense of the racial segregation between schools and their contradictions between what they said they valued in schools

with what they actually chose. Furthermore, I examined how advantaged parents made sense of their child's placement within the segregated, two-track school. For parents, this complicated school choice decision is based on a number of factors including whether their children make the G&T cutoff score on the test, and then, if he or she is chosen for a seat in The Community School's G&T classroom. All of these factors and choices along the way to enrollment in a G&T program lead to status hierarchies and distinctions between groups, especially in a school where advantaged families are being placed into both programs.

In this way, parental school choice is like a sorting mechanism since it results in nearly perfect distinctions between G&T and Gen Ed classrooms based on the student's race, SES and academic backgrounds. And, although the Gen Ed program is becoming more White over time, advantaged families retest their children for G&T, leading to very segregated programs in the older grades. This sorting process relates to my theoretical framework on parent's habitus and where they see their children belonging in this stratified school choice context based on what other parents in their social networks are doing and their perceptions of their child's ability. It also demonstrates the powerful connections between their habitus and the structural inequalities within the larger society – especially those related to race and class – and the choices that parents can and will make regarding separate and unequal educational programs.

Thus, the research on school choice and segregation reviewed above connects conceptually to the research on school tracking/G&T, which I describe in the next section. The theme running through both literatures reveals how students are sorted into different schools or tracks within schools based on parents or, in the case of tracking/G&T, teacher's perceptions of student's academic ability (based on standardized test scores, and teacher or parent recommendations to a certain track), race, and SES backgrounds compared to other students. This theme also helps to refine the theoretical framework on habitus and boundaries around parent's social constructions of ability and segregation that I developed to focus my study and make a theoretical as well as an empirical contribution to the field. While the literature below focuses more on the ways that teachers and parents' influence which track a student

belongs in based on a student's behavior, motivation, race and class, my study is different because the parent's determine whether their children take the standardized test for G&T admission or not with the G&T score being the deciding factor in the process.

Tracking and G&T Programs—Re-segregation Within Schools

There are many obvious overlaps between the social science evidence on tracking and G&T practices at least when they are implemented in schools with racially and/or socio-economically diverse student bodies that systematically sort students according to their race and class status in the larger society. This is the obvious connection between the school choice/segregation and tracking literatures, as both within and between school parental choices, absent explicit policies to create more racial diversity, tend to result in greater racial and social class segregation. This is due to the fact that higher income, White parents tend to have more choice and power in the system based on their *habitus* and cultural capital to either get their children into the “best” schools of choice or prepare their children with the resources to pass the standardized tests for higher track placements or G&T admission. These two literatures also help me illustrate a central tenant of my theoretical framework which uses social reproduction and boundary maintenance theories to question how parents, through their *habitus*, make sense of and interact with the multiple boundaries separating the G&T and Gen Ed programs when they are making choices for their child's elementary education.

Conceptually, Gamoran (1992) defines tracking in elementary schools as the practice of separating students for the entire day to receive different instruction. Indeed, researchers like Mickelson et al. (2008) or Oakes (1985/2005), who examine school choice and tracking policies within schools include self-contained G&T programs on their list of programs that track students. While most of the tracking literature has been conducted at the secondary school level where students, teachers, and parents have the power to choose which track a student belongs in, my research explores parents' choices of where to place their children in either G&T or Gen Ed “tracks” at the elementary school level (see also Oakes et al., 1997). Because these parents are making these choices as their children are entering kindergarten, teachers and students are not part of the decision-making process. Therefore, I contend that

this type of elementary school tracking provides a better context in which to explore issues of boundary maintenance because the parents' social construction of their child's ability as it interacts with several material circumstances, including district policies and G&T test scores, is one of the central factors in the decision-making process.

In this way, tracking and G&T programs come to symbolize how parents' socially construct where students belong within academically tracked schools based solely on a standardized test score and their cultural capital and habitus. Mickelson et al. (2008) explains, "Choice options designated for gifted students, particularly schools that require certain test scores to enter, will by design resegregate students by achievement. And because achievement is correlated with race and SES, [G&T] students tend to be disproportionately White, Asian, and middle-class" (p. 15).

Tracking and G&T as a Sorting Machine

As I will describe in more detail below, the existing body of literature on tracking/G&T informs us on how track placement is determined not only by objective measures, but also by how parents and teacher's socially construct students' ability levels, based on their standardized test scores, race and class backgrounds, student's motivation levels, etc. in ways that reproduce the larger social stratification in society (Mulkey et al., 2009; Rubin, 2008). As Wells & Serna (1996) explain, "what is commonly referred to as "objective" criteria [e.g. standardized tests] of intelligence and achievement is actually extremely biased toward the subjective experience and ways of knowing of elite students (p. 97). In fact, many of the tracking and G&T policies are based upon measures of student "ability" that are seen as merit-based, but in fact have many cultural biases that relate to privilege in terms of race and class. Therefore, my study explores how the social construction of students and their ability is related to broader social structures and the ways in which those structures are embodied in their parents.

The tracking and detracking research, much of which was conducted in the 1980s and 90s, provides an abundance of empirical findings on the negative effects of tracking in secondary schools— educationally, socially and psychologically-- and the strong relationship between track placements and students' background characteristics, especially race and social class (Mulkey et al., 2009; Oakes,

1985/2005; Page, 1991; Darity et al. 2001; Hallinan, 1999). This ties into the main point of the school choice literature reviewed above—namely that there are consistent patterns of racial and SES segregation when parents can influence school placements, especially when school choice policies are crafted in such a way that parents can use their unequal cultural capital exchange to get their children into higher quality schools of choice and there are no racial or SES quotas to balance the schools. Additionally, the school choice and tracking literatures points to the social construction of merit that this process entails, which makes it helpful in thinking about how sorting and segregation occurs across schools and classrooms. For instance, in Oakes' (1985/2005) study of 25 racially and socio-economically diverse secondary schools, she deconstructs the supposed “merit-based” system used to legitimize tracking by calling into question how the tracking system continues to award more advantaged parents and their children with better educational opportunities through higher track placements, and why we keep blaming lower-income families for “their own lack of ability and effort or on their failure to take advantage of schooling” opportunities (p. 300).

In fact, researchers have consistently found that White, higher income students are more likely to be placed in higher tracked classrooms (Advanced Placement, G&T, college prep) and Black/Latino, lower income students are disproportionately placed in lower tracked classrooms (Mickelson, 2003; Lucas & Berends, 2002; Oakes, 1985/2005) and there are little to no educational or social benefits for either track. In regards to G&T placements, research has shown that Black, Latino and Native American students have perniciously been underrepresented in gifted classrooms by as much as 70 percent since G&T programs started operating in the early 19th Century (Ford & Grantham, 2008; ABCNY Report, 2003). As Ford & Grantham (2008) write, “This historical problem is rooted in the deficit views of culturally diverse groups, as well as in the overreliance on intelligence tests as the single or primary means of selection.” Indeed, as a response to the influx of immigrant children into the public school system in the early 1900s intelligence testing and tracking systems in the schools (including G&T programs) were implemented to sort students based on perceived ability into different “tracks.” These rigid tracking structures sorted students into academic, general or vocational tracks for their secondary

school careers. In fact, G&T programs remained even after tracking policies started to lose popularity based on an extant body of research proving that they were “ineffective” (Ford & Grantham, 2008).

G&T Placements Based on Standardized Test Scores

The relationship between tracking and gifted education as it intersects with the use of standardized tests, sometimes paired with subjective teacher or parent recommendations, is most likely going to result in, what gifted researchers call a “gifted identification problem.” This “problem” stems from disproportionate numbers of White, higher income students in G&T classrooms and Black/Latino low-income students in lower tracked classrooms since parents and children’s cultural capital are valued and rewarded so differently in the school system. Indeed, scholars like Ford (2003) or Borland & Wright (1994) have advocated for a better way to identify gifted students, especially low-income minority students since they are underrepresented in gifted programs. On the other hand, a few researchers have taken Mara Sapon-Shevin’s lead, a leading opponent of G&T programs, and have argued for dismantling G&T programs and implementing more inclusive, differentiated curricula and teaching to diverse learners (G&T students included) based on the inclusive special education model (see Borland, 2003). For instance, Sapon-Shevin (2003) argues:

Gifted programs are implemented for students for whom educational failure will not be tolerated (generally the children of the White, privileged parents) and are enacted in ways that leave the general education system untouched and immune to analysis and critique... (p. 129).

In fact, the argument that gifted educators and researchers use to advocate for equal educational opportunities by providing a separate education to gifted students, just like schools do for special education or musically talented students, is contradictory and questionable when the very practice of separating students based on dichotomous categories of “gifted” and “not gifted” serves to maintain and perpetuate the racial and social stratification in our society. In a more recent writing, Borland (2003) explains that even if more lower-income minority students were placed in G&T programs the “problems persist” and that “effective education and equitable education can [not] coexist with gifted education” (p. 124).

Oakes et al. (1997) also critique G&T/tracking structures within schools by exploring the relationship between how parents socially construct “ability,” “intelligence,” and “giftedness” with perceptions of race and class. The authors found that these conceptions are based on ideologies that perpetuate race and class privilege through the maintenance of this unequal structure of schooling that rewards children with parents who possess highly valued cultural capital. Therefore, White, more advantaged and powerful parents fight to retain honors classes in detracking schools in order for their children to have the same benefits that they had in higher tracked classes. At the same time, parents also legitimize the racial segregation within schools as being natural because of their perceptions of ability, intelligence, and merit being linked to race and class backgrounds.

Oakes et al. (1997) argue that this is the case because of dominant views on intelligence that are based on the use of standardized tests that historically showed racial group differences on IQ and standardized tests. In this study, I found that having their child placed in the higher tracked G&T classes by using a single test score became a signifier of a parent’s *habitus*, which reinforced for parents where their child should be placed in the system and led to a fractured *habitus* if they were in the Gen Ed program.

I turn next to a more thorough review of the tracking/G&T literature on how parents and teachers’ socially construct children’s ability, largely through subjective measures (including scores on standardized tests) and background characteristics, when determining track placements. Interrelated with this first theme, I examine what we have learned from the existing literature on the boundary work employed by parents, teachers and the school itself, which keeps the boundaries and status hierarchies between high/low tracks in place. This finding reveals how parents and student’s identity and *habitus* are affected by the status associated with high/low track placements. And, finally, I review some of the detracking research that tells us how White, higher income parents are the most vocal and become the most vested in rigid boundaries between tracks in order for their children to gain the advantages of higher track placements.

The Social Construction of Ability-- How Habitus and Identity are Linked to Status Distinctions Between Tracks

In a recent ethnographic study that connects the tracking and G&T literatures and explores how students are placed in different tracks based on social constructions of their ability, Staiger (2004) explored how students and teachers made sense of a gifted magnet program housed within a “regular” high school in urban California. In order to make the mostly Black and Latino high school more diverse (e.g. to attract more White students) the district implemented a voluntary desegregation “school within a school” program that is similar to City Limits G&T elementary schools because the “regular” school is mostly students of color, while the G&T magnet program is majority White.

First of all, Staiger (2004) found that the district and school engaged in a “set of practices that produced exclusionary access to the gifted program,” which led to resegregation within the school (p. 161). In order to be placed in the magnet school G&T program, a student needed a referral from their parent or a teacher to take the standardized tests for admission. Therefore, this practice gave parents and teachers the power to decide if a student was gifted in the first place in order for the district to consider them for G&T placement. Staiger (2004) writes, “But before parents can request that their child be tested, they need to be aware of the concept of giftedness and the educational advantages associated with this label” (p. 164). This admissions process points to how social reproduction is maintained through parents’ uneven cultural capital exchange and habitus related to their race, class and educational backgrounds. In addition, the use of standardized tests as the sole criterion for admission is problematic because these tests have been found to be culturally biased and favor children that possess highly valued cultural capital (Margolin, 1994; Sapon-Shevin, 1996).

Secondly, Staiger’s (2004) qualitative interviews and observations with teachers and students in the G&T magnet and in the “regular” high school found that they perceived G&T programs as “protecting” G&T students from the “other” non-G&T students in the rest of the school. In addition, she found that racial segregation between tracks was “naturalized” by the teachers and students since the G&T program was predominantly White and the “regular” school was mostly students of color. Her interviews with high school students and school personnel suggested that the mostly White, gifted

students were sheltered or protected within the school from the non-G&T students who were mostly Black—sheltered from the poor language and the bad behaviors. In fact, even though the district claimed that “notable” integration was taking place within the school by telling parents that G&T and non-G&T students were taking non-academic courses together (e.g. physical education), what Staiger (2004) actually found was that most of the electives that the G&T students took were AP or Honors classes which consisted of mostly G&T students. In addition, the G&T and Gen Ed students in this school were completely separated from each other even in the hallway, since the programs had a different bell system between classes with G&T classes being 90 minutes long compared to the Gen Ed classes that were only 60 minutes in length.

Thus, Staiger (2004) illuminates some of the ways that the organizational practices within the school can produce rigid boundaries between tracks—through the G&T admissions process, course scheduling, and separate bell system-- and how the academic and social “identity” of the G&T and “regular” students are affected by these boundaries with perceptions of inferiority for the “regular” students and a sense of specialness for the G&T students. In addition, Staiger (2004) found that teachers and students consistently equated the gifted program as being majority White, and that White student’s giftedness was “naturalized.” On the other hand, since Blacks, Latinos and Asians were underrepresented in G&T, other students and teachers in the school would call into question their G&T placement with comments like, if Asians are in G&T “then their parents pushed them in [there], not because they are gifted” (Staiger, 2004, p. 172). In other words, their non-giftedness was naturalized and racialized because there were so few students of color in the G&T program.

Staiger’s (2004) research touches on some of the issues that I also found in my study, including the rigid boundary maintenance strategies that are produced by the school with the separate field trips, special activities for the G&T program, and the admissions G&T process that enrolls a majority of White students. In addition, the new principal switched G&T teachers into Gen Ed classrooms apparently to appease white, incoming parents to the Gen Ed program. Whereas Staiger’s (2004) study questioned students and teachers about their experience in a tracked high school, my study investigated how

advantaged *parents* perceive the stark racial and SES segregation between gifted and Gen Ed programs within one school building and their school choice process that requires them to decide where their kindergarten children “fit in.” Ultimately, what I found was that the perceived differences between tracks—educationally, socially and culturally—guided parents into different track placements for their children, which was affected by their *habitus* and how they socially constructed student’s ability and segregation within the school.

In another recent study that connects the tracking and G&T literatures and explores how the social construction of ability affects track placements, Watanabe (2008) conducted an ethnographic study of one high school attempting to implement North Carolina’s statewide tracking policy. Even though her central question was on the different educational opportunities available across different tracks—“regular” and “academically gifted”—within this school, Watanabe also questioned how race, class and the social construction of ability influenced track placements. She reported how track placement into high school G&T and “regular” tracks were based more on parental intervention (see also Useem, 1993) and teacher’s subjective judgments about which track was more appropriate for a student than on objective measures. Like other researchers before her (Mickelson, 1999; Lucas & Berends, 2002; and Oakes, 1985/2005), Watanabe also found that racially and socio-economically segregated tracks were a result of both “official” placement decisions (e.g. standardized test scores), and “unofficial” placement decisions, like teachers and parents’ influences. In other words, this decision was not always based on objective measures, but instead student’s behavior, teacher’s expectations and student’s “cultural background” were used, which redefined “merit” in such a way that also led to segregation across tracks in terms of race and class (Watanabe, 2008, p. 500).

Similar to other G&T programs and tracks across school districts, Watanabe (2008) argues that gifted educational programs are implemented to provide a select group of students more hands-on, in-depth and challenging curriculum that she believes all students could benefit from. Like Staiger’s (2004) and Oakes’ (1985/2005) research findings, not only do the students receive a “bifurcated curriculum” but Watanabe (2008) also discovered that they internalize the “hierarchical” labels that are placed on them,

which affects their motivation levels. Furthermore, teachers treat students differently based on their track level by giving more attention and higher expectations to the gifted track students. Again, this research connects to issues of student's academic self-concept and the "stigma" of being labeled as a "smarter" G&T or "not so smart" Gen Ed student and what those hierarchical labels mean educationally, socially and psychologically to their motivation and outlooks on education. Thus, in my study I extend Watanabe's findings by including how parent's *habitus* is affected by their children's track placements. For example, I found that for advantaged Gen Ed parents, they develop a fractured *habitus* between where they say their children belonged and where they are placed in the race and class based hierarchy.

Whereas Watanabe's (2008) study examined a secondary school that used teacher and parent's subjective recommendations for gifted placement, my study illuminates the boundary work employed by The Community School parents, who are given the power to determine track placements when their children are in preschool (and later by retesting for G&T) since parents decide if they should get their child tested for giftedness or not. Then, based on their children's scores on the G&T tests, students either get accepted into a G&T program or not. Additionally, if advantaged parents initially choose the Gen Ed program because their children did not get a high enough score, they activate their cultural capital exchange (Lareau, 2003) by prepping and retesting for the G&T program until most eventually get in. In this way, parents help to determine track placements by how they make sense of the different educational opportunities available across tracks (i.e. based on the reputation of the school/program, by word of mouth recommendations, test score data, etc.), and also how they socially construct their own children's ability, based on their scores on G&T tests, race, class, classroom behaviors, motivation levels, etc.

Meanwhile, Sapon-Shevin's (1994) research on G&T programs ties into my theoretical framework around issues of parent's *habitus* and their social constructions of their child's ability. Sapon-Shevin's (1994) qualitative case study examined a suburban elementary school that implemented a pull-out program for gifted education once a week. The students were from similar racial and SES backgrounds, but for those students that were left behind in the Gen Ed classroom there was lower academic expectations and self-esteem. Similar to the tracking literature, basically, Sapon-Shevin (1994)

questioned a school structure that advantaged a select few that were deemed “gifted” and left out all the others that were merely “average.” Furthermore, she uses a political stance when she questions the silence that surrounds the controversy over gifted education programs. The findings from her research imply that for parents, teachers, students and other school personnel there was “pain, confusion and silence” about why certain students were labeled gifted and others were left out (p. 156).

One of Sapon-Shevin’s (1994) chapters from her book, Playing favorites: Gifted education and the disruption of the community, was titled “I Only Want What’s Best for my Child...” Here she discussed the findings from her interviews with eleven G&T parents. Sapon-Shevin (1994) reported that although the G&T placement process was unclear for some parents and that most parents were “satisfied” with the Gen Ed curriculum, they thought that the Gen Ed classroom was “rigid” and the gifted program was needed for it’s “extracurriculars” with more educational choices and challenging projects—even though many of the parents did not actually know what was being taught in the G&T program (pgs. 156-158). Like Staiger’s (2004) findings about G&T programs protecting students, one parent also mentioned that having her child go to the G&T classroom was a way to avoid the disciplinary problems in the regular classroom. Another parent explained that “there is a lot of status attached to it,” and many parents responded that their children “felt honored, special, smart, valued, and acknowledged” by being included in the G&T program (pgs. 160 and 167).

In general, Sapon-Shevin’s (1994) work calls into question the practice of even offering G&T programs when it involves labeling some students gifted and others non-gifted, and results in segregated school environments and lower self-esteem for non-G&T students. She writes that her biggest concern is how schools respond to the different academic, social and cognitive abilities that children come to school possessing because of their different background experiences before they start formal schooling.

Again we see how parent’s *habitus* is linked to status distinctions (G&T or Gen Ed “student” or “parent”) and the rigid boundaries, even in a more homogeneous school, between G&T/non-G&T programs. Therefore, retaining G&T programs, especially in urban school districts that rely on standardized tests to determine track placement and enroll a more racially and socio-economically diverse

population of students, creates dichotomous categories of students on either side of the boundary line, which correlates to the race, class, and academic ability of the students and their families.

In the City Limits School District context, the separation of race and class between the different tracks within racially and socio-economically diverse schools with self-contained G&T programs serves to further legitimize the *habitus* of White, middle to upper-middle class parents (and children) of being “smarter” or “better” at school because their children are consistently placed in the separate, higher tracked classes. This racial and SES segregation between tracks also serves to reinforce for parents where their child belongs in the system.

As I explain below, parents become highly invested in these boundary lines between tracks, especially White, more advantaged and powerful parents, who are more likely to fight for curriculum differentiation that favors their own children. In this study, I found this to be the case when parents spoke about whether the G&T program could (or should) be phased out or not, especially since there are more White families choosing the Gen Ed program now. Thus, tracking and G&T programs came to symbolize how parents socially construct where students belong within tracked schools based on perceptions of student’s ability, measured through standardized tests when they are in preschool. Yet this social construction is not solely about narrow standardized test scores, which in some ways serve to legitimize preconceived notions or understandings of students and their intelligence, which, like the test scores, correlate with race and class. Because of this social construction of ability and merit, when school officials start to tear down tracking structures in schools, parents (and sometimes teachers) will vehemently oppose these efforts. By keeping the status quo in place, these parents hope to protect and reproduce their privilege and power in the system by maintaining and perpetuating rigid boundaries between different students, different tracks and different abilities.

How Privileged Parents and Teachers Fight to Keep the Status Quo

In fact, not only have many teachers been found to be supporters of homogeneous classroom placements because they say it is “easier” to teach students that have similar abilities than having to differentiate the curriculum for a heterogeneous group of learners, many parents—especially higher

income ones—also support the idea of tracking mechanisms in their children’s school. Researchers have found that higher-income, more educated White parents are the most vocal and the most likely to push for high academic track placements for their children and be against detracking reforms (see Oakes & Wells, 1998; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Useem, 1992). On the other hand, lower income parents tend to allow the school to have more authority on school placement decisions for their children because they say that they feel less empowered and/or have less knowledge of the system and the benefits of higher track placements (Wells & Serna, 1996; Lareau, 2003).

For example, Wells & Serna (1996) found from their detracking study of ten racially diverse secondary schools that elite, mostly White parents use their cultural capital to resist detracking reforms. In other words, these “local elites” use their power and status in the school community or what the authors call, “ideology of entitlement,” and pass down this privilege to their children by keeping them separated in the higher tracks (p. 2). Wells & Serna (1996) examined how these elite parents “make meaning of their privilege within the educational system and how others come to see such meanings as the way things ‘ought to be’” (p. 2). They found that the motivation for White parents was to maintain the status quo by keeping their more privileged children in the higher tracked classrooms, and therefore lessen the contact they might have with lower income, mostly minority children that are more frequently placed in the lower tracked classrooms. Thus, these powerful parents used boundary maintenance strategies to ensure their children remain separate from the “other” in order to receive a higher quality educational experience, which reproduces the larger inequalities in society related to race and class. But, Wells & Serna (1996) argue that “if a school does away with separate classes for students labeled “gifted” but teachers continue to challenge these students with the same curriculum in a detracked setting, the only “losses” the students will incur are their label and their separate and unequal status” (p. 96).

Given the research findings from Wells & Serna (1996), my study extends this work on parents’ social constructions of ability, intelligence and giftedness in racially diverse schools, which were found to be linked to race and class ideologies and became barriers for detracking initiatives in some schools (see also Oakes et al., 1997).

Conclusion

In sum, the existing research on school choice and tracking/G&T has documented how social constructions of student's ability—through status ideologies, race and class compositions in the schools, teacher recommendations to a particular track, etc.—results in consistent racial segregation between or within schools. This segregative pattern is consistent when parents are given the choice between schools—e.g. based on what other parents in their social networks are doing-- and also for track placement decisions within schools—based on standardized test scores or teacher recommendations. This speaks to my theoretical framework on the highly valued cultural capital and habitus that is rewarded in the system and the status distinctions and resulting boundaries between schools or programs within schools that result (Bourdieu, 1977). Therefore, given what we know from the theoretical and empirical literature on these issues, there is a need for more qualitative research like mine to look more carefully at how and why this social reproduction and racial segregation is maintained and possibly legitimized. I accomplished this by examining the ways that advantaged parents, through their *habitus*, make sense of the boundaries within schools with G&T and Gen Ed programs when determining where they belong and where they are placed within the race and class-based hierarchy.

In the following chapter, I will discuss the case study design of my study in more detail, including the population and sample, research paradigm, data collection, interview protocol, and data analysis procedures—in order to answer my research questions and provide an empirical and theoretical contribution to the existing literature on school choice, segregation and tracking/G&T mechanisms within schools. A case study research design is a holistic way to study educational processes and the boundaries that divide and stratify students. This research design allowed me to examine deeper meanings behind advantaged parent's sense making of where their children belong versus where they were placed within two separate and stratified programs in a single elementary school (Yin, 1994; Merriam, 2005).

CHAPTER FOUR

New York City Context and Methodology

This chapter describes the research methods I utilized when conducting this qualitative case study in an urban elementary school that houses two hierarchical academic programs. As I mentioned previously, I used a theoretical framework I developed from the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 2000) and Lamont (1992; Lamont & Molnar, 2002), to guide my research and make sense of the ways that “advantaged” parents---namely, the White, higher income and highly educated parents--- socially construct the elementary school choices available or desirable to them and what meanings they give to majority White G&T programs and majority Black and Latino Gen Ed programs within this segregated structure of schooling. Because the parents I studied had similar degrees of advantage, but their children received different placements in the gifted-nongifted hierarchy, I examined how parents made sense of where they fit within the school’s racial and class-based hierarchy.

Therefore, the focus of this study is the complex interplay between advantaged parent’s sense of place within the social hierarchy (e.g. *habitus*) and their children’s placement within a segregated two-track school. Studying how parents made sense of the boundaries between G&T and Gen Ed programs when distinguishing where they and their children belong is key to illuminating the effects of school structures on parent’s school choice practices.

Using the theoretical framework that I have developed as a lens through which to examine this social phenomenon, I designed a study to answer the following research questions:

1. How do “advantaged” parents—namely White, higher income and highly educated parents, who are either in the process of choosing schools for their children or have elementary school children already enrolled in a G&T, Gen Ed, or both⁶ programs, distinguish where their children belong in a demographically changing urban public school that divides students into two separate, hierarchical academic programs?
 - 1a. How are their understandings about where their children belong aligned with where their children are placed within the school’s racial and class-based hierarchy?
 - 1b. How do those understandings relate to parents’ *habitus* and their perceptions of the

⁶ Some parents that I interviewed had older children in the G&T program and younger children in the Gen Ed program (or vice versa) within the same school.

families who enroll their children in the different programs, as well as their understanding of their own social status and the construction of their children's intelligence and ability?

2. What "boundaries" most strongly influence how advantaged parents in the G&T and/or Gen Ed program define themselves, their children, and the "other" group (those in the other classrooms)?

Through in-depth interviews with 41 advantaged parents who have children enrolled in the G&T program, Gen Ed program or both on their understandings of children, ability and segregation, my research questions illuminate how those understandings are associated with the educational choices parents make as their children are placed into two separate, hierarchical programs and they interact with the structural realities of public schools with self-contained G&T and Gen Ed programs. In this way, I analyzed the multiple ways that The Community School parents embody, resist, and reproduce the social structures in which they live their lives and educate their children. I also learned what parents with resources and valued cultural capital do when their children are not placed in what they consider to be the appropriate program for someone like them. In order to triangulate the parent interview data and contextualize my findings, I also interviewed a school choice consultant and observed school-level functions to see whether the school played a part in the maintenance of boundaries among parents.

As I will describe in the sections below, the advantaged parents in this urban school choice context are an interesting group to study on many dimensions, especially within a demographically changing school where more White families are starting to send their children to the Gen Ed program when they never would have before when students were placed in G&T and Gen Ed "based on skin color alone." In fact, the contradictions or tensions that these parents face between their beliefs about exposing their children to diversity, on the one hand, and their desire to provide their children with the "best" education, on the other, helps us understand how parents' *habitus* can become fractured or divided between where they say they and their children "belong" and where they are placed in this segregated two-track school.

The larger social, political and economic context that advantaged parents in this study are situated within is also important theoretically and conceptually since the NYC school system is an ideal

place to learn about the multiple ways that social reproduction and racial and SES segregation *within* schools is maintained and perpetuated at a more micro level by both the NYCDOE's G&T policy and parent's elementary school choices. In fact, even though NYC schools are often seen as unique cases, the consequential boundaries that are created and maintained between the G&T and Gen Ed programs *within* NYC elementary schools are more layered and complex since the two programs are in closer proximity to one another. Thus, in the current post-civil rights era, the racial/ethnic demographic contrast between the two become a more visceral experience for the parents, students and school community, especially when parents are determining where their children belong in this segregated system.

In the sections below, I will discuss the research design of my dissertation, elaborating on how I will further both the empirical research and the theoretical understanding of these issues. I describe the various components of my study: 1. site selection and context of my research, 2. research paradigm, 3. methodology and case study design, 4. the limitations of case study research, and 5. overview of findings chapters.

The NYC G&T Policy Context

To the extent that the advantaged parents in this study choose public over private school for their children, gentrifying cities such as New York, are potential sites of a growing number of racial and socio-economic diverse public schools. In fact, according to the parents that I studied and the popular press, there has been a recent influx of White, higher income parents into the public schools because of the economy and the high cost of private schooling that many of these parents cannot afford anymore—causing overcrowding in the most popular, disproportionately White schools and G&T programs within schools (Raschka, 2008).

I also found that there is a common belief amongst parents and the popular press that the reason the DOE introduces G&T programs at certain schools with a majority of students of color is to attract middle class parents from across the district into public schools to make them better (Gootman, 2009). As Lauren, a Kindergarten Gen Ed parent, explained, “But you know why they have the G&T? I mean, you know, it's so middle-class families will stay in the schools. Supposedly it wasn't—it was supposed

to get bright kids from not-so-good school districts to be able to come [to the G&T], but I was told that was all smoke and mirrors and that it's to make sure that middle-class families stay in the schools and don't all go to private."

In fact, in NYC, the Mayor, Michael Bloomberg and the School Chancellor have supported self-contained G&T programs, and since 2005, have pushed to expand the number of G&T programs across the City, yet they have not changed the criteria for admitting students to these programs, namely the use of standardized tests for admission (Gootman, 2009). This reliance on using a single standardized test score when children are four years old to determine G&T placements is aligned with the broader policy focus on narrow measures of accountability and testing in public school systems across the country. In fact, former Chancellor Klein, who was in charge at the time the G&T admissions policy was changed to use a single score on a standardized test, is considered to be "a leading testing proponent for everything from grading schools to rating teachers, and he predicted that a citywide test [for G&T admission] would be a more equitable solution" (Winerip, 2010). This larger context, then, is a factor in how the division of boundaries between students based on tests and "ability" gets legitimized and reproduced as a way that affects the *habitus* of different parents.

Addressing the long-standing criticism from some parents, DOE officials, and the popular press that G&T programs were "gifted in name only" and the admissions process was not transparent, the NYCDOE decided to change the decentralized admissions process in 2008 (Winerip, 2010). Leading up to the New York City district-wide G&T policy change, the New York City School's Chancellor described the G&T classrooms, "as a hodgepodge of offerings with varying, and often opaque, admissions criteria that tend to favor children with well-connected parents" (Gootman & Gebeloff, 2008). In fact, one of the DOE's stated goals with the policy change was to increase the enrollment of Black and Latino students into G&T programs. But, like Lauren's quote above suggests, that could have been just "smoke and mirrors" with the real reason being to attract middle class parents into public schools to make them better.

While the old G&T admissions process, before 2008, relied on multiple criteria for G&T admission, like teacher recommendations, interviews and observations, which allowed community school districts to tailor their G&T admissions criteria to their community and enroll a more diverse G&T program, the new centralized policy, however, was changed to use a single test score as the sole criterion⁷. Despite warnings from experts that using standardized scores alone would lead to fewer Black and Latino students in G&T classrooms because the tests have been found to be racially biased, former Chancellor Klein pushed forward with his new G&T admissions policy anyway (Haimson & Kjelberg, 2009).

The G&T Admissions Policy

This relatively new G&T admissions policy is now based on a single score on a standardized test that children take in preschool. Thus, parents can choose to have their children tested to become eligible for two types of G&T programs. The first G&T option is a community school district program for students that score above the 90th percentile. These G&T programs are located within certain neighborhood schools that also house Gen Ed programs for students living in the neighborhood, like the school that I studied. The other G&T option is for children who score above the 97th percentile on the G&T tests. These students become eligible for the five citywide G&T schools, which are open to students from all five boroughs if space is available⁸. This new G&T admissions process favors parents who send their children to private preschools and have more time, knowledge, and resources, not only to navigate the system but also to prepare their children to take the test and get the highest score possible.

The two standardized tests that preschool children take include the OLSAT (Otis-Lennon School Ability Test) and the Bracken School Readiness Assessment (BSRA). According to the NYCDOE's website, the OLSAT G&T test measures “verbal comprehension, verbal reasoning, pictorial reasoning

⁷ Preschool students take two standardized G&T tests administered by testers, the OLSAT (Otis-Lennon School Ability Test) and the Bracken School Readiness Assessment (BSRA). The scores from these two standardized tests are then averaged to produce one score.

⁸ The five citywide G&T schools include, The Anderson School in Manhattan (K-8), NEST+M (New Explorations into Science, Technology and Math) in Manhattan (K-12), and TAG for Young Scholars in Manhattan (K-8). In addition, two new citywide G&T schools with grades K-1 opened in Brooklyn—The Brooklyn School of Inquiry, and Queens—STEM.

and figural reasoning” and the BSRA asks questions about colors, letters, shapes, sizes, numbers/counting and comparisons in a multiple-choice format. During the parent interviews, parents would describe the BSRA as a basic kindergarten readiness test that children can easily pass if they attended preschool and learned their colors and shapes. The OLSAT test, on the other hand, was described as being a little more “tricky” and was the test that parents were prepping their children to take because they said it was more about test taking skills than actual “academic prowess.” As Elaine, a 3rd Grade Gen Ed parent explained, “The questions are just confusing [on the OLSAT]. And you have to really be a good test taker, which I don’t think everybody is. And you have to really be able to decipher what they’re actually asking. The questions are all very tricky. A lot of logic and almost puzzle-y kind of questions.”

In fact, I found that the majority of parents in my sample would do some kind of test prep activities with their children either at home, at preschool, and/or with a private tutor. Many parents said they used the DOE’s website, which provides a practice OLSAT test that parents can print out. Parents also bought practice tests and workbooks online and even hired professional tutors (usually privately at their home). This growing test prepping industry is yet another example that contributes to the uneven cultural capital exchange among parents (Lareau, 2003), which serves to strengthen the boundary line between G&T and Gen Ed programs and children and leads to the reproduction of this stratified system (Winerip, 2010).

Since the children are only four-years-old when they take the tests, professional testers (who are usually school teachers) read the questions and fill in the test form bubbles for the children. Parents in my sample said that some children who are shy and are not “comfortable going off with strangers” have more difficulty with performing well on these tests because of their “personality.” Children who are more outgoing and comfortable talking to adults, according to parents, are more likely to get better G&T scores.

Before parents can rank the G&T schools on the application form, they are required to fill out an online “Request for G&T Testing” form, get their children tested at their assigned place and time, and receive their children’s scores. The DOE combines the student’s two test scores to come up with a

percentile rank by weighting the OLSAT 75 percent and the BSRA 25 percent. The percentile rank score shows a student's score relative to other children in that age group who also took the test. If the student scores above the 90th percentile, then they get placed in schools according to sibling priority, percentile rank, ranked school preferences, and available seats in G&T programs. Parents receive one offer, and if they decline their seat they do not get put on a waiting list or receive another placement offer.

Since the G&T program that I chose to study is popular, parents told me that students had to get a top score of a 98 or 99 to get a seat at The Community School (except for younger siblings who were guaranteed a seat if they scored above the 90th). They also explained that there are so many younger siblings that there are hardly any available seats. As Rachel, a 1st Grade G&T parent explained:

I don't know of anybody that scored under a ninety-eight in the G&T from last year [in kindergarten] or for the first grade. So if you scored a ninety, you could get in because you were a sibling. And I think it's pretty easy to get a ninety in the way that—I don't know if you've seen the stats, but somebody from the G&T, they sent me a spreadsheet that had all the boroughs and all the stats on how many kids scored in each—in which bracket, and [City Limits School District], you know, blown out of the water. And half the kids score above ninety. And a really high percentage scored above ninety-seven. So to even get considered for city-wide, I mean you had to have a ninety-nine, and then it was the luck of the draw whether you got picked or not.

In other words, if your child got between a 90-97 on the G&T test, they were still considered “gifted” according to the DOE's standards because they made the cutoff score, but unless they were a younger sibling, they were offered a G&T seat in a less desirable school. This caused many parents who lived within The Community School's catchment or had older children in the G&T program already, to choose The Community School's Gen Ed program for their children's education, instead of choosing a less desirable G&T program or having their children be enrolled in two different schools. This entire process clearly favors parents who know the “rules of the game,” as Bourdieu would say, and activate their cultural capital exchange (Lareau, 2003) in order to maintain or improve their position in the school choice field.

Therefore, the problem remains that merely offering more G&T programs across the City, testing more children (because the testing is free now), setting a unified cutoff score to the 90th percentile, and having a more standardized application process citywide did not equate to more diverse enrollments

as the DOE had hoped. Actually, just the opposite occurred, with more White students, from 33 percent to 48 percent, and half as many Black and Latino students admitted to G&T programs after the centralized application policy was implemented. See Table 1 for a comparison of NYC public school students in G&T Programs by race/ethnicity before and after the 2008 centralized G&T policy change.

Table 1. NYC Public School Students in G&T Programs by Race/Ethnicity Before and After the 2008 Centralized G&T Policy Change

	Latino (%)	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)
NYC Incoming K G&T Population- before 2007	15	31	33	20
NYC Incoming K G&T Population- 2008-09	9	13	48	28

Source: Gootman & Gebeloff, 2008b

In fact, by 2008-09 the entering G&T kindergarten population was Whiter and higher income than in prior years, with more than a third of the new class of gifted kindergartners coming from NYC's wealthiest and whitest community school districts. On the other hand, students of color make up 68 percent of the public school population overall, but only 22 percent of students in the new gifted classrooms, down from 36 percent before the policy change (Gootman and Gebeloff, 2008). In addition, out of 32 total community school districts in NYC, nine districts that enroll a majority of low-income Black and Latino students overall currently do not have enough students who passed the test to offer *any* G&T programs (Gootman, 2009).

While no systematic study of the new admissions process has been done, I believe that the demographic shifts that occurred are due to the fact that the criteria for admitting students to these programs actually narrowed to place more and not less emphasis on the one measure with a clear correlation to both race and class: e.g. standardized tests. What did change about the process, however, was that individual schools no longer had the ability to choose a more diverse group of students for their G&T programs and the NYCDOE implemented a 90th percentile cutoff score for the G&T tests.

Thus, it is important to highlight how the policy context itself shapes the distribution of opportunities for the parents in my study in the first place by creating the status distinctions between schools, programs, and parents in this local school district. In the next sections, I will describe the site selection process and context of this study in more detail, starting with the community school district where the advantaged parents in my sample choose to live and send their children to school.

Site Selection: “City Limits School District” and “The Community School”

While most of the 32 NYC community school districts have predominantly Black and Latino student populations, the significance of studying the school district chosen for this study, which I call City Limits School District, is due to the racially and socio-economically diverse student body overall. In the context of one of the most racially and ethnically segregated public school systems in the country, in the City Limits School District the student population stands out. The public school enrollment in City Limits is incredibly diverse, with more Black (33 percent) a growing number of White students (27 percent, up from 23 percent in 2006) and fewer Latino and Asian students than the citywide school system. See Table 2 for a comparison of the racial/ethnic breakdowns between the City Limits School District and the larger NYC school system.

Table 2. Percent of the 2009-10 New York City versus the City Limits School District Student Population by Race/Ethnicity and FRPL⁹

	Latino (%)	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	FRPL (%)
NYC Public Schools	40	30	15	15	71
City Limits SD	34	33	27	5	54

Source: NYCDOE 2009-10; <http://schools.nyc.gov/default.htm>

Therefore, in theory the City Limits School District has the ability to create integrated schools, but because of racially segregated housing patterns and many parents choosing their neighborhood schools coupled with the G&T policy that uses standardized tests for admission into kindergarten, the end result is that most schools are racially and socio-economically segregated—both between schools and

⁹ FRPL stands for “Free and Reduced Priced Lunch” and is commonly used as a proxy for a student’s socio-economic status.

within schools that offer G&T programs (See Table 3—lighter shaded rows are disproportionately White schools). In fact, even though from the outside many of the elementary schools that offer G&T programs may look racially diverse, on the inside the students are separated into different homogeneous tracks from kindergarten through fifth grade. I found that while G&T parents will rationalize that their children are being exposed to school level diversity, but there is little interaction between the G&T and Gen Ed parents and students inside the school. This separation contributes to the feeling that the G&T is “getting something better” or special. Parents told me that the only opportunity for students to socialize with the other track is during recess, lunchtime (where they sit with their own class), and afterschool activities and sports (if they participate). For example, the two, second grade G&T classrooms will have their own “G&T” field trips together and publishing parties, etc.—leaving the second grade Gen Ed classes out.

The end result of parents sorting their children based on where they determine they belong in this stratified and segregated system is that most schools are racially and socio-economically segregated with 13 out of the 19 elementary schools comprised mostly of children of color and the remaining 6 schools disproportionately enrolling the White student population (NYCDOE, 2009/10). For example, of the six schools that have a sizable population of White students in them, two schools offer G&T programs (School A and The Community School) and four schools offer more heterogeneous classroom environments (School E, F, R, and S¹⁰).

A second reason for choosing the City Limits School District for this study stems from my earlier research in this community school district on parent’s satisfaction of a new, 2006, school choice lottery system (Roda & Wells, 2013; see discussion of that study in Chapter 3). In particular, the comments from many of the 39 White parents who were interviewed, described the struggles that they went through when choosing a school, especially when they witnessed the segregated G&T and Gen Ed classrooms in some of these schools when they went on school tours. (see also Borland, 2003; Gootman, 2009; Saulny, 2005; Roda & Wells, 2013 for evidence of the segregation within the schools). For example, some parents were very bothered by the segregation between the two programs when they toured the schools, and ultimately

¹⁰ School S just opened in 2009 as an overflow for Schools E and F, which were becoming extremely overcrowded.

chose a different school, either a private school or one of the three non-G&T neighborhood schools with a disproportionate share of White students (see Table 3; Schools E, F, and R).

But others, acknowledged the “problem” of segregation, but still chose the G&T program and rationalized it as the best program for their child. In other words, some parents felt uncomfortable sending their child to a school that segregated the White students into the G&T classrooms and the rest of the children, who were predominantly Black and Latino, into the Gen Ed classrooms, but still chose the G&T anyway. Since the goal of this study was to understand the contradictions in parents’ sense making when choosing schools and school programs for their children, I wanted to take a closer look at one of the schools with G&T programs in this policy context to see how advantaged parents make sense of their different placements within a segregated two-track school.

These schools with G&T programs, though, continue to be popular choices because they are perceived to be “better” than the Gen Ed classrooms, even if they are highly stratified racially and socio-economically. In fact, the NYCDOE recently reported that the district-wide number of kindergarteners enrolled in G&T programs almost doubled from 874 students in 2008 to 1,554 students in 2009, which they attributed to more four-year-olds who took the standardized tests and passed the 90th percentile cutoff (NYCDOE, 2010).

In addition, many of the NYC White parents whom I interviewed four years ago, voiced their frustration with the fact that there are only three truly “diverse” non-G&T schools¹¹ available to choose from in the City Limits School District, which are virtually impossible to get into because they are oversubscribed (Schools E, F, and R in Table 3). Currently, some of the students zoned for these schools are being placed on waiting lists due to the lack of available seats. This suggests that in the current economy, anyway, when public schools are oversubscribed, parents do not really have the option anymore of moving into a certain catchment area to enable their child to attend one of these schools. Therefore, the options that parents have left include 1. private schools (if they have the money for tuition

¹¹ Out of a total 19 elementary schools to choose from in this NYC community school district, only three non-G&T schools have a sizable number of White students enrolled in them (e.g. more than 50% White students).

or are awarded a scholarship, and get accepted), 2. zoned, neighborhood schools or charter schools that are typically hypersegregated,¹² (See darker shaded rows in Table 3) or 3. G&T or Dual Language self-contained programs that oftentimes attract White parents into separate programs within certain public schools (See lighter shaded rows in Table 3).

In recent years, a growing number of advantaged parents in the City Limits School District are starting to consider a fourth option for their children's education, namely Gen Ed programs within schools that also offer highly popular G&T programs, like School A or The Community School which are located in higher income neighborhoods. Therefore, what is happening is if their kindergarten child does not originally get a high enough score on the G&T test to get offered a G&T seat in School A or The Community School, they choose the Gen Ed program within that same school for kindergarten (either because they are zoned for that school or their older sibling is in the G&T program and the administration allows them to enroll their younger child even though they live outside the catchment). Then, these same families retest their children for G&T until they eventually get in. In particular, this case study examines a racially and socio-economically diverse elementary school, which I call The Community School, where parents, school district policy makers, and school officials have maintained and legitimized a separate segregated space for certain students who get a high enough score on the G&T test to be educated.

¹² Hypersegregated schools are defined as schools with more than 90% children of color. In this community school district, there are 9 out of 19 schools that fit into this category. For some parents in my sample who live outside of School C's zone, these are the zoned schools that they are using the G&T program to escape.

Table 3: Student's Race, Eligibility for (FRPL), and Percent of Students who scored a 3 or 4 on the ELA and Math state tests for Each City Limits School, Broken Down into 4 Types of Schools (1.Schools with G&T Programs, 2. Zoned, neighborhood Schools (with no G&T), 3. Zoned, neighborhood School with a French DL Program, and 4. Schools with Selective Admissions.)¹³

Public School ¹⁴	Total Students	% Black	% Latino	% White	% Asian	% FRPL	% ELA score	% Math score
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Category 1:

Schools with G&T Programs

A	561	10	21	60	8	19	83	93
B	612	25	40	28	6	48	60	70
The Community School	610	12	24	54	8	31	62	73
D	430	26	61	6	2	76	31	42

Category 2:

Zoned, neighborhood Schools (with no G&T)

E	962	10	17	68	7	10	84	85
F	774	5	12	68	11	9	88	91
G	687	28	52	16	4	56	45	55
H	404	81	18	1	0	86	25	47
I	395	75	21	1	1	78	25	30
J ¹⁵	751	19	71	7	3	74	41	48
K	552	70	21	7	2	72	46	60
L ¹⁶	245	66	30	1	2	76	N/A	N/A
M ¹⁷	441	42	45	9	7	68	34	49
N ¹⁸	208	66	29	1	2	80	26	30
O	155	70	26	2	3	88	21	34
P	194	76	19	2	0	76	34	46

Category 3:

Zoned, neighborhood School with a French DL Program

Q	482	23	45	28	3	54	42	49
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Category 4:

Schools with Selective Admissions

R ¹⁹	705	18	24	57	7	21	68	70
S ²⁰	123	10	11	65	14	N/A	N/A	N/A

¹³ Source: 2010-11 statistics taken from: <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/report/default.htm>

¹⁴ All Schools were renamed using the alphabet to ensure confidentiality of the schools.

· K-8 Schools

¹⁵ Currently School J is starting a G&T program in Kindergarten.

¹⁶ K-2 School

¹⁷ School M is phasing out their self-contained G&T classrooms.

¹⁸ 3-5 School

¹⁹ School R is a K-8 school and has it's own district wide lottery application for admission.

²⁰ School S was just opened to alleviate the overcrowding in Schools E and F. It is enrolling students from across the district who fill out an application form. Currently it has K and 1st grade and each year it will add a new grade level.

TOTALS	9291	33	34	27	5	54	-	-
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The Community School—The School, the Neighborhood and the Parents

Out of the three most popular G&T schools in the City Limits School District, the elementary school that is the focus of this study, which I call The Community School, was chosen because it does not have a dual language program (which might confound the results), is the only school housed in the building (e.g. the school building is not shared by multiple schools), has two G&T classrooms and two Gen Ed classrooms for each grade from kindergarten through fifth grade,²¹ and has a more even mix of different race/ethnicities and social class backgrounds in terms of the overall school enrollment compared to the other two G&T programs that are popular with White parents (See Table 3; Schools “A²²,” “B,” and “The Community School”). Given the segregative aspects between and within schools that are maintained and perpetuated by the G&T policy and parent’s school choice decisions, my decision to study The Community School within the City Limits School District was strategic and, I believe, paramount to figuring out what role *habitus* plays in parents’ decisions to enroll their children into certain schools or programs for elementary school, which also creates divisions between race and class lines.

Generally, when asked to describe The Community School to someone who is not familiar with the schools or programs in the City Limits School District, the vast majority of parents described it as a “great school” with “excellent teachers” and “very involved parents.” In terms of the curriculum and pedagogy, parents said the school was very “traditional” and “structured.” According to parents in this study, what also stood out to them was the diversity in the school overall, which they cited as one of the reasons why they chose The Community School and was seen as a “positive thing” in the school, especially now that there are more White families choosing the Gen Ed program. Yet, even though the Gen Ed program is becoming more White in the younger grades, when describing the two academic

²¹ For the 2010 school year, School C will offer two G&T classrooms and three Gen Ed classrooms for incoming kindergarten children. Because more White, catchment families started enrolling their children in School C, they took away their pre-K program to add an additional Gen Ed classroom.

²² At the time of this study, School A, which was the most popular G&T program, decided to phase out their G&T program because there were too many parents from the catchment area filling the Gen Ed seats. Therefore, they said they did not have room for the G&T program anymore.

programs within the school parents would say that the segregation is still “visible” because the G&T program remains majority White and advantaged parents who have a child in the Gen Ed program retest their children for G&T. As Lisa, a kindergarten Gen Ed parent described:

When I toured it, you go into the G&T classrooms and it’s White and Asian predominantly, maybe a couple Indian children. You go into the Gen Ed, and it’s just across the board – completely diverse, and you have children with special needs. And then you go into 1st or 2nd grade classrooms, and it’s predominantly African-American and Hispanic. It’s very – the school is very split like that. I guess because in the past, they didn’t have a lot of interest from people in the neighborhood so they were busing in kids from other zones to fill in.

In fact, prior to 1997 when The Community School implemented its G&T program, it was a typical neighborhood school and served mostly Black and Latino children from the catchment area and by some reports was considered to be a low performing school. Since the G&T program began with its separate admissions criteria, though, White and Asian families from across the district have been drawn to it’s highly reputed G&T program. The Gen Ed program, on the other hand, historically enrolled Black and Latino students from the catchment area (who live in a public housing building) or, as Lisa described above, from lower income districts outside of the City Limits School District that were bused in to fill the Gen Ed seats (Kershaw, 1996). In fact, based on its overall demographics -- roughly 10 percent Black, 24 percent Latino, 56 percent White, and 10 percent Asian with 36 percent eligible for free and reduced-price lunch—this school has the potential to be a truly integrated school, breaking down racial and social class boundaries. But on the inside its students are racially segregated into separate and unequal “gifted” and “non-gifted” or Gen Ed classrooms (NYCDOE, 2009/10; Roda & Wells, 2013).

Within the catchment area of The Community School, which encompasses four city blocks north to south (about a quarter of a mile in length) and five long blocks east to west (about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile), there is an 18-story public housing building with 150 apartments and 400 residents. According to the NYC Housing Authority’s 2000 Census data on families with children in public housing (www.Infoshare.org), of the 7,518 families in public housing in the City Limits School District, 47 percent were Black and 47 percent were Latino compared to a mere 4 percent White. Many of these public housing families live in the catchment areas of City Limits schools with G&T programs but enroll their children in the Gen Ed

programs in those schools. In fact, about 35 percent of families with children in The Community School are receiving public assistance; 36 percent of The Community School students are eligible for the federal Free or Reduced Price Lunch (NYCDOE, 2010). Thus, I found advantaged parents characterize “those” parents who live in the “project housing” within The Community School’s catchment as the “other” in the Gen Ed classrooms. Because of this, advantaged parents with children in the Gen Ed program, retest their children for G&T to create distance from the parents and students who are not “like them” in terms of race, class, parent involvement levels, student behavior, etc.

The public housing buildings that are located a couple of blocks away from The Community School are surrounded by high-priced apartment buildings and brownstones that constitute the majority of homes in the attendance area. These higher priced housing units are no doubt home to much more affluent families; the average rent for a 2-bedroom apartment in one of the luxury apartment buildings in this neighborhood is in the \$4,000 to \$5,000 per month range. The sale price of a two-bedroom apartment in this neighborhood averages between \$1million to \$2.5 million. Furthermore, the current sales price for a two-bedroom brownstone in this neighborhood is \$699,000 (<http://www.nybits.com/apartments/>). The cost of an entire brownstone ranges from \$3.3 million to almost \$20 million (<http://www.townhouseexperts.com/>).

According to one NYC real estate website that describes The Community School’s neighborhood to prospective renters and buyers, “Some parts of the neighborhood are extremely wealthy, most of it is upper-middle class, but there are a few blocks in the northern section of the neighborhood that are visibly poor” (<http://www.nybits.com/apartments/>). Within this context of SES bifurcation and residential and school segregation, how advantaged parents’ *habitus* interacts with the social and symbolic boundaries when determining where their children belong was one facet of what I aimed to uncover in this study. The Community School, nested within a public education system with rigid student assignment policies, is the site where advantaged parents’ contradictory dispositions emerge between finding their right “place,” wanting “diversity,” and providing their children with the “best” education.

The changing demographics of The Community School. It is important to note that in recent years, the segregation between G&T and Gen Ed programs within The Community School has been breaking down slowly over time. In fact, since 2008 the school's White student enrollment has increased from 46 percent of the total in 2008 to 56 percent in 2012. Meanwhile, the Black and Latino student population has decreased steadily in the school, going from 48 percent to 34 percent as more and more seats in the Gen Ed program were being filled by White, advantaged students from the neighborhood, leaving few seats for Black and Latino students who lived outside of The Community School's attendance zone to choose to come. Table 4 displays the demographic changes from 2007-2012.

Table 4. Demographic Changes at The Community School Elementary School, 2007 to 2011

School Year	Latino (%)	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	FRPL (%)	ELL (%)	Total Enrollment
2007-08	29	19	46	7	37	11	574
2011-12	24	10	56	10	31	5	610

Source: NYCDOE, 2011

The parents that I interviewed attribute these demographic shifts in the Gen Ed program to the fact that the program is becoming more popular to White neighborhood families, mostly because they are getting shut out of other options because of the overcrowding issues in the most popular, disproportionately White schools (especially Schools E and F, which are in close proximity to The Community School). The G&T program remains majority White because enrollment is based on a standardized test score and favors students who come from advantaged families and have been prepped for the G&T tests. In addition, since there is an increased demand from the White neighborhood families into the Gen Ed program, they stopped needing to bus in Black and Latino students from outside the district to fill the Gen Ed seats. In the last couple of years, they even had to stop offering their Pre-K program and use that space instead for a third Gen Ed kindergarten classroom to accommodate the increasing number of catchment students. Thus, the demographic shift in the early grades (K-2) is

creating a more White Gen Ed program, which is attributed to a number of reasons including, the recession, the change in the G&T admissions policy, and the subsequent overcrowding issue in the most popular and disproportionately White schools.

In fact, starting around 2008, the economic crisis hit New York City. According to parents and the popular press, this economic instability caused many City Limits parents to choose public over private schools (Raschka, 2008). This was the case not only for kindergarten admission, but, as I heard through some of the parent interviews, some private school parents started to enroll their youngest children into public because they could no longer afford private school tuition for all of their children anymore. In this way, The Community School has become a “good” option that is starting to be “recommended” by other similarly advantaged parents in their social networks, especially since there is also a G&T program that parents know will have “engaged parents and students.” Lauren, a kindergarten Gen Ed parent, said that advantaged parents are more likely “to try out” The Community School now:

...especially with the G&T program there, people are more into it. The word has gotten out. And they also switched the principal. She’s getting a lot of good press, so I think people definitely are more apt to try out that school. It wasn’t actually – when we did our admissions interview at [our preschool], it wasn’t one of the schools they recommended as a good NYC public school. They recommended [School E and F] and obviously Anderson, but it wasn’t a school they recommended – I think now they’re a little more open to it. They were suggesting trying it, especially the G&T program.

At the same time that the economic crisis was affecting the school choice decisions of families in New York City, the DOE changed the G&T admissions process to be a single score on a standardized test. As I have demonstrated, this policy change led to the G&T programs becoming less racially diverse over time (see Table 1). Therefore, getting into the most popular G&T programs became more and more competitive because students had to get a top score (e.g. a 98 or 99). This also caused many White families in The Community School’s catchment area who did not initially get into the G&T program to choose the Gen Ed program for kindergarten. In addition, families who already had older children enrolled in The Community School’s G&T program, but their younger children did not make the G&T cutoff for siblings (90th percentile for siblings), began to choose the Gen Ed program in order for all of

their children to attend the same school. For example, 9 parents in my sample had older children in the G&T program and younger children in the Gen Ed program²³.

And finally, since there was an influx of White, higher income, City Limits School District parents into the public school system, there was severe overcrowding in the most popular non-G&T schools, School E, F and R (see Table 3), and more demand for the G&T programs, therefore more parents were getting shut out of these highly sought after options. This caused some parents that were zoned for the schools with G&T programs, including School A and The Community School, to choose the Gen Ed program for kindergarten if they did not test into the G&T program initially.

All of these factors combined to change the racial composition of The Community School's Gen Ed program in the younger grades (K-2), which I heard made it a more acceptable option for some White families who lived in the catchment because there were more parents/students like them in those classrooms. Before this demographic shift occurred, though, the racial segregation was very stark between programs and still remains so in grades 3-5 because parents retest their children for the G&T program.

In sum, all of these social, cultural and economic contextual factors were important in my decision of which community school district, school, and G&T program to study. This study, situated within a social and political NYC community school district context of residential and school segregation, SES bifurcation, and a test-driven G&T admission system, is a key site to study these issues of social reproduction and boundary maintenance with advantaged parents whose children get placed into two different hierarchical academic tracks. Given this context of the parents I studied, this research ultimately helps us understand the ways in which parents use their different forms of capital to gain advantages for their children in the school system. Thus, this study helps to answer the broader question of how individual parents – connected through social networks, local context, and a set of available possibilities – interact with and help perpetuate social reproduction, social stratification and school segregation within

²³ One family had an older child in the Gen Ed program and their younger daughter got into the G&T for kindergarten.

and between schools.

Methodology and Case Study Design

In order to study educational processes and the boundaries that divide and stratify students, I employed a case study research design. This research design allowed me to examine deeper meanings behind advantaged parent's sense of place within this stratified elementary school context (Yin, 1994; Merriam, 2005). Yin (1994) defines a case study as an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" (p. 18). This design was chosen because it was best suited to uncover how parents made sense of their school choice options in this urban community school district, elementary school, and neighborhood context, which led them to ultimately choose The Community School's Gen Ed or G&T program.

In addition, a qualitative case study design enabled me to "understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences...on the ground" by looking at the "recurring patterns or themes" in the interview data that would not have appeared without a rich descriptive analysis (Merriam, 2009, pgs. 23 and 24). Ultimately, using a qualitative case study design allowed me to probe deeper into how the advantaged parents with children in the G&T, Gen Ed and both programs made sense of where their children belong versus where they were placed in a stratified school and system.

In particular, this study's methodology is framed by an inquiry-based research paradigm with a constructivist and pragmatist worldview. The assumptions inherent in constructivist epistemology are grounded in an understanding that the researcher and the respondent co-construct to "make sense out of their experiences and/or lives" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 10). Thus, themes and findings inductively emerge through the multiple ways that parents make meaning out of their experiences in either program as analyzed through the researcher's positionality related to the context. Furthermore, the pragmatist perspective assumes that a respondent's "acts of knowing" are not always based on "reality" but how they perceive the experiences to be real to *them*, which are situated within the social, cultural and political context in which they live (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Exploring advantaged parents' understanding of

their place[ment] within the social hierarchy as they relate to social locations and habitus of parents across racial/ethnic and social class boundaries is an important part of that contextual approach.

Moreover, the epistemology of this kind of qualitative work, where researchers try to get as close as possible to the participants being studied by lessening the ‘objective separateness’ between them, was helpful in connecting my framework on habitus and boundaries to the parent’s experiences in this stratified context (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Therefore, I contextualized my study by trying to understand the context in which families live and send their children to school, which is essential for understanding the meanings behind what the participants were saying. I accomplished this by examining newspaper articles related to school choice and G&T programs in the City Limits School District and The Community School, the district and school’s websites, census data, achievement data, and other online information about The Community School and the G&T program. I also observed two school-level functions where parents were in attendance—a PTA meeting and a G&T school tour for incoming G&T parents. In this way, I not only saw how parents made sense of the multiple boundaries separating the two programs (through the parent interviews), but also how the school itself produced boundaries between parents and students (through the observations of school-level events).

Ontologically, qualitative work is based on the idea of multiple realities, which includes not only the perspectives of the individuals being studied, but also the researcher’s positionality related to the context. My positionality as a white, advantaged mother provided me with “insider” status with my respondents because we shared similar “social identities” (Merriam, 2009). Nevertheless, as an interviewer, I had to be aware of my own assumptions and biases and make sure I had enough “distance...to ask real questions and explore, not to share assumptions” (Seidman, 1991, p. 77). More specifically, I gained insights into how advantaged G&T parents, Gen Ed parents, and parents with children in both programs made sense of the boundaries separating the two programs based on their *habitus* and child’s placement in the social hierarchy. I examined whether there was a mismatch between where advantaged parents said they belonged and where they were placed in terms of the educational opportunities in both programs as well as the students, parents and families affiliated with each. Thus, I

provide evidence of the parent's different perspectives by analyzing and coding the interview data—comparing the G&T and Gen Ed parent's experiences across these two programs to each other and also to the parents with children in both programs.

The methodological steps for qualitative research can be thought of as inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher's experience in collecting and analyzing data. Therefore, the kind of knowledge that was obtained from the interview data focused on how parents make meaning (e.g. constructivism) of the social realities concerning their choice of school/program for their children's education and how they made sense of the multiple boundaries separating the G&T and Gen Ed program that are grounded in their interactions with their surroundings.

Method of Data Collection

In order to understand advantaged parent's sense making of where their children belonged versus where they are placed in a school that offers two hierarchical academic programs, for this qualitative case study, I interviewed 41 advantaged parents whose child[ren] were enrolled in the G&T, Gen Ed, or both programs. Since my goal was to understand the possible contradictions in advantaged parents' sense making when choosing schools and school programs for their children, I interviewed parents who had been actively involved in the school choice process, had their children tested for G&T in preschool, and were mostly middle to upper-middle class, college-educated White mothers. Out of the 41 total parents in my sample, 16 parents had their child[ren] enrolled in the G&T program while another 16 parents had child[ren] enrolled in the Gen Ed program only. Meanwhile, 9 out of the 41 parents studied, had at least one child in each of these two programs. In total, I interviewed 16 Gen Ed parents, 16 G&T parents, and 9 parents who have children in both programs. See Table 5 for parent demographic information.²⁴

²⁴ Besides the 40 White mothers and one White father in the overall sample, I also interviewed two Black mothers and two Latina mothers to hear their perspectives on their school choice process and their experience in School C. Since the number of parents from different racial groups was small compared to the overall sample, I was not able to compare between racial groups and I did not include them in the final analysis.

Table 5. Parent Sample (n=41)

Name ²⁵	Race/ Ethnicity	SES ²⁶	No. of Children in the School	School Program	Grade Level(s)	Referral	Zoned School
G&T Only (n=16)							
1. Jane	White (Jewish)	Stay at home mom; College- educated	1	PreK	Incoming K	Rachael (Classroom Network)	Out of Zone
2. Courtney	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	1	PreK	Incoming K	Alyssa (Preschool Network)	Out of Zone
3. Cecelia	White	FT ²⁷ professional job; College- educated	1	G&T	K	Preschool Network	Out of Zone
4. Rachael	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	1	G&T	1 st	School's Website	Out of Zone
5. Jennifer	White	PT professional job; College- educated	2	G&T	1 st	Rosie's email to whole class	Out of Zone
6. Rosie	White (Jewish)	Stay at home mom; College- educated	1	G&T	1 st	Jane (Preschool Network)	Out of Zone
7. Carrie	White (Italian American)	FT professional job; College educated	1	G&T	1 st	Domenica (Preschool Network)	Out of Zone
8. Ashley	White	Stay at home mom; College educated	2	G&T	2 nd and 4 th	Dana (Classroom Network)	Out of Zone
9. Anne	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	2	G&T	2 nd and 4th	School's Website	Out of Zone

²⁵ Pseudonym²⁶ During the interview, several parents in my sample referred to themselves, and other parents like them, as middle to upper-middle class. Therefore, like Lareau (2003), I also define the parents in my sample as falling into these social class categories since they all were either employed in a professional or managerial position and/or were college educated. They also possessed economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital in the system, as evidenced by the ability to afford private preschools, live in School C's catchment area, pay for private tutoring, etc.²⁷ Works full-time

Name ²⁵	Race/ Ethnicity	SES ²⁶	No. of Children in the School	School Program	Grade Level(s)	Referral	Zoned School
10. Kathy	White	PT professional job; College- educated	1	G&T	4 th	School's Website	Out of Zone
11. Caitlyn	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	1	G&T	4 th	School's Website	Out of Zone
12. Claire	White	PT ²⁸ managerial job; College- educated	3	G&T	K, 2nd, 4 th	School's Website	Zoned School
13. Melody	White	Stay at home mom; College educated	2	G&T	1 st and 4 th	Jessica (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
14. Dana	White	PT professional job; College- educated	2	G&T	1 st and 5 th	Alice (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
15. Chrissy	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	1	G&T	4 th	School's Website	Zoned School
16. Lillian	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	1	G&T	4 th	Caitlyn (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
Gen Ed Only (n=16)							
1. Kelly	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	1	PreK	Incoming K	School Choice Consultant (Email to her listserve)	Zoned School
2. Alyssa	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	1	PreK	Incoming K	School Choice Consultant (Email to her listserve)	Zoned School
3. Maya	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	1	Home (no PreK)	Incoming K	Alyssa— Friend	Zoned School
4. Kate	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	1	PreK	Incoming K	Alyssa (Preschool Network)	Zoned School

²⁸ Works part-time

Name²⁵	Race/ Ethnicity	SES²⁶	No. of Children in the School	School Program	Grade Level(s)	Referral	Zoned School
5. Trudie	White	FT professional job; College-educated	1	PreK	Incoming K	Alyssa (Preschool Network)	Zoned School
6. Lauren	White (Jewish)	Stay at home mom; College-educated	2	Gen Ed	K	Margaret (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
7. Lisa	White	Stay at home mom; College-educated	1	Gen Ed	K	Jessica (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
8. Tanya	White	Stay at home mom; College-educated	1	Gen Ed	1st	Jessica (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
9. Denise	White	Stay at home mom; College-educated	1	Gen Ed	1st	Jessica (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
10. Domenica	White (Italian American)	FT professional job; College-educated	1	Gen Ed	1st	Jessica (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
11. Beatrice	White	FT professional job; College-educated	1	Gen Ed	1 st	Denise (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
12. Colleen	White (Irish Immigrant)	FT professional job; College-educated	2	Gen Ed	1 st	Jessica (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
13. Jessica	White	FT professional job; College-educated	1	Gen Ed	1st	Alice (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
14. Veronica	White	Stay at home mom; College-educated	1	Gen Ed	2 nd	Kathy (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
15. Tara	White (Italian American)	Stay at home mom; College-educated	1	Gen Ed	3rd	Kathy (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
16. Elaine	White	PT professional job; College-educated	2	Gen Ed	3 rd	Chrissy (Classroom Network)	Zoned School

Name ²⁵	Race/ Ethnicity	SES ²⁶	No. of Children in the School	School Program	Grade Level(s)	Referral	Zoned School
Both Programs (n=9)							
1. Amy and 2. Joe (married couple interviewed together)	White (Amy is Portuguese American)	Amy= FT graduate student Joe=PT professional job; College- educated	2	G&T and Gen Ed	K G&T and 3 rd Gen Ed	Elaine (email to whole class)	Out of Zone
3. Margaret	White	PT professional job; College- educated	2	G&T and Gen Ed	K Gen Ed and 3 rd G&T	Preschool Network	Out of Zone
4. Lindsay	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	3	G&T and Gen Ed	K Gen Ed, 2 nd G&T, 4 th G&T	Lauren (Classroom Network)	Zoned School
5. Melissa	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	2	G&T and Gen Ed	K Gen Ed, 4 th G&T	School's Website	Out of Zone
6. Alice	White	PT Professional job; College- educated	2	G&T (child in Gen Ed for K)	1st	Apartment Building Network	Zoned School
7. Betsy	White	Stay at home mom; College- educated	1	G&T (child in Gen Ed for K and 1 st)	2 nd	School's Website	Zoned School
8. Violet	White	FT Professional job; College- educated	2	G&T and Gen Ed	K Gen Ed, 4 th G&T	Lindsay (Email to whole K Gen Ed class)	Zoned School
9. Tessa	White	FT professional job; College- educated	3 (son entering K Gen Ed this year)	Gen Ed (2 older daughters got into G&T for the following year)	K Gen Ed, 1 st and 2 nd G&T	Domenica (Email to whole class)	Zoned School

As I illustrated in Table 5 above, I interviewed parents with children in different grade levels since I was interested in comparing the perspective of parents who were relatively new to the school (Incoming parents to 2nd grade) with parents who had experienced the school's culture longer (Grades 3-

5), as well as parents who had children in both programs across different grade levels. Thus, my sample included 7 parents with children in preschool who had chosen the G&T or Gen Ed program for the following year (e.g. Incoming parents), 9 parents with children in both G&T and Gen Ed programs, 5 G&T parents and 9 Gen Ed parents with K-2nd grade children only, 4 G&T parents and 2 Gen Ed parents with 3rd –5th grade children only, and 5 G&T parents with children enrolled across the grade levels (e.g. K-5 mix), but in the same program (See Table 6).

Table 6. Number of Advantaged Parents in Each Program

G&T Only	Gen Ed Only	G&T and Gen Ed (Both)	Total Parents
16	16	9	41

What was most interesting and unexpected before I started the data collection, were the parents who had children in both programs since they had to negotiate between the boundaries of the G&T and Gen Ed programs. Before I started the data collection, I heard that the Gen Ed program was starting to enroll more White, advantaged families, but what I did not realize was that some of these families already had older children enrolled in the G&T program. I found that a substantial number of these parents with children in both programs were especially critical of what they may view as an arbitrary distinction between the G&T and Gen Ed program, which results in very different learning opportunities (academically and socially) for their two children that they view as similar.

Sample Selection. In order to obtain the kind of multiple perspectives that I was seeking based on my theoretical framework and research questions, I needed to use both “snowball” and purposive sampling techniques to obtain a sample that captured parent’s different positionalities related to the structures. Some snowball sampling was needed since logistically it was difficult to get contact information for parents with children enrolled in all grade levels at this school. Using snowball sampling also provided insights into the social networks of both sets of parents. Purposive, more systematic sampling techniques, on the other hand, was also required to obtain a group of parents from G&T, Gen Ed

and both programs across grade levels, which connects to my theoretical framework and research questions (Merriam, 2005).

In this way, I used five different entry points into the school to obtain a well- rounded sample of advantaged parents from different programs, different classrooms, and different grade levels. As I display in Table 5 in the “Referral” column, I obtained parent’s contact information from the following sources:

1. A colleague that referred me to parents from her daughter’s preschool who were sending their children to The Community School (e.g. “Preschool Network”).
2. A colleague that referred me to parents from her apartment building in The Community School’s zone that sent their children to The Community School (e.g. “Apartment Building Network”).
3. The Community School’s website to obtain contact information for parents that were on the PTA or SLT (School Leadership Team) (e.g. “School’s Website”).
4. Parent referrals to other parents in their child’s elementary or preschool classroom (i.e. “Classroom Network” or “Preschool Network”).
5. The School Choice Consultant that emailed her professional listserve about my study. This created a new set of parents who were going through the school choice process at the time of my study (e.g. “School Choice Consultant”).

After identifying a parent from The Community School from these various sources, I utilized snowball and purposive sampling techniques to find additional parents to interview that fit the “advantaged” parent criteria that I was looking for (namely White, higher income and highly educated parents), which as I have shown also provided me with important information about their stratified social networks (Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 2009). For instance, parents referred me to other parents with similar backgrounds who they knew from their private preschools, apartment buildings, or elementary school classrooms. In addition, 8 parents in the sample contacted me after receiving an email sent out by one of my respondents to the entire grade cohort.

The limitations of using snowball methods is that researcher’s can receive biased results because too many parents will recruit their friends or other parents in their child’s class that may be more involved in the school, etc. Therefore, in order to get an unbiased sample, I had to make sure that one person did not recruit too many other people and try to obtain information about parents that may not be as involved in the school as others, etc. In fact, I found that there was variation in the amount of parent involvement in my sample, with some parents being highly involved in the school by being a member of the PTA or

SLT, and others being less involved in the day to day activities of the school, but still knowledgeable about what was going on by talking to other parents at drop off or at the playground, etc. In this way, I made sure I interviewed enough parents in each category and across all grade levels, who were highly involved or less involved in the school—G&T only, Gen Ed only, G&T and Gen Ed (both), and incoming parents-- until data saturation was reached. In order to hear different perspectives on their school choice options and ensure that I had enough Gen Ed parents who were zoned for the school, I also made sure that I interviewed parents who 1. lived within The Community School's catchment and were zoned for the Gen Ed portion of the school, but could also test into the G&T program (n=26) or 2. lived outside the catchment area, so they could not choose the Gen Ed program as an option out of their zoned school, but could test into the G&T if they scored high enough (n=15) (See Table 5). In contrast to using a more generalizable random sampling technique to select individuals to interview, purposive sampling provides me with depth over breadth.

Observations. In order to triangulate the data and situate my findings, I also interviewed a school choice consultant, observed The Community School's G&T school tour, a PTA meeting, and attended a public school choice workshop for incoming parents led by the school choice consultant. I interviewed the school choice consultant because one of the parents that I interviewed referred to her as the "G&T guru." In fact, many of the G&T parents told me that they utilized her private consulting services and/or attended one of her school choice workshops when they were going through the school choice process. She was an extremely valuable resource since she has been working as an educational consultant for 14 years, has children that went through the public school system (in the district that I studied), stays abreast of all the school choice policy changes, and has insider knowledge about all of New York City's schools and programs (including private schools). She also hears what parents are saying about each school and what the enrollment trends and demographic changes have been over time.

During the observations in the school and at the school choice workshop, I paid close attention to which parents attended in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, G&T vs. Gen Ed parent, etc., how parents interacted with each other, and what kinds of questions were asked. For example, I noticed that most of

the parents giving the school tour were White and on the PTA, and the incoming G&T parents attending the G&T school tour were also majority White women. The parents attending the school tour asked some of the same questions that I was also asking during my interviews, like what the difference is between the G&T and Gen Ed programs, if the students know about the two programs within the school, and if the G&T program was going to be phased out eventually. I also reviewed documents such as newspapers, NYCDOE website information, census data, and other admissions materials in order to learn about changes to the G&T admissions policy, the district-wide school choice policy for General Education and other specialized dual language or magnet programs, and recent demographic changes to the schools and neighborhoods in this district.

One-on-one Interviews. After receiving IRB approval for the study, the semi-structured, recorded interviews and school observations were conducted between March 2011 to July 2011. The face-to-face interviews took place at an agreed upon location, like the respondent's home or coffee shop, and lasted between 30-90 minutes. The community school district, school and respondents were given pseudonyms in order to ensure confidentiality.

During the interview, I asked parents to describe The Community School and the two different programs within the school, their educational/occupational background, their school choice process, how they prepared their child[ren] for kindergarten and the G&T tests, and their beliefs about gifted education and the G&T policy (See Appendix A for Interview Protocol). I asked them questions about what factors ultimately led them to choose the program that their child is enrolled in, which included questions and probes about how they activated their cultural capital (Lareau, 2003) for the school choice process based on their own educational and professional background and what is expected of them within their social class and within the constraints of the school choice field (e.g. *habitus*). For the upper grade parents, I also asked how their initial beliefs about the two programs changed over the years as their children have gotten older and they have experienced the school's culture longer.

I also focused on questions about G&T and Gen Ed parents' social construction of the term giftedness from different perspectives in order to understand how their habitus interacts with the multiple

boundaries separating the two different programs, students and families: 1. beliefs about gifted children's intelligence, behaviors, motivation, and race/class backgrounds compared to Gen Ed children, 2. beliefs about children's families in G&T and Gen Ed classroom settings related to their own habitus and where they said they belonged in this hierarchical school with two separate and unequal programs (see also Rubin, 2008).

I began the interview by using more open-ended interview questions to elicit more insightful and honest responses about the relationships between race and SES backgrounds and gifted education that might be more sensitive topics for parents and other social actors (see Staiger, 2004; Brantlinger et al., 1993). In addition, using more open-ended questions allowed respondents to use their own words for "us" and "them" dichotomies between gifted and Gen Ed programs, parents and children. And finally, I asked parents to disclose some demographic information, like their race/ethnicity and educational and occupational background, in order to make sure that I obtained this information in case they did not elaborate on these issues when responding to the interview questions.

For this study, I was the sole data collector and analyzer, therefore it was imperative that I recognized my own bias as a White mother whose child formerly attended a NYC public elementary school and a researcher who has conducted school choice research in this community school district in 2006. To avoid leading or biased questions or probes that I might convey during the interviews, I used open-ended questions, avoided using technical words or jargon, repeated words or phrases that respondent's used in their responses when probing for more information, and allowed silence during the interview to allow the respondents to frame these issues in their own words without leading them to a certain answer.

Data Analysis

During the data collection stage, the in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim, and I used a data management software program, ATLAS.ti, to organize the interview transcripts and code the data. An important part of the iterative process of qualitative research entailed writing up interview notes and field notes during and after each interview and observation, in order to analyze categories, themes, and

patterns that arose from the data before the interview transcriptions were completed. This analysis during the data collection stage was important so that I could re-configure future interview questions based on the themes that were emerging (e.g. the idea that the G&T should be phased out or not).

As the interviews were being transcribed, I spent time combining and reorganizing categories and sub-categories from the interview data by hand-- pulling out relevant parent quotes to support the most salient themes and findings that emerged based on the theoretical framework of my study (Merriam, 2009). As I came up with major themes and categories, I looked for “negative examples” from the interview data and looked for differences between the G&T, Gen Ed, and parents in both programs across grade levels (Lareau, 2000). In order to provide a comparative analysis, each set of advantaged parents was analyzed for the information that they gave about themselves (“us”) and also the information that they gave about the “other” group (“them”—in this case, the lower income families of color who chose the Gen Ed program) (Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Molnar, 2002; see also Crozier et al. 2008). In addition, I compared the experiences of the parents who were relatively new to the school (Pre-K to 2nd Grade) with the parents who have older children and have experienced the school’s culture longer (Grades 3-5). The parent interview data was then triangulated with the observations of school-level functions in order to see how parent’s perceptions overlap with how they interact with other parents and school personnel.

When analyzing the data, I first found more general “umbrella themes” in the parent’s interview data (e.g. “parental school choice”), and then found more specific “dimensional codes” within the larger themes (e.g. “benefits and challenges of school diversity”), which connected to my theoretical framework on fractured habitus and boundary maintenance (See Carter, 2005). See Table 7 for examples of my analytical codes.

Table 7. Analytical Frameworks and Codes

Framework	Analytical Codes and Description
Fractured Habitus	SB---Sense of Where they Belong <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Choice • Contradictions SP---Sense of Where they are Placed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embody G&T Label • Resist Gen Ed Placements
Boundary Maintenance	SYB---Symbolic Boundaries SCB—Social Boundaries

This process resulted in 14 codes that described parents' contradictory dispositions regarding how they made sense of their child's placement in the school given their advantaged backgrounds in the larger system. These codes were narrowed into 9 after I combined themes and sub-themes and considered theoretical implications. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I describe the results of my analysis, connecting the themes and findings to the theoretical framework that guides my study and analysis.

Limitations of Case Study Research

According to Merriam (2009) and Yin (1994), some of the limitations of case study research include issues of construct validity, generalizability and reliability. To control for validity problems, I recorded and transcribed the parent interviews and typed up field notes on the day the school observations took place. I also discussed my emerging themes and findings with other scholarly researchers and described in detail how the study was conducted and how the findings were derived from the data. In addition, I made sure that I made comparisons between two or more sources of evidence (interviews, field notes, school website postings). For example, I compared the parent interview data with the parent's interactions at the school functions, and the information about school choice and the G&T program on the school's website. I continued to interview parents from the G&T program, Gen Ed program and both programs until I started to hear similar responses from them (saturation) in order to accurately capture the phenomenon in question. Finally, I clarified my biases and assumptions upfront regarding the research.

In terms of this study's generalizability, many critics have pointed to how case studies are poor examples for generalizing to other contexts, but Yin (1994) and others would argue that case study research relies on "analytic generalization" where "the investigator is striving to generalize particular sets of results to some broader theory"—in this case Bourdieu's social reproduction theory and Lamont's theories on boundary maintenance were supported and extended (p. 43). And finally, to increase the reliability or the consistency of my findings, I explained the theory that frames my study, and described in detail how the study was conducted and how the findings were derived from the data. In this way, another researcher, particularly one that also had "insider" status with the respondents, could replicate the case study and find similar results. Ultimately, in order to produce high quality research, I made sure that I adhered to these three tests during all phases of my research.

Summary of Chapter

In conclusion, this chapter discussed the research design and methodology that was employed in this study. As I discussed in detail above, this study used a qualitative case study design in order to contextualize the experiences of an advantaged group of parents who chose a G&T or Gen Ed program (or both) for their children's elementary school education. This study's methodology is framed by an inquiry-based research paradigm with a constructivist and pragmatist worldview, therefore, I sought to understand how parents made sense of their lives and experiences within the constraints of the school choice field.

In order to understand parent's decisions to enroll their children in G&T and/or Gen Ed programs and see how their perspectives may change as their children matriculate through the system, I conducted in-depth interviews with 41 advantaged parents within The Community School, as well as interviewed a school choice consultant and observed school-level events to triangulate the data and contextualize my findings. Therefore, a case study design was important in order to uncover themes that will add to the growing body of research on the multiple ways that social actors interact with school policies and practices in a manner that consistently leads to social reproduction and racial and SES segregation in

schools. The theoretical contribution of this study is also important, because, the findings build new theoretical knowledge and understandings of social reproduction and boundary maintenance.

Overview of Findings Chapters

In the following chapters, I describe the three main findings to emerge from the parent interviews that connect to my theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 2. The overarching theme to emerge from the in-depth interview data with 41 “advantaged” parents -- namely White, higher income and highly educated parents -- with children enrolled in a demographically changing urban public school is that they embody contradictory dispositions related to their simultaneous desire for their children to be exposed to racial/ethnic and socio-economic “diversity,” their drive to provide their children with the “best” education, and their sense of the “place” where they and their children belong within a segregated two-track school. The Community School, nested within a public education system with rigid student assignment policies, is the site where these conflicting desires converge and advantaged parents grapple with the contradictions between what they want and what they think they need given the existing choices or the structure of schooling and where their children have been placed within it.

What makes this research valuable, therefore, is that these parents, despite their similar degrees of advantage within the larger school system and the society overall, end up with their children placed in two different and unequal programs within The Community School -- the “Gifted and Talented” (G&T) program versus the regular, “non-gifted” or General Education program – based on one admissions test score. Since my goal was to understand the possible contradictions in advantaged parents’ sense making when choosing schools and school programs for their children, for this analysis, I ended up interviewing 41 parents who were more involved in the school choice process, had all gotten their children tested for G&T in preschool, and were middle to upper-middle class, college-educated white mothers (and one white father) with children enrolled in either or both programs. Out of the 41 total parents in my sample, 16 parents have their child[ren] enrolled in the G&T program while another 16 parents have their child[ren] only enrolled in the Gen Ed program. Meanwhile, 9 out of the 41 parents studied, have a child in each of these two programs. These two within-school “choices” of “gifted” or “general” education not

only differ in terms of their status and prestige within School C and the larger educational system, they also differ rather dramatically in terms of their demographics, with mostly black and Latino students in School C's Gen Ed Program, while the G&T program is predominantly white "advantaged" students.

The advantaged parents in this study made sharp distinctions between the two academic programs by drawing social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 1992) around students and parents enrolled in each program. These boundaries include not only the physical separation of students into different classrooms and the resulting academic and social consequences of this separation (e.g. social boundaries), but also the symbolic distinctions of being in the G&T program with the higher status and reputation that it bestows on parents and their children (e.g. symbolic boundaries). As parents explained, the G&T program was considered the place where the white, higher income and highly educated parents who were more involved in the school enroll their children, while the Gen Ed program was where the lower income, black and Latino parents belong. The G&T program, then, became a symbol of where the more advantaged parents in this segregated system should be, even as they all touted the importance of diversity.

Because the parents I studied had similar degrees of advantage, but their children received different placements in the gifted-nongifted hierarchy within this school, I learned what parents with resources and valued cultural capital do when their children are *not* placed in what they consider to be the appropriate program for someone like them. The interview data suggest that for parents with at least one child in the Gen Ed program, they develop a "habitus" – or internalized knowledge of social hierarchies and their place within them -- that does not quite fit with where they say their children "belong" and where their children are actually placed within the system. In fact, this mismatch between where advantaged parents think their children belong based on their position in the status hierarchy and where they are placed in a hierarchical two-track school leads to what Bourdieu called a fractured or cleft habitus (2000). On the other hand, for advantaged parents whose children are in the G&T program, even though they may feel contradictory about their desire for diversity and bemoan the level of segregation between programs, they still feel they are 'in their right place,' thus, matching their relatively high status position in the status hierarchy.

In the end, for most of these advantaged parents, having their children enrolled in a program with other students “like them” in terms of their social status and privilege and thus being associated with other parents “like them” was the most important factor, superseding all other desires, including “diversity” or even which program their children are enrolled in – “G&T” versus “Gen Ed.” Interestingly enough, for many of these parents, the “G&T” program did not signify that “best” education they strongly desire for their children. This is because they said they do not entirely “buy into” the G&T label nor do they think the curriculum is so distinct from that of the “Gen Ed” program. But ambivalence about the academic quality of the Gen Ed program varied and was reconstructed depending on whether these parents had one or more children in the program.

Thus, while all parents embody contradictory dispositions and struggle with the sharp distinctions that are created between the two hierarchical programs in terms of the segregation between programs and the diversity within their own children’s classroom (or lack thereof), parents with at least one child in the Gen Ed program become fractured, as Bourdieu would say, because they are *not* ‘in their right place’ in the social hierarchy. Below, I demonstrate how the distinctions between the different sets of parents—G&T, Gen Ed, or both-- are somewhat the same in terms of Bourdieu’s theory and somewhat different given each set of parent’s relationship to the structures.

The biggest similarity for both G&T and Gen Ed advantaged parents is that they appreciate the diversity in the school overall and are bothered by the segregation that still exists between programs. They specifically point to the “diversity” in the Gen Ed classrooms in the younger grades (K-2)—meaning there are more white students in those classes-- as a “positive thing” for the school since the segregation between programs is breaking down slowly over time. At the same time, though, they strive to give their children what’s considered to be the “best” education, in terms of who’s enrolled in each program, in order to give them “every advantage” in this local school district context. Ironically, both G&T and Gen Ed parents struggle with their child’s placement by admitting that they do not see much difference academically between the two programs—with Gen Ed parents questioning the existence of the Gen Ed program and the G&T parents questioning what they are getting that’s any different than the Gen

Ed if the curriculum is the same. Ultimately, even though some parents would support the G&T program being phased out because there are more white families choosing the Gen Ed program now, the majority of parents agree that having the G&T program at School C makes the school “better” because it attracts advantaged parents from across the district to the G&T program.

While the similarities between advantaged G&T, Gen Ed, or parents with children in both programs are important because it shows how parents make sense of where they fit within the structures given their similar positions in the larger society, it is also important to examine the differences that result from their children’s placements in the racial and class-based hierarchy within the school. Thus, for the Gen Ed parents or parents with children in both programs I studied, they simultaneously embody, resist, and reproduce the structures all at the same time. For instance, even though they value the diversity in their own children’s classroom because it reflects the urban environment in which they live and prepares their children to live and work in a global society, they still activate their cultural capital to try to overcome the G&T-Gen Ed boundary by prepping and retesting their children for the G&T program because that is what other advantaged parents like them are doing. In fact, for parents on the Gen Ed side of the boundary, it’s their placement within the hierarchy that causes their habitus to fracture because they are surrounded by the “other” lower income, families of color who hold lower-status positions in the social hierarchy—even as they also appreciate the diversity that their children are being exposed to.

This “fracture” between where parents felt they belonged and where they were placed is especially apparent for the growing number of parents with children in both programs, who have to negotiate between the two programs and two sets of parents and clearly struggled the most with the labels and categories that their two children, who they view as academically similar, were given within the school. These findings imply that parents will say one thing about valuing diverse educational programs but, when it comes time to choose, they all strive to be in the majority white G&T programs in order to create distance from the “other,” avoid the negative stigma of the Gen Ed label, and be surrounded by “like-minded” families – even as some of them deny such programs are “better.”

Meanwhile, the G&T parents I studied often embodied the segregated and hierarchical structures

of the school and larger system, stating that they believed their children are ‘in their right place’ whether or not they believed the G&T program offered their children and other students “like them” the “best” education. They understood their privileged position and why they were in the G&T program and others were not, and knew how to work the system to their advantage to get high-status G&T placements for their children in a constrained school choice environment. What was also apparent was that G&T parents who were relatively new to the school versus G&T parents who had been in the school longer socially constructed the G&T label in different ways. For instance, once G&T parents in the *younger grades* (PreK-1) get their child’s G&T test score back, it validated their belief in their child’s intelligence and ability, and made them also believe in the validity of the G&T tests for G&T placement. On the other hand, G&T parents with children in the *older grades* were more likely to question their child’s giftedness, be bothered by the segregation between programs and defend their reasons for choosing the G&T program even though it’s segregated. All G&T parents, though, said they are regretful that the G&T program did not provide a racially “diverse” learning environment and often rationalized that their children were being exposed to school-level diversity even though their G&T classrooms were majority white.

In the first findings chapter, or Chapter Five, I illustrate the multiple ways that parents use social and symbolic boundaries to distinguish the G&T and Gen Ed categories and labels in The Community School and then go through all necessary steps to get their children placed in the G&T program, which better matches their advantaged position, as signified by plenty of people “like them” despite the seemingly paradoxical value they also place on “diversity.” The distinctions that parents make between “us” and “them” reinforced the feeling that advantaged parents belonged on the G&T side of the boundary line and contributed to the fracturedness that developed inside them based on their stated beliefs in diversity and where they said they belonged (e.g. their “place”). Thus, advantaged parents, who are all striving to be in the high status G&T program, will try to reconcile their fractured habitus by rationalizing that the whole school is diverse even though the separate and unequal G&T classrooms are not.

In Chapter Six, I show how even advantaged parents – particularly those with at least one child in

the Gen Ed program who have more resources to get their children into G&T programs, struggle with the true meaning of the measures used to define giftedness in this context (e.g. a single score on a standardized test administered to students when they are in preschool). The parents with children in both programs, in particular, best articulated their belief that the “gifted” label is socially constructed—relating “giftedness” in this context more to student’s advantaged backgrounds and G&T test preparation than their true intelligence--- because they stated that they did not believe one of their children is more “gifted” than the other. Again, we see how parents want to be with other people like them, not because they “buy into” the labels and categories in the school or are certain that the G&T program is the “best” educationally, but rather because it matches their relatively high-status position in the social hierarchy.

And finally, in Chapter Seven, the third and last findings chapter, I demonstrate how the findings discussed in the prior two chapters can shift and become redefined as a growing number of White, advantaged parents were choosing the Gen Ed program. Thus, I learned that the advantaged parents made sense of and adapted to the changing social and symbolic boundaries within the school by choosing the Gen Ed program when that was their only option in The Community School and then redefined what the symbolic boundary of the two programs meant. In this moment of recreating the boundaries, parents on both sides of the boundary line considered the “diversity” in the Gen Ed classrooms as a “positive thing” and a sign that the school could (and should) phase out the G&T program. But, regardless of the positive benefits of diversity in the younger grades, the boundary between G&T and Gen Ed in the upper grades gets reproduced because the advantaged Gen Ed parents retest their children for G&T. In this way, these same advantaged parents who would support the G&T program being phased out, also argue that the G&T program is still “needed” at The Community School to attract the right kind of parents to the school and create distance from the “other.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Knowing Their “Place:” The Contradictions Between What Parents Say and Do When Confronted with Segregated School Choice Options

The findings from my study are centered around the struggles and contradictions that emerge when advantaged parents, who say they value diversity for their children’s education, interact with a policy context that gives them the choice between mostly segregated schools and programs. More specifically, my study explores the White and upper-middle class parents of students placed in both Gifted and Talented (G&T) and General Education (Gen Ed) Programs in one school with a very racially/ethnically diverse student body overall, but very racially divided classrooms based on these different programs. These parents struggle for high-status positions in the status hierarchy across programs and classrooms in their school. Meanwhile, they describe the contradictory dispositions (e.g. habitus) that develop inside them as a result of their child’s placement in a majority White G&T program and/or majority Black and Latino Gen Ed program, their desire for their children to learn in a diverse environment, and their drive to provide their children with what’s considered to be the “best” education, in terms of the people not the program.

Therefore, my goal was to understand the possible contradictions in advantaged parents’ sense making when determining where they believe they belong in this stratified system compared to where their children are placed within a demographically changing school that is starting to enroll White advantaged families into two separate and unequal G&T and Gen Ed programs. In our post-civil rights era, many White parents bemoan the racial segregation that continues to divide the G&T and Gen Ed students into separate and unequal classrooms. They say they are uncomfortable with this racial division, but they still choose (or strive to be in) the G&T program when they have that option because they consider it to be the “best” education for their children in a constrained school choice environment (Roda & Wells, 2013).

What I found was that parent’s distinguished where they belonged (their ‘place’) in this segregated and hierarchical school setting by drawing social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 1992)

around what constitutes “us” (advantaged parents) versus “them” (lower income parents of color who enroll their children in the Gen Ed program). According to Lamont & Molnar (2002), symbolic boundaries are the “conceptual distinctions” that are used to categorize people into groups based on group similarities (p 169). On the other hand, social boundaries are patterns of “social exclusion and race and class segregation” that result from symbolic classifications and unequal access to resources and opportunities (p. 169). In this context, the social boundaries include the physical, academic and social separation of students in separate classrooms within The Community School, which correlates to the race, class, and academic backgrounds of the students.

In this chapter, I illustrate the multiple ways that advantaged parents make sense of their place within the school. They do this by using social and symbolic boundaries to distinguish the G&T and Gen Ed categories and labels in The Community School and then go through all necessary steps to get their children placed in the G&T program, which better matches their advantaged position, as signified by plenty of people “like them” despite the seemingly paradoxical value they also place on “diversity.” The distinctions that parents make between “us” and “them” reinforced the feeling that advantaged parents belonged on the G&T side of the boundary line and contributed to the tensions that developed inside them if they were not where they said they belonged (e.g. their “place”). For instance, I heard that G&T parents as a group were mostly White, highly educated parents who were more involved in the school (e.g. symbolic boundaries). Therefore, if you felt you belonged in that category, then you struggled with your child’s placement if you did not initially get into the G&T program.

These boundaries within The Community School, come to be viewed as signifiers of parent’s *habitus* – or internalized knowledge of their place within the social hierarchy-- since the boundaries between the two programs are rigid and divided by race and class lines, which also become symbolic of parent involvement levels, parent donations to the school, importance of their child’s education, and other background family characteristics--all definitions and classifications that distinguish themselves by ‘marking differences’ that set them apart from others. This is similar to *habitus*, which Bourdieu (1984) describes as being like a classification system when he writes, “classification classifies the classifier” (p.

6). Thus, by integrating the conceptual ideas of boundary work with *habitus*, I not only learned what decisions parents make and why, but also how their decisions are grounded in a larger stratified social context that encourages and rewards more advantaged parents in particular, in order to create distance and maintain boundaries between themselves and others and, at the same time, reinforce status hierarchies and distinctions between groups.

Below, I illustrate the ways in which the three key factors of place, desire for diversity, and wanting the “best” educational program described above create contradictions and tensions within the advantaged parents I interviewed. I relate these internal struggles within these parents to Bourdieu’s concept of “fractured habitus” because it captures the sense of division that they embody between who they are, where they believe they belong and where their children are placed within the social hierarchy, even if they also appreciate the diversity in the school overall (for G&T parents) or in their own children’s classrooms (for parents with children in the Gen Ed program). In fact, I found a fractured habitus develops within these advantaged parents when they find themselves in the ‘awkward position’ of the Gen Ed program, which does not match with their advantaged place in society or where other similarly advantaged parents are located within the school. For G&T parents, they may feel like they are ‘in their right place,’ but also struggle with their child’s placement in a majority White classroom within a diverse school setting. Ultimately, what is important and helpful about Bourdieu’s theory as it relates to my findings is that different parents within my “advantaged” sample, depending on whether they have children in the high-status G&T program or not, differ in terms of how and when they either internalize or resist the categories or labels that their children are given based on a single score on a standardized test.

In fact, the context of this study provides a perfect site to learn about parents’ contradictory dispositions by comparing the different positionalities of parents with children enrolled in the G&T, Gen Ed, or both programs on how they make sense of their place within a segregated two-track school. In addition, it was clear how their placement clashed with their stated beliefs in diversity if they were in the G&T program, and their sense of place if their children were enrolled in the Gen Ed program. My analysis goes one step further by also showing how parents reconcile their seemingly contradictory beliefs

and actions.

I also reveal parents' contradictory dispositions between the value they place on "diversity"—at least in the abstract and if they are not in the minority, and their drive to provide their children with what's considered to be the "best" education. In the sections below, I illustrate the sorting process that parents go through based on the people in the school/school program when choosing *between* and *within* highly segregated school options in this policy context. For both sets of parents, I show how they make sense of their place[ment] within The Community School by rationalizing and reconciling where they belong. I demonstrate how the distinctions between the different sets of parents—G&T, Gen Ed, or both—are somewhat the same in terms of Bourdieu's theory and somewhat different given each set of parent's relationship to the structures.

Drawing the Boundaries—Distinguishing Between Us and Them

As I described briefly above, I found that parent's distinguished their place within this segregated and hierarchical school setting by drawing social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 1992) around "us" versus "them." These boundaries become signifiers of their "habitus" and help guide parents into the places where they feel they belong. As parents explain below, the G&T program was considered the place where the White, highly educated and higher income parents send their children to school ("us"), while the Gen Ed program was where the lower income, Black and Latino parents belong ("them")—even when advantaged parents have their own children enrolled in the Gen Ed program. The G&T program, then, became a symbol of where the more advantaged parents in this segregated system belonged.

To illustrate, Domenica, a 1st grade Gen Ed parent, explained that, "you'll want your kid to be in the G&T program, because the people in it are just like you." Thus, because Domenica describes herself as being "privileged, because I'm totally, completely independent" and more involved in the school, she belongs in the G&T program with other "privileged" and highly involved parents like her. At the same time, she describes the typical Gen Ed parents as being not like her, because they are bused in from outside the district or live in the "project housing" buildings within the catchment area, and are considered "non-involved" parents with "kids who have no discipline because parents are not involved."

In this way, advantaged parent's sense of 'place' in the stratified system (e.g. habitus) and the boundaries that continue to divide "us" and "them" contributes to the tension that parents face if they end up on the wrong side of the G&T- Gen Ed boundary line.

Therefore, for an advantaged parent, like Domenica, whose child did not receive a high enough score on the G&T test, they felt a mismatch between where they said they and their children belonged and where they were placed within the social hierarchy (e.g. fractured habitus). For this first theme, I go into further detail about how and why this boundary making process occurs, which is largely determined by *who* is enrolled in the school or program and the status and opportunities that the G&T label affords parents, not about whether they actually believed in the G&T label (like I will illustrate in Chapter 6) or believed the G&T program offered their children and other students "like them" the "best" education (like I will show in Chapter 7).

This sorting process by race and class became clear in the very beginning of the interview when parents were asked to describe The Community School to someone who is not familiar with the schools or programs in the district. What I found is that nearly all of the parents described it as being a "diverse, mixed population" school in terms of race, class, nationality, academic background, etc. But, when asked more specifically to describe the two different programs inside the school, 35 out of 41 – or 87 percent -- of the parents interviewed said that the G&T and Gen Ed classrooms were segregated by race and class lines. In other words, over everything else that they could say to differentiate the two programs, like curriculum or teacher quality, the thing that stuck out to them the most was the visual difference of the students enrolled in either program. For the remaining six parents who did not mention the racial or SES differences between programs, they explained that they did not know enough about the other respective program to distinguish between the two since they were all kindergarten parents who were new to the school.

For the majority of parents, though, they consistently delineated between the two different sets of G&T and Gen Ed parents along race and class lines and clearly identified with the G&T parents the most—even if their own children were currently enrolled in the Gen Ed program. In fact, they described

the G&T program as being comprised of a majority of White, higher income, highly educated, and very involved parents, and as one G&T parent, Betsy, replied, G&T parents “are totally committed and into it and have actually chosen to send their kids to school here over other schools.”

The Gen Ed parents, according to Betsy, were characterized as being mostly lower income, Black and Latino parents, “who it’s just their zoned school and... they’re not involved because they’re working parents or they’re parents who are under a lot of maybe financial hardship because we have in our district, we have several housing projects too.” Thus, Betsy is using symbolic boundaries or “conceptual distinctions” to categorize people into groups based on group similarities when determining where she belongs in the social hierarchy (Lamont & Molnar; 2002; p. 169). Then, as a result of the symbolic classifications that are made between “us” and “them,” parents who are not placed in what they consider to be the appropriate program for someone like them activate their cultural capital (Lareau, 2003) to cross over the G&T-Gen Ed boundary. This boundary maintenance results in patterns of “social exclusion and race and class segregation” or what Lamont & Molnar (2002) call “social boundaries” (p. 169) See Table 8.

Table 8. Symbolic and Social Boundaries Within The Community School

Symbolic Boundaries	Social Boundaries
Race/Ethnicity and Socio-economic Status	Race and SES Segregation between schools and programs
Perceptions of Student's Motivation Levels and Classroom Behavior	Perceptions of "Good" and "Bad" Schools or Programs (because of race, class, parent involvement, student behavior, etc.)
The Degree to Which Parents Were Involved in their Child's Education	Perceptions of being a smarter student or "better" parent if you are in the G&T program
Getting Child Tested for G&T or not	Negative Stigma of the Gen Ed label
Whether they Send their Children to Private Preschools	Do parents "Care" about their child's education? (as evidenced by whether they got them tested for G&T or not)
Where They Choose to Live (inside or outside The Community School's zone, low income housing, etc.)	Do parents "Value" Education? (as evidenced by their SES background)

Therefore, the White, middle-class and affluent parents I interviewed say a parent's race and class background was symbolic not only of G&T versus Gen Ed categories, but other attributes were correlated with those labels, including the degree to which parents were involved in their child's education, the level of importance parents placed on their children's education, and whether parents participated in the G&T admissions process or not, etc. Thus, parents sorted themselves into the places where other parents "like them" were also concentrated—e.g. disproportionately White neighborhood schools or majority White G&T programs inside diverse schools, even if it went against their beliefs in diversity. As Bourdieu (1984) would argue, their sense of 'place' within the social hierarchy guides them into the places where they said they belonged based on their privileged position in the larger system of inequality.

Some parents not only compared the demographic differences between the G&T and Gen Ed parents, but also described the differences between the student's behavior in the two separate programs. In fact, out of the 35 parents who said that the racial differences were the biggest distinction between programs, 21 of those same parents --or 65 percent-- also pointed out that there are more severe behavior

problems in the Gen Ed classrooms, especially in the older grades when the children's behavior "manifest themselves" more. The behavior problems in the Gen Ed classrooms were attributed to less parental involvement or support in their children's education because of cultural reasons, economic reasons, or work schedules, etc. In fact, for the White, more advantaged Gen Ed parents, the behavior problems in the older grades was a key reason to retest their children for the G&T.

To illustrate, Melissa, a parent with children in both programs, described The Community School overall as being, "a great cross-section of the New York City population." But, when asked specifically to describe the two different programs within the school, she said that she noticed a difference in the behavior of the Gen Ed students "because of the family background that a lot of the Gen Ed kids are coming from. There's just—there's not as much support, there's probably not as much time and attention with their parents, and I think it shows."

As I have demonstrated, the more advantaged parents categorize the typical Gen Ed families living outside of the district or from the "housing projects" as being not like them—the "other"-- in terms of race, class, parent involvement levels, and student behavior (e.g. symbolic boundaries), which then translates into perceptions of school quality and where they said they believe they belong (e.g. social boundaries). As Lamont and Molnar (2002) argue, symbolic boundaries only become real to the people involved when they develop into social boundaries.

An example of how symbolic boundaries become social boundaries was captured in the following quote by Anne, a 2nd and 4th grade G&T parent, who explained why she "felt comfortable" in The Community School's G&T program. "I think we felt comfortable that, because there was a test that narrowed - that was a bar to entry that the kids would be of similar enough abilities ...so I think a part of it was just that we knew that because there was a test that people had to take, that it would be an engaged class and parent body. I think that probably was what drew us." Therefore, Anne knew that the parents who went through the "hassle" of getting their child tested for G&T (e.g. symbolic boundaries) would be more involved or "engaged" in the school (e.g. social boundaries). Thus, the G&T test acted as a gatekeeper or "bar to entry" that sifted out the "engaged" students and more involved parents who could

navigate the system—which also happens to be correlated to their race and class backgrounds-- from the rest. And, even though Anne said that a reason for choosing The Community School was because her and her husband “liked the idea of a bigger range, socio-economically, than we had growing up...we sort of liked the idea of diversity of the public school,” she still wanted her children in the separate, majority White G&T program to be surrounded by students and parents who were more “engaged,” and, as I will describe below, rationalized that her children were being exposed to school-level diversity.

In the next section, I go into more detail about how parents make sense of what a typical “G&T parent” and “Gen Ed parent” symbolizes in this hierarchical school setting leading them to sort and segregate their children into the “best” program with the “better” G&T parents “like them.” These symbolic boundaries are created because parents want to be with others they perceive to be most “like them,” not necessarily because they believe their children are gifted and talented.

Labeled for Distinction

This perception that G&T parents were “better” and therefore the G&T program was the “best” because of the people there-- in terms of parent involvement levels, resources that they brought to the school, etc.—implying that Gen Ed parents were not, permeated the parent interviews. This reinforced the feeling that the G&T program was where you belonged if you were an advantaged parent who “cared” about your children’s education, even if it went against your beliefs in diversity.

Like Betsy and Anne suggest above, I found that G&T parents, because they went through the “hassle” of getting their children tested for G&T, was interpreted to symbolize that these parents “cared” the most about their children’s education. Jennifer, a parent with children in the G&T program, described the G&T parents in the school: “I think on some naïve level, I think the [G&T] parents are more involved because they were willing to go through the testing process, they’re willing to step up in other ways which has mostly to do with raising money to get - we got the teacher this year two little sofas for the kids to sit on to read. We got her a vacuum to vacuum the rug once a week... We got them construction paper, a teaching assistant... I don’t see that happening in the Gen Ed classrooms.”

Likewise, Lillian a 4th Grade G&T parent thought the “G&T classes tend to be easier to teach. The kids are less disruptive and maybe have more parental involvement and are better-behaved and better sort of prepared at home. Parents are around helping with the homework, forcing them to do it.” Thus, in all of these ways, G&T parents and students were perceived to be better, therefore, that is where other advantaged parents wanted to be.

On the contrary, Gen Ed parents as a group were seen as being less involved in the school, therefore, it was perceived that they were not as invested in their children’s education. These social and symbolic distinctions reinforced the feeling that advantaged parents belonged on the G&T side of the boundary line and contributed to the fracturedness that developed inside parents with children in the Gen Ed program because they were not ‘in their right place.’ The symbolic boundaries that divide G&T and Gen Ed parents and students by race and class also reflected the larger structures of inequality that the school embodied—particularly a set of educational policies that draw sharp distinctions between those who are “gifted” and those who are not and then give parents only one choice – between separate and unequal classrooms.

Jessica, a White 1st Grade Gen Ed parent, explained that not only do parents have this perception that the G&T parents are better, but the teachers also have this perception. She recalled a time when she was helping a teacher, who apparently did not know she was a Gen Ed parent, who said to her, “Well, you know those Gen Ed parents, you know, they don’t do what they’re supposed to do.” What the teacher meant by this statement was that Gen Ed parents were characterized as being “non-involved parents,” which translates into not caring about their child’s education.

Jessica said that comment kind of “cut me like a knife. I was really annoyed because I thought, oh my God, if the teachers in kindergarten have that perception, I don’t like that at all. But it definitely speaks to a problem that exists.” She went on to say that everyone has a perception about the two programs, even the parents.

Jessica, and other Gen Ed parents were also worried about the difference in parenting between advantaged parents and the lower income parents of color in the Gen Ed classrooms since when her

children got older she would have less control over their choices. Therefore, she wanted to be with other parents like her who were raising their children in similar ways and, as she stated, “that there was some [parent] oversight and involvement and-do you know what I mean? That was really what mattered to me more than anything.” In this way, race and class became signifiers of better parenting, more parent involvement, and better G&T programs with better-behaved children. As I will discuss in more detail below, this speaks to the stigma of the Gen Ed label that advantaged parents are trying to avoid by retesting their children for G&T.

Jessica went on to explain why the G&T parents label the Gen Ed parents as being less involved in the school:

I can understand to some degree why like a G&T parent labels the Gen Ed parents because I do think that the G&T parents are more responsive to things like a class parent sending out an email, you know, I think they get more participation. I found out two years in a row being a class parent of Gen Ed, it can be very frustrating because people just--they seem like they don't care or they don't have the time. Maybe it's because maybe both parents work, maybe there's just a single parent, I don't really know.

Therefore, as Jessica makes clear, White, advantaged Gen Ed parents struggle with their place[ment] the most and strive to be in the G&T program to be around other similarly advantaged parents like them. These Gen Ed parents felt like they were in a “second tier” program because of the high levels of parent involvement in the G&T classrooms. Jessica, as well as other advantaged Gen Ed parents that I interviewed, explained that in her Gen Ed classroom there are only a few parents who get involved and the rest of the parents are never around-- while the “G&T parents are there all of the time.”

Similarly, Elaine, a 3rd Grade Gen Ed parent, attributed the differences between the two sets of parents as being a “culture thing:”

“...because a lot of these [Gen Ed] families are low-income families...[and] a lot of that culture, that economic level or person or however you want to put it doesn't really participate in the school as much. So it becomes a more frustrating experience for parents like me, where every year I end up being the parent that does everything....And the other class is the G&T classes, parents are much more involved. They're much more interested in building the school and working towards raising money for things at the school. Gen Ed just never really seems to have interest in that.

Margaret, a parent with children in both programs, said that the differences in parent involvement between the two programs was pretty noticeable. For instance, in her daughter's kindergarten Gen Ed class she was the only parent who volunteered to be "Class Rep" compared to her son's 4th grade G&T class where there were eight parent Class Reps. As Margaret explained:

I think [Gen Ed parents] come in and they're not sure what the expectation is or what they're supposed to do... I mean, it's not a free ride really. I mean, there's a lot of expectation for people to donate all over the place ...I don't know, it seems like in [my daughter's Gen Ed] class, people don't really quite understand that that's kind of an obligation.

In this way, when parents labeled someone in the school as a Gen Ed parent, they were also criticizing them for not showing "interest" in getting involved or donating time or money to improve the school. At the same time, they were making their own approach to their children's education (e.g. how much they were involved in the school) the one that should be emulated and the one that the system rewards because they got their children into the high status G&T program. Ultimately, besides the visual differences, what I heard is that the biggest distinction between the two different sets of parents was how involved they were in their children's education, which started by getting their children tested for G&T. As I have shown above, the more advantaged Gen Ed parents in the school did not want to be placed in the same category as the other typical "Gen Ed parents" who were from the nearby "project housing" building, implying that those parents do not care enough to get their children tested for G&T, and are not as involved in the school, etc.

Although the typical 'Gen Ed parent' was the "other" in the minds of parents on both sides of the boundary line, a Gen Ed parent is not a homogeneous category. As I will explain in Chapter 7, this is especially true now as the boundaries are changing to include more White advantaged parents in the Gen Ed category. Therefore, you would think the definition of what a typical Gen Ed parent means should be changing in the minds of advantaged parents, as well. But, even if an advantaged parent had their children in the Gen Ed classroom they clearly did not think of themselves as a typical Gen Ed parent because it was where a majority of lower income, Black and Latino families who were not involved in the school were located.

Ironically, this preference to be with “like-minded” families who were from similar race and class backgrounds in the G&T program overshadowed their desire to expose their children to classroom-level diversity if they were initially enrolled in the Gen Ed program, as I will show in the next theme. According to parents, having a diverse student body in the school overall was a “positive thing,” but was also “disturbing” since the two programs were highly segregated across race and class lines. In the end, for most of these advantaged parents, having their children enrolled in a program with other students “like them” in terms of their social status and privilege and thus being associated with other parents “like them” was the most important factor, superseding all other desires, including “diversity.” In the sections below, I explain how parents reconcile their contradictory beliefs and actions by rationalizing that their children are being exposed to school level diversity, even though their G&T classrooms are not diverse. In fact, their desire to have their children educated in a “diverse” setting gets reconstructed depending on their child’s placement in the school.

How Parents Rationalize their School Choices and Reconcile Their Beliefs

What the first theme above made clear is that advantaged parents distinguish where they belong by socially and symbolically defining what it means to be a “G&T” parent versus a “Gen Ed” parent, even when they are technically a Gen Ed parent themselves. They want to be with other parents “like them” over and above any other school related factor and use the race and class composition of the school/program to determine it’s desirability. Given their advantaged backgrounds, it makes sense on some level that these parents feel they belong in what’s perceived to be the better program with the “better” parents and students. This is especially true in an elementary school context that allows parents to use their cultural capital--in the form of private preschool experiences, G&T test prepping and tutoring, etc.-- to gain access into the G&T program that uses a single test score as the sole criterion for admission. In addition, it was clear that their placement clashed with their stated beliefs in diversity if they were in the G&T program, and their sense of place if their children were enrolled in the Gen Ed program.

In this section, I illuminate the contradictions that emerge when parents rationalize their preferred choice of a majority White G&T classroom, even as they tout the benefits of choosing a diverse public

school (for G&T parents) or diverse Gen Ed classroom (for parents with children in the Gen Ed program) to educate their children. In fact, out of 41 total parents in my sample, 33 – or 80 percent-- said that the reason that they chose public over private school for their children’s education was because of their own public school experience (n=37) and the “diversity” of the NYC public schools. These parents explained that their own public school experience made them public school “advocates.” They also said that one of the main reasons that they chose public school, as opposed to private school or moving out to the suburbs where it is more homogeneous, was mainly because they wanted their children to be exposed to racial and socio-economic diversity-- with the cost of private school being a secondary reason. Given the strong support that these parents had of diverse, public schools, this second theme illustrates the contradictions that emerge when parents are faced with highly segregated school choice options—both between and within schools, pushing them to make choices that fit their advantaged backgrounds.

What was interesting was that even though there was not a direct question during the interview about how important school level diversity was when they were choosing schools/school programs for their children, more than half of parents said that diversity was a major factor in their decision to send their children to public school, and specifically The Community School, which they described as being racially and socio-economically diverse overall. Yet, as I will illustrate below, even though diversity was a “positive thing” in the school as a whole and in the Gen Ed program more specifically (at least in the younger grades), in these parent’s eyes, school-level diversity is a different thing than classroom-level diversity.

In addition, the term “diversity” meant different things at different times to parents depending on their relationship to the structures and which program or school they were talking about. For instance, “diversity” could mean a school or program with a majority of students of color, like in the Gen Ed program in the older grades. On the other hand, the term “diverse” or “diversity” was used to refer to a mix of race/ethnicities and SES backgrounds, like in the Gen Ed program in the younger grades.

To illustrate the apparent contradiction between school-level and classroom-level “diversity,” Betsy, a parent who enrolled her son in the Gen Ed program in Kindergarten and 1st grade before he

switched to G&T in 2nd grade, said that even though she was “not particularly happy” when her youngest of three children did not pass the G&T test, she was happy that out of all of her children he was the only one who was exposed to “real diversity” in the Gen Ed classrooms (meaning a mix of race/ethnicity and SES backgrounds) because “it’s a good life lesson.” Betsy was comparing her youngest child’s educational experience to her other children, including her oldest daughter who is in private school, which Betsy said has “fake diversity” because they bring in children just to say they are not all from the same background, and her middle son who went through the G&T program at The Community School, which Betsy said has no diversity at all. She explained that since “we live in New York City and there’s people from all over, I felt like his [Gen Ed] classroom absolutely reflected that in a great way.” But even though she felt that being in the Gen Ed classroom was “really a great experience” for her youngest child and admitted that the G&T programs are the least diverse when you compare all the school choice options (even compared to private schools), she still retested her son for G&T to be surrounded by other similarly advantaged parents.

Thus, all of Betsy’s earlier beliefs in the positive benefits of “real diversity” in the Gen Ed classrooms were swept aside for the higher status G&T program, which matched her privileged position in the status hierarchy. As I will illustrate below, like many other G&T parents, Betsy rationalized that her two youngest children who are both in the G&T program now are being exposed to school level diversity, even when their actual G&T classrooms are majority White. Thus, despite G&T parent’s beliefs in the benefits of diversity, they actually choose to separate their children in the “least diverse” G&T option.

Similarly, Alice, a 1st Grade G&T parent whose child was in the Kindergarten Gen Ed program before he switched over, said she likes “the idea of diversity” in the public schools, as opposed to a private school with “no diversity,” but in the same sentence thought it was “too bad” that the two academic programs within the school were segregated. She said:

I just like the fact that my kids [are going to] a public school and it meant a city public school. That said, the G&T classes honestly are not that diverse. They’re diverse in kids from all over the world. They’re diverse in, you know, there is an international diversity,

it's a somewhat Asian diversity. It's not minority diversity, you know, Hispanic, Black. We have a couple but not, you know, and it's too bad."

Thus, even though she appreciated the diversity her son was experiencing in the Gen Ed classroom before he switched over to G&T and said she would have been "fine" if he stayed in the Gen Ed, she was apparently more concerned about the status and opportunities that being on the G&T side of the boundary line would afford him.

Alice explained further that she knew that the G&T program was the place where her son belonged since the other parents in her neighborhood and preschool who "got into the G&T program, and the people I knew who had gotten in were really smart." In addition, she said that one of the students she knew from her son's preschool that attended The Community School's G&T program got into a high status G&T middle school, "so clearly she got a good education." Therefore, even though she would have been "fine" if her son stayed in the Gen Ed program and was bothered by the segregation between programs, she explained that there's a certain "status to being chosen" for the G&T program. She said, like I will explain in more detail in the next chapter, that the students in the G&T program are perceived to be smarter and "connotes a certain level of achievement that I'll buy into and make him look more attractive to other parents...so why wouldn't I want my child to have that, for people to judge him as well as possible?"

Thus, for advantaged parents, like Betsy and Alice, whose children originally get into the Gen Ed program, they attempt to reconcile their fractured habitus by switching over to the G&T program, which goes against their beliefs in diversity but otherwise matches their position in the status hierarchy.

G&T parents in the older grades who had the most experience with The Community School's culture were also critical about having the G&T program at The Community School because of the segregation and stratification that it caused within the school—even though their own children are in that program. Lillian, a 4th Grade G&T parent, described The Community School "as a fairly odd mixture" of affluent families from the neighborhood and families "where their kids are bused in or come in from less privileged areas." She explained that even though she went to a G&T program herself when she was a

child and her children are enrolled in one now, she does not think there should be a G&T program in the school because the school is “fairly segregated” and she said she did not believe that the G&T admissions process is “fair” because of the “parenting, the tutoring, whatever they do to get their kids in, and then they sort of have the upper hand for the rest of the time that they’re in school. *I don’t think that’s really fair. That being said, my kids are in that* (emphasis added).” Thus, even when G&T parents are critical about the program, they still use social and symbolic classifications to distinguish where they belong in the school. They embody the structures and feel they are ‘in their right place’ according to their privileged backgrounds even when they do not like the segregation or think the admissions process is “fair.”

On the other hand, for advantaged parents with at least one child in the Gen Ed program, they find themselves in the ‘awkward position’ of the Gen Ed program alongside parents who are not like them, therefore they “bring to consciousness” what G&T parents take for granted. Because they feel like they are not ‘in their right place’ in the social hierarchy, a fractured habitus develops as they struggle to modify their social location in the field.

I found that even though they appreciated the diversity in their children’s Gen Ed classrooms, they still retested their children for G&T because it matched their advantaged position in the social hierarchy. For example, Lauren, a Kindergarten Gen Ed White parent, said she “likes” the Gen Ed program because “my child goes to school with some non-White children, you know? I like that. In the other [G&T] classes, you don’t get that.” But, she still retested her son for G&T because she wanted to give her son what was perceived to be the better program based on the classroom behavior, even though she would lose the diversity that she liked so much in the Gen Ed. In other words, it is about the people you are surrounding yourselves with, not the program.

Lauren went on to say that in the older grades, there is more “diversity” in the Gen Ed classrooms, meaning a majority of Black and Latino students, because they used to bus in students of color from outside the neighborhood. She told a story about her and her children playing basketball in the park the other day:

And, like this older Black kid I'd never seen before, he goes, "Hey dudes, how you doing?" and he came and high-fived them. And I was like, I love that! I love that they have these acquaintances with these older kids that aren't exactly like them and that are kind of cool and fun, and not just boring, same as them, you know, middle-class, you know, I kind of like that.

Therefore, racial and socio-economic diversity was a good thing both in her son's class and in the school as a whole. But, even though Lauren, and many other Gen Ed parents, praised the Gen Ed program for the diversity, she still retested her children for G&T for 1st Grade because she heard that the behavior problems in the Gen Ed classrooms become an issue in the older grades.

When asked if most people in her kindergarten Gen Ed class were retesting their children, Lauren answered:

Yes, I think everyone feels like, Well, we owe it to our kids, we might as well, is it better? I don't know. So I mean, you feel like you want to give your kid every advantage, right? I mean, if you lived in the city, you would probably have your kids tested for G&T, right? Because that's what you do. I don't think you're going to say, 'No, I'm going to hold my kids back.'

Therefore, even though Lauren valued the diversity in her son's Gen Ed classroom and was not sure if the G&T classroom was actually "better," she still retested him for G&T because "that's what you do" to give your child "every advantage." Again, these distinctions between programs, parents and students would not exist if the G&T admissions policy did not create the distinctions in the first place.

Thus, what I heard is that parents value diversity for their children's education because it reflects the urban environment in which they live and prepares them to live and work in a global society. At the same time, though, they strive to give their children what's considered to be the best education in the G&T program, which matches their privileged position in the larger society, but is also segregated by race and class. They are especially concerned about the segregation between programs, but because they retest their children every year until they get into the G&T, they ironically help to reproduce the segregation and inequality within the system, not just for their children but for all children educated within the school. Thus, for the advantaged parents with children in the Gen Ed program they embody, resist and reproduce the structures all at the same time.

As I will demonstrate in the next section, in order for advantaged G&T parents to reconcile their contradictory beliefs and actions they would rationalize their choice of a G&T program by saying that

their children are being exposed to school-level diversity, even though there is little interaction between programs, and their G&T classrooms are majority White. One aspect of this larger theme, then, is that parents want the best of both worlds—separate, majority White G&T classrooms within highly diverse schools.

Wanting the Best of Both Worlds—Separate, White G&T Classrooms Within a Diverse School Setting

What I found is that even though the majority of parents said they value diverse public school settings, like The Community School, and describe the school overall as being very diverse racially and socio-economically, they choose to separate their children in all White G&T classrooms because of the people enrolled there. They rationalize that the whole school is diverse even though the G&T classrooms are not. In this way, parents like the “idea of diversity” at the school level, but the benefits of diversity do not extend to their majority White, higher income classrooms. Thus, the idea of “diversity” gets reconstructed depending on parent’s relationship to the structures. For example, Anne, a 2nd and 4th Grade G&T parent, when asked why she got her children tested for G&T, said:

I think because I wanted to make sure that they were going to be challenged in school and be in school with kids with parents who wanted their kids to be challenged and took learning seriously. Like I said, *we sort of liked the idea of diversity of the public school and it felt like the only way to get that - get both sort of things was through the G&T.*”

In this way, Anne was getting the best of both worlds, separate, White G&T classrooms within a diverse school setting. Dana, a G&T parent with children in 1st and 4th grade, when describing The Community School’s student population said, “...sociologically it’s a broad spectrum school. It has a very diverse student body.” Later in the interview, when asked whether her or her spouse’s educational experience influenced her school choice decisions for her own children, replied:

We both went to public school and we both wanted our kids in public school because we didn’t want them to be with all wealthy kids (laughs) and we didn’t want them to be with all White kids or all Jewish kids. And especially my husband felt that that was a strength in his growing up, and I think so too. But also I’m an artist and we’re in the city and it’s expensive, so I think if we couldn’t have found a good public school, we would have left the city.

As Dana’s quote above suggests, parents rationalized that their children were being exposed to diversity at the *school level*, even when their children’s G&T classrooms were not diverse. She explained

that it was important for her that her children were not surrounded by one type of child (e.g. comparing it to a private school environment), and that exposure to diversity was considered a “strength” in her husband’s public school education. But, what parents were leaving out is at the *classroom level* their children are not being exposed to diversity in their self-contained G&T classrooms since they are surrounded by, as one parent put it, mostly White “blond hair and blue eyed” children.

Similarly, Rosie, a White 1st Grade G&T parent, said that what was most important to her was that her daughter was in a class with other students whose parents “value education” and that she’s happy that her daughter is “dealing with diversity, which is great.” But, when I pointed out to her that her G&T classroom was not that “diverse” in terms of race and class, she replied, “Well, it’s more diverse than the Jewish Day School.”

She went on to clarify that the G&T program is not economically or educationally diverse because all of the parents have professional careers, which she thought was a good thing because they “value education.” She hopes that it does not have to do with race and class, but, she explained, “again, it comes down to, do you value education? Do you want your children to learn? Do you want your children to excel? Do you want them to be the best, do the best that they can and live up to their potential and have self-esteem...?” Therefore, even though Rosie admitted that “the whole idea of G&T bothers me” because of the segregation between programs, she chose the G&T program anyway in order to be with other highly educated families like hers that value education. Again, I found that the G&T program comes to symbolize race and class, which is correlated to parent’s education levels and how much they “value” education or not (e.g. social and symbolic boundaries).

Courtney, an incoming G&T parent to the school, explained that the school choice process “was really weird and unsettling and, one of the things that comes up a lot for a lot of people I think is sort of the whole, *race thing*. Like when you look at the demographics of these different classrooms, what are you seeing? And [The Community School] wasn’t the *Whitest* school I saw. But it’s definitely, when you look around, when I was looking at the parents at the [G&T] orientation the other day I was like, Oh, yeah, It’s pretty White you know? And it’s disturbing.” Thus, even though the segregation between

programs was “disturbing” to Courtney, she still chose the G&T program for her daughter’s education anyway because it was considered the best option because of the other people enrolled there. In other words, she embodied the structures and her child’s placement in the G&T program even if it contradicted with her beliefs in diversity and segregation.

Thus, what I heard over and over again was that parents like the “idea of diversity” at some abstract level and explain that the public schools as a whole are more diverse than the private schools, but the benefits of diversity do not extend to the classroom. Ultimately, they want diversity, but they also want to create distance from the “other.”

The majority of advantaged parents (eventually) navigate to the G&T program, not necessarily because they thought their children were gifted, but, as I will show in the next theme, because they wanted to avoid the more severe behavior problems in the Gen Ed, not have the negative stigma of the Gen Ed label, or, be the “minority” in the Gen Ed classrooms.

Navigating Between and Within Highly Segregated School Options---It’s About the People Not the Program Per Se

From the parent interview data, I found that a main reason that parents choose disproportionate White neighborhood schools and in this case G&T programs within diverse schools is because in this school choice context their only other option really is to choose a majority Black and Latino low income school. They do not want to be the “minority” in their neighborhood school or in The Community School’s Gen Ed program since it is comprised of mostly Black and Latino students. In fact, they apply to G&T programs to give themselves “better” options in a constrained school choice environment, not, as I will show in the next chapter, because they believe in the G&T label. As Dana, a 1st Grade G&T parent, explained she would not have initially chosen the Gen Ed program for her son since “You can tell when you were walking into the classes. It was not diverse, it was like the White class and brown class, and *not that I don’t want brown kids (laughs) in my kid’s class, I do*. I don’t know that I want my kid to be the *only* White kid in the class” (emphasis added).

A strong theme that emerged from the parent interviews was that it’s not about the G&T program

per se, it's about the people enrolled there that makes it an attractive choice for advantaged parents in this context. Therefore, even if parents value diversity, the "diverse" options with a mix of race and SES students are extremely limited to a few choice schools that are oversubscribed and hard to get into. As one parent, Joe, who has children in both programs, explained, "it's almost like if you build it they will come. It's a G&T program, OK let's go, you just called it a G&T program....There's community in the G&T program. There's more parent involvement. There's at least a sense that we're getting something better and that dresses it up."

Thus, it should come as no surprise that White, advantaged families are activating their uneven cultural capital exchange (Lareau, 2003) to sort their children into what's considered to be the "best" and high status educational option that matches their position in the larger system and society, but is also disproportionately White, higher income and segregated from the rest of the school. One parent's story that illuminated this sorting process, was Maya, an incoming parent to the Gen Ed program, who recently moved into one of the "good" school zones in the City Limits School District because she wanted "better" school options for her kindergarten daughter. In fact, Maya, her husband, and her three young children under the age of five recently moved from what she described as a "three times" bigger apartment in a majority African American lower income neighborhood in New York City into a much smaller one bedroom apartment in a wealthier and Whiter neighborhood because she did not want to worry about her daughter being a "minority" in their former zoned school, which is comprised mostly of lower income children of color:

I'm just trying to be here in this neighborhood where there are successful things going on and you don't have to worry about – like in [the lower income, African American neighborhood] I would worry about her being a minority. She's kind of soft spoken when she's in a group of kids. So things like that were a concern....We were willing to take that sacrifice [of a much smaller apartment] and take what we could get, if that makes sense. Our options were good.... there's more money, there's more parental involvement. The kids and parents you associate with are well educated and have a brighter future.

Therefore, Maya's family moved away from their old zoned school where her daughter would be a "minority" to get into a "better," Whiter, and higher income neighborhood with "good" school choice options. Even though she thought the G&T admissions process was "absurd" because parents prep their

children for the G&T tests, she chose to get her daughter tested for G&T because she wanted to give her every opportunity in the system. In addition, she thought that the segregation between G&T and Gen Ed programs was a major “disadvantage” [of the system]:

I guess [having G&T programs is] more of a disadvantage than an advantage – ‘this is me, this is you.’ Privilege and realizing that you aren’t or you are privileged. Parents do it, or I think our society does it, but kids do it on their own too. Once they figure out what the differences are, they can even label themselves. That’s how they make sense of their world. I see that as the big disadvantage of G&T in general -- ‘I’m less than you, I’m more than you.’ Our society values those – ‘I have this, and you don’t.’

Yet, even though Maya had all of these critiques about the validity of the G&T tests and the segregation that G&T caused, what was obviously more important to her was associating with “kids and parents” that are “well educated” and have “brighter futures.”

She also brings up the dichotomous categories and labels that this segregated system creates. For example, the different opportunities that are given to students based on their G&T/Gen Ed label, like Maya states, is also symbolic of whether they are privileged/not privileged, and the parents and student’s understanding of “I have this, and you don’t,” and “I’m less than you, I’m more than you.” As I will illustrate below, parents also worry about the negative stigma associated with the Gen Ed label—pushing them to make choices that match their privileged background.

Other incoming parents also described what factors they were considering in their school choice decision, like if the school had a strong principal or good teachers, but, like the following incoming parent, named Jane, said about getting her children into The Community School’s G&T program, that who she was exposing her children to mattered more than any other school related factor: “I’m not lying, if I would have gotten [into G&T] I would have sent my kid regardless of who the principal was because I also recognize being surrounded by good kids as more important than the other things.”

In fact, in contradictory ways parents like Jane who lived outside of The Community School’s catchment²⁹ area told me that they never would have considered their zoned school because of the

²⁹ I use the term “zone” and “catchment” interchangeably to mean the same thing. For instance, each student is automatically assigned to their zoned or neighborhood school, which is determined by their home address and which catchment area they live within.

demographics of the students enrolled there, therefore they used the G&T policy to escape their “failing” zoned schools and seclude their children in a “primarily White environment.” For instance, when asked about her zoned school, Jane replied: “I’m zoned for a failing school – [School D]. I live on [a particular street] so *I’m zoned for a school that no one you or I know would ever send their kids to...*” (emphasis added).

She went on to say that she grew up in a “nice suburb of DC” and her high school did not have a “huge demographic swing.” She wanted some “diversity,” but she replied:

I didn’t want my kids to be the only kids who have an apartment that’s bigger than we needed. *So I think partially I just want them to be surrounded by kids that are somewhat like them, or at least half of the kids.* I think living in New York gives them a good view on what the world is like and different types of people and they see all kinds. But I didn’t want them being at school with people that weren’t coming from like-minded families. I hope it doesn’t sound racist, but I think your friends are a big influence on how hard you study and how motivated you are. So it was important to me that they were somewhat surrounded by kids like that (emphasis added).

Thus, as I noted above, to a certain extent parents in my sample intuitively know that school diversity is beneficial for their children because they live in New York City and they “expect that in the public schools,” but what was most important to Jane and other parents like her was that there would be “like-minded families” from similar race and SES backgrounds in the school—just like they had in their own more suburban and homogeneous public school experience (See also Posey, 2012; Roda & Wells, 2013).

They do not want their children to be in the minority, so they either choose to live in (or move to) catchment areas with disproportionately White zoned schools or, like most parents, get their children tested for G&T and apply to the majority White G&T programs across the district if their zoned school was not an option and they did not want to move. Courtney, an incoming parent to the G&T program who is also zoned for a “failing” school, described her school choice process:

it was kind of a shock dealing with—realizing that our catchment school, everybody said, ‘You cannot go to that school. It’s a terrible school. You cannot send your kid there. Forget it. Don’t even look at it.’ Which of course I did look at it because I thought how bad could it be? (laughs) But it wasn’t appropriate for [my son]...since there’s projects right around there and it kind of seems like, you know, it’s not the people living west of [a certain street], it’s the people living east of [a certain street], you know? It services like the immediate area and all the people in the neighborhood that we knew from our preschool, like nobody was considering it.

Thus, parents use social and symbolic boundaries to distinguish where they belong based on where other advantaged parents from their private preschools and immediate neighborhoods are going. This is the case even if they are bothered by how segregated the G&T programs are. Courtney ended up choosing the G&T program for her son's education, even though she initially said she was "hesitant" to choose that option, because:

if the G&T is like this isolated pool in the school and the rest was strikingly different...Like I wanted something where there wasn't like such a big shocking difference between what's the classroom like and what the rest of the school seemed much more rough around the edges in terms of who was going there and what was going on.

Thus, contradictory dispositions emerge when parents are simultaneously bothered by the segregation between G&T and Gen Ed programs within diverse schools, but choose G&T programs anyway where there is a concentration of other families like theirs. Courtney rationalized her choice of a majority White G&T program by saying that "none of these options are perfect." Parents with children in the G&T program, then, will rationalize that they are exposing their children to diversity at the school level-- in the case of G&T programs within diverse schools—or, as Jane above said that simply by living in New York City they are exposing their children to diversity.

In contradictory ways, I found that despite parents' arguments for the importance of diverse schools and classrooms in preparing their own children and other children for a more global society, they actually steered away from schools and programs that did not enroll children like theirs in terms of race, class and privilege. Therefore, they chose, or strived to be in, what was perceived to be the "better" program with "better" parents and students, even if the G&T program was segregated by race and class.

In the next sub-theme, I illustrate how the advantaged parents in the Gen Ed program felt a stigma or judgment from other G&T parents about their placement in the school-- giving them another reason to struggle with their place in the social hierarchy. I reveal how advantaged parents with at least one child in the Gen Ed program develop a fractured habitus since their 'awkward' placement in the social hierarchy does not match with where they feel they belong, even if, like I demonstrated above, they valued the diversity that the Gen Ed program offered them.

The Stigma of Gen Ed—the “Oh” Response

In fact, Gen Ed parents in my sample, especially ones who had children in both programs, spoke about feeling a “stigma” or “judgment” from other parents because their child was placed in the Gen Ed classroom. These advantaged parents who had children in the Gen Ed program told stories about other parents asking them how their child scored on the test and feeling sorry for them if they did not test into the program. As I will describe in more detail in Chapter 6, parents felt a judgment about their child’s intelligence based on their score on a standardized test.

For instance, Denise, a 1st Grade Gen Ed White mother said, “Moms would be like ‘Oh, what class are you in?’ and it’s like ‘Oh, she’s in the Gen Ed class.’ ‘Oh.’ And you kinda get that ‘Oh’ thing.” Incoming parents to the school were also concerned about the stigma involved with being in the Gen Ed portion of the school. Kelly, a White, incoming parent to the Gen Ed program made a comment about not wanting to be “pegged as a Gen Ed parent” in the school, meaning one that is not involved in their children’s education. When asked if she would prefer a school that was all Gen Ed, she replied:

I would at this point, because I kind of fear the stigma of it. But that’s my own problem, not my kid’s problem. That’s my own little mental thing. I was actually talking to a friend this morning that’s going to [School A, which just phased out their G&T program], and she’s actually thrilled that there’s not going to be a G&T program there now because it makes her feel better, it makes her feel like there won’t be that division. And I can totally understand that because that’s how I feel about [The Community School] on some level, that I’m going to get pegged as the Gen Ed parent and not one of the G&T parents.

Thus, in order to avoid the Gen Ed parent “stigma,” I heard that parents would pay for expensive private tutoring in their homes for the G&T testing and buy test prep materials, booklets, and games in order for their children to score high enough to get into the “better” G&T programs.³⁰ Alyssa, an incoming White mother said that even if parents did not truly believe in the G&T program, they still prepped and tested their children for G&T because that was what everyone else was doing to give themselves “better” options. She said, “Everyone I talked to who were wanting to be in the camp of cool parenting - like organic food, breastfeeding, whatever the hell it is - suddenly - and they said they’re not

³⁰ For School C’s G&T program, students had to score a 98 or 99 to get into the program because it was one of the most popular programs. According to the G&T sibling policy, younger siblings had to score above a 90 to get into the same school.

teaching for the test - there wasn't a house that I went into that didn't have Brain Quest flashcards or some kind of game that had the word 'smart' in it. That's really unfortunate." Yet, even though Alyssa said she did not like, what she called the "tracking" and segregation within schools with G&T and Gen Ed programs, and she felt "bad" about getting her daughter tested, she still tested her for the G&T program to give herself "better" school options.

In addition, for parents with children in both programs, they prepped and retested their children who did not initially get into the G&T program because they did not feel like one of their children was more "gifted" than the other. For example, Margaret, a mother with an older son in a 3rd Grade G&T class and a younger daughter in Kindergarten Gen Ed struggled with her daughter's Gen Ed placement and the feelings of "judgment" from other G&T parents because her daughter was in Gen Ed,

...it bugged me, it definitely does feel like some sort of judgment, and it is just amazing how people-how people talk about G&T, how they respond to saying your kid is not like, like, "Oh, your poor stupid child!" (laughs) ... and people will say out loud in front of [my daughter], "Is she in the Gifted and Talented program?" And I'll say, "She's in K101 with [teacher's name]." "Oh." I mean, she hears that, you know? It's, it's so obnoxious. I think, I think the name should be changed. I mean, I think the whole program should be changed. I look at my children. There's no difference between-you know, one is not-[my son] is not more gifted and talented than [my daughter], absolutely not.

Therefore, for parents with children in both programs, they had to negotiate between the two programs and two sets of parents and clearly felt the most fractured over where their two children, who they view as similar, were placed within the school.

Amy, who recently moved from Texas, initially had a different conception of what gifted meant. She thought it was for children who were geniuses and scored off the charts, and therefore did not get her children tested for the program at first because she thought they were "normal IQ." As Amy, who had an older son in the third grade Gen Ed program and a younger daughter in the Kindergarten G&T class, explained, after awhile parents in the school kept "pulling me aside saying:"

No, no, you really. You're kids...and it took me a little while to read between the lines. What they were saying was that "we," the middle, upper middle class, well more or less, are over here. We don't want to be over there. They were trying to give me a code, ya know. So it took me a little while to figure that out. Of course when you go to the classes you see it [the segregation].

Amy got her children tested (and retested) for G&T, not because she believed they were gifted, but because everyone told her that's where her children belonged, and afterwards said:

It was very interesting when parents would say, So did your son pass the G&T? And I was like, no, he missed it. And they're like, 'Oh.' They just seemed ya know, 'really sucks to be you. You're kids going to be in there with all of those other kids,' At [The Community School] people are pulling you aside saying, 'Don't send you're kids in with those people.' And that's almost what they were telling me to do, everybody. If you didn't, I mean...they went out of their way they were looking out for me you know? I got that from several parents. And it wasn't like gifted and talented, it was like, 'are you with us or not?'

In this way, G&T became a symbol of where other parents who are "upper, middle class," more involved and "care" about their children's education sent their children to school. And, if advantaged parents did not get into G&T, they felt like they were not in the appropriate program for someone with their privileged background, especially given the "stigma" or the "Oh" response that the Gen Ed label produced. Because of their fractured habitus, advantaged Gen Ed parents all test and retest their children for G&T to feel 'in their right place,' create distance from the "other," and give their children what's perceived to be the "best" education.

Conclusion

In sum, what this first findings chapter illuminates are the struggles and contradictions that emerge when advantaged parents, who value "diversity" for their children's education (at least in the abstract and not if they are in the minority) and are bothered by the segregation between G&T and Gen Ed programs, are constructing their sense of 'place' within a segregated two-track school. I found that advantaged parents whose children are in the G&T, Gen Ed, or both programs made sense of their 'place' by drawing social and symbolic boundaries around what constitutes "us" (advantaged parents) versus "them" (lower income parents of color who enroll their children in the Gen Ed program). They want to expose their children to some level of diversity—at the school or classroom level, but also want to create distance from the "other" and not be in the minority. Therefore, if they are placed in the 'awkward position' of the Gen Ed program, they resist their placement by prepping and retesting their children for the high status G&T program that better matches their position in the larger system and society.

In fact, for the advantaged, White parents whose children are placed in the Gen Ed program, they experience a habitus that does not quite fit with their expectations of where their children belong in this segregated system (e.g. fractured habitus). Thus, because of their fractured habitus, Gen Ed parents struggle the most with the G&T/Gen Ed categories and labels, contradict themselves on the value they place on diversity, and resist their placement by moving out of less desirable catchment areas or by prepping and retesting their children for the G&T program because that's where they felt they belonged. On the other hand, even though G&T parents get their children into the appropriate program for someone like them, they are still bothered by the segregation and tension that having the two programs creates in the school. They still have to reconcile their beliefs in diversity by rationalizing that their children are being exposed to school-level diversity, even though they chose a segregated G&T classroom because they wanted their children surrounded by "like-minded families" and better behaved students with "brighter futures."

In Chapter 6, I will expand upon these contradictory actions and beliefs by showing how even advantaged parents – particularly those with at least one child in the Gen Ed program who have resources to get their children into G&T programs, struggle with the true meaning of the measures used to define giftedness in this context (e.g. a single score on a standardized test administered to students when they are in preschool). This theme illuminates how "giftedness" is a socially constructed term that some parents believe in or "buy into" more than others. I will also go into more detail about the differences between the different sets of parents regarding how they made sense of the labels and categories within the school, and how that relates to the "fracture" between who they are, where they belong, and most importantly where they are placed in the social hierarchy.

CHAPTER SIX

The Social Construction of Children and Their Ability: How Parents Embody or Resist the G&T Label

There are many contradictions that emerge when advantaged parents are distinguishing where they belong within a school that offers two segregated academic programs—a majority White G&T program and a majority Black and Latino (but demographically changing) Gen Ed program. As I demonstrated in Chapter Five, the advantaged, White and middle to upper-middle-class parents I studied chose (or strove to get their children into) majority White G&T classrooms because of *who* is enrolled there, not because they necessarily said they believed their children were “gifted.” It was clear, therefore, that the G&T program had become a symbol of where the more advantaged students and parents in this segregated system belonged. Thus, the White, advantaged parents whose children were placed in the Gen Ed program, felt a mismatch between where they and their children belonged in the school and where they were placed.

In this chapter, I continue with this framework by exploring how the “social construction” of children, their “ability,” and their parents’ understanding of what is the “best” education for them, is related more to how parents made sense of where they fit in this segregated two-track system than it is any objective assessment of the curriculum and teaching available in each of the two programs. I show that parents’ habitus or sense making about their place[ment] within The Community School leads them to either internalize (to varying degrees) or resist the categories or labels that their children are given based on their score on a standardized test (Bourdieu, 1984). In this chapter, therefore, I highlight how the G&T policy itself, not only shaped the distribution of opportunities, but also creates the status distinctions between parents, students and programs in this local school district. I highlight the parents’ strong drive to provide their children with the “best” education, even when they define that based more on symbolic boundaries of distinction than on actual information about G&T classes.

It is important to note that all of the advantaged parents in my sample had originally tested their children for the G&T program when they were applying for kindergarten spots. It is also the case that all

of these parents wanted the distinction of having their children in the G&T program to be with others like them. At the same time, however, many of these parents, especially those with children in the Gen Ed program, also struggled with the definition of “giftedness,” the validity of the G&T admission’s tests and the meaning of the label it confers, which many said is given to some students based on their advantaged backgrounds and whether or not they were prepped for the G&T tests. In fact, the advantaged parents I studied acknowledged that the use of standardized tests as the sole criterion for admission to the G&T program is unfair because it favors students from advantaged backgrounds. Nevertheless, despite their critique, these parents still capitalize on their advantage in order to win one of the coveted spots for their children in a high-status program, thus assuring the passage of “advantage” from one generation to the next.

Meanwhile, as I noted in Chapter 4, The Community School overall, and the Gen Ed program in particular, was changing rapidly in terms of the student demographics at the time I conducted this study, as more White and affluent students were enrolling in the Gen Ed program and staying there – at least through grade 3 (which is the last year they are able to retest for G&T placement). This meant the social and symbolic boundary lines between the Gen Ed and G&T programs (at least in grades K-2) were shifting, as I will explore further in Chapter 7. The Community School, therefore, was the perfect site to study the ways in which the meaning of the G&T placement and label was constructed among these parents because advantaged students were being placed into two separate hierarchical programs when they never would have before when students were placed into G&T and Gen Ed programs, as one parent put it, “based on skin color alone.” The parents with children in both programs, in particular, best articulated their belief that the “gifted” label is socially constructed—relating “giftedness” in this context more to student’s advantaged backgrounds and G&T test preparation than their true intelligence--- because they said they do not believe one of their children is more “gifted” than the other.

Thus, I argue that what is fueling the advantaged parent’s efforts to have their children “properly” sorted into the G&T program is because they have been sorted that way for many years, as far as I can tell, and for some, they have (or had) older children in the G&T program already. In fact, *who* is enrolled

in the G&T program is apparently more important to these parents than their beliefs about whether or not their children are actually gifted. As I will demonstrate below, parents get their children tested and retested for G&T to be with other students who are “like them” in terms of race and class within a system that is highly stratified by both factors. Yet because they do not feel comfortable, in 2011 in New York City, saying that their strong drive to get their children into the G&T program is about segregating them by race and class – and because, like I demonstrated in Chapter 5, they virtually all said that they would prefer their children to be in more diverse classrooms -- they use different language to discuss where they want their children placed and why.

In the sections below, I describe how the parents I studied differed in important ways in terms of their and their children’s positionalities in relation to the structures. I start by explaining how the majority of parents in my sample, or 84 percent, struggle with the labels or categories that their children are given—based on one test score-- in the school, yet, still strive to be in the G&T program because it’s perceived to be the “better” program. In this context where White students are being placed into two hierarchical academic programs, parents, especially parents with children in both programs, explained that “G&T” is a socially constructed term that some parents “buy into” more than others. They ‘play the game’ (e.g. test prepping) that other similarly advantaged parents are playing to get their children into the G&T program. Thus, getting your children tested for the G&T program and securing a G&T placement became a symbolic boundary between “us” (advantaged parents) and “them” (lower income parents of color with children in the Gen Ed program), which helped guide advantaged parents into the places where they felt they belonged.

I end the chapter by describing why some G&T parents, particularly the remaining 16 percent, or 7 parents in the younger grades, who have the least experience with the school or with the Gen Ed program, tend to embody or internalize the G&T label more than others because of their child’s score on the G&T test. In other words, their sense of place in the larger system and society matches their high status G&T placement in the school. For all parents, I found that contradictory dispositions emerge as they embody, resist and reproduce the structures all at the same time.

The Social Construction of the “Gifted” Label—“I never went into the G&T program thinking my kids were gifted”

Thus, for the advantaged parents with children in the Gen Ed program, including the 9 G&T parents in the older grades who have experienced the school’s culture longer, they stated that they did not believe their children were “truly” gifted or that the G&T tests were adequately measuring giftedness, as they define the term, because children were being prepared for the tests (either at home with workbooks or with a private tutor). In fact, according to the interview data, I found that the vast majority – a full 84 percent of G&T, Gen Ed, and both parents in my sample (or 34 out of 41), did not believe the G&T tests adequately measured “giftedness,” as the DOE defines the term (e.g. scoring a 90th percentile or above on the G&T test). Yet, despite how advantaged parents with children in the Gen Ed program question the legitimacy of the G&T label, they still resist their placement and ‘play the game’ by prepping and retesting their children every year to get into the G&T program to reconcile their fractured habitus and pass along their advantages to their children through educational placements.

For example, Tessa, a Gen Ed White parent who retested her two Gen Ed daughters to get into G&T, illustrates the ways that parents simultaneously embody, resist and reproduce the structures:

You know, it’s really interesting. I don’t like it [the G&T program]. I think it’s too bad. But you just are either in Gen Ed or you’re in G&T and it’s a marker, and it stays with you. I find it really interesting, especially- so I was telling my husband about this too, and I said, ‘You know, what are your feelings about it?’ And he said, ‘Well’-this is so funny, I mean he means it comically, but he said, ‘**Well, if our daughters get into G&T, I love it. And if they don’t, I think it’s a terrible program.**’ And I think that really is--I think a lot of people in their heart of hearts really feel that way (emphasis added).

In the sections below, I show how even advantaged parents – particularly those with at least one child in the Gen Ed program who have resources to get their children into G&T programs, struggle with the true meaning of the measures used to define giftedness in this context (e.g. a single score on a standardized test administered to students when they are in preschool). Again, we see how parents want to be in the G&T program because it matches their sense of “place” in the larger system and society, not because they “buy into” the labels and categories in the school or are certain that the G&T program is the “best” educationally, but rather because it matches their relatively high-status position in the social hierarchy.

Questioning the “Measures” Used to Define “Giftedness”

To illustrate, Melissa, a parent with a Kindergartener in the Gen Ed program and a 4th grader in the G&T described how parents socially construct the labels and categories in the school when she admitted, “I never went into the G&T program thinking that my kids were gifted. They were in the G&T program because I was able to send them to a good preschool. I knew they needed to take the test, I knew the whole deal. So I don’t really think there’s a whole lot of difference between the G&T and the Gen Ed, certainly in the early grades.”

Melissa and the other parents with children in both programs were, understandably, the most critical of having both programs within the school since they said they did not believe one of their children was more “gifted” than the other and thus questioned the meaning of the distinction between the two, but still retested for G&T because that’s where they felt they belonged. I learned that they simultaneously embodied the broader social structures because of their child’s G&T placement, but also resisted them when their other child[ren] is placed in the Gen Ed program with the students and parents who are not like them, in terms of race, class and academic ability. Thus, *who* is enrolled in the G&T program is apparently more important to these parents than their beliefs about whether or not their children are “gifted.”

Another parent with children in both programs, Amy, was skeptical of the reasons for having a G&T program at The Community School and the validity of the G&T tests since she considered both of her children to be “really intelligent.” Meanwhile, her son missed the cutoff score on the G&T for admission to the program by one point, thus he was labeled “not-gifted” and assigned to a Gen Ed classroom while her daughter got a very high score and was placed in the G&T classroom. She argued that it’s not a “real” G&T program in this context, because it’s about:

...sifting kids from like smart, and less smart...And it [the test scores] doesn’t tell me anything about the kid’s intelligence, really. The [G&T] test is very one-dimensional. And like I said, both my kids took the test. They’re both very intelligent kids, but they’re intelligent in different ways. And so, at first, when my son didn’t pass I said, what’s his score? And they said 89. So he was off by like one point. You know. So you know, because of that point, now he’s not gifted and talented? What is this? Really, what is this? I just thought that was lame.

Amy's quote relates to the social construction of the G&T label and the arbitrary test score cutoff that the DOE has implemented (90th percentile) to label students gifted/not gifted in the status hierarchy.

An incoming Gen Ed parent to the school, Kelly, also questioned what "gifted" meant in this context. Her son technically passed the 90th percentile cutoff score for the District's G&T requirement since he received a 94. But, he did not get placed in the G&T classroom within The Community School because other children were getting 98's or 99's on the G&T test. Therefore, she was offered a G&T seat in a less desirable school, but decided to choose the Gen Ed program in The Community School for kindergarten instead. She said, "I know some people that have scored 99s on the test and I would not say that their children are particularly bright. They're bright kids, but I wouldn't say they're out-there brilliant – I'm sure that they will do well in the world, but they're not geniuses by any stretch." As for her own son she explained, "I do think he's very bright, but I think most parents think that about their kids." Therefore, if advantaged parents prepped and tested their children for G&T, but got placed in the Gen Ed instead, a fractured habitus emerged because where they felt they and their children belonged did not match with where they were placed.

Denise, a 1st Grade Gen Ed parent, questioned the whole idea of labeling a four-year-old "gifted" because she implied that most children in the City Limits School District were being prepped for the G&T test. She said, "I wouldn't say anybody who pulled a bunch of kids out of the G&T program at [The Community School] are like, gonna be the next Bill Gates or a rocket scientist, ya know? I think probably the majority were prepped for it. I don't think a kid can be truly gifted. I think a kid can be a faster learner."

When I asked her how she would define giftedness? Denise, answered: "I think definitely different than the DOE does. Their definition is who can do really well on this test by being prepped. I actually think it's someone who has an ability to do something extraordinary, like if a kindergartener can do algebra or geometry or compose music. It certainly isn't what the Department of Ed's standards are." As I have shown, parents with children in the Gen Ed program thought the name "gifted" should be saved for children who have exceptional talents or abilities, not children who got a certain score on a

standardized test when they are four years old.

I also found that for 9 of the total 16 G&T parents in my sample, whose social status is somewhat legitimized by their child's placement – based on one test score – also questioned the gifted label in this context. For instance, Carrie, who had a 1st grade child in the G&T program, questioned the use of G&T tests for children so young, “At four years old? No. I’ll do it because that’s the system and I was working through the system, but I just don’t think that it adequately measures giftedness.” When I asked her why she felt that way, especially given the fact that her daughter tested into the G&T program, she explained that “I know that there’s probably parents who don’t test their kids. They don’t know, or they don’t bother or whatever. But, and I see that there’s a broad range of ability in the Gifted and Talented class, too.” Thus, a strong theme to emerge from the parent interviews was that parents felt that testing children so young—before they start formal schooling-- was unfair because the test scores reflected more than just their intelligence. It also reflected their cultural capital exchange, through test prepping, etc., in the school choice field.

In this way, advantaged G&T parents develop contradictory dispositions related to their sense of the “place” where they and their children belong within a segregated two-track school, when they simultaneously embody, resist and reproduce the social structures in which they educate their children. Carrie and other parents attributed the “broad range of ability” in the G&T program to the test preparation that children were being exposed to before the test. Thus, I found that, like Carrie, many parents would make distinctions between the two programs in terms of race and class and who is enrolled in either program. Thus, being with people like them was more important than any concrete programmatic distinctions between the G&T and Gen Ed programs. Ironically, the majority of parents did not even believe in the “gifted” label though--with most of them attributing their own children and other children’s G&T placements to their advantaged backgrounds or test preparation. As Carrie implied above, she knew the system and how to work through the system to get her daughter into the G&T program.

Meanwhile, for parents with children in the Gen Ed program, they questioned their child’s placement the most because even when they followed the “rules of the game” that other similarly

positioned parents followed, they were not placed in the appropriate program for someone like them. Therefore, the data show that most parents did not internalize the structures and their place within the hierarchy. Instead, they resisted their placements and attempted to work the system to their advantage-- with some being more successful than others-- by prepping and retesting their children for the G&T, even if they argued that they did not believe in the gifted label in this context, felt bad about prepping (because it was “cheating” and they were not “supposed” to do it), or testing their child so young. In this way, a fractured habitus develops because their sense of place within the larger system and society does not match their child’s placement within the school, even when they say they do not believe in the labels or measures used to define giftedness in this context. One aspect of this larger theme about the ways that parents question the measures used to define “giftedness” is that their definition of being “gifted” is very different than how the DOE defines the term (e.g. someone who scores above the 90th percentile on the G&T test).

Deconstructing the Construction of Giftedness. For instance, Lauren, a Kindergarten Gen Ed parent, thought that passing the G&T test score cutoff was more about test taking skills than actual intelligence. She explained how she would define giftedness: “Probably a kid who’s got like an I.Q. off the charts and could probably be like a kindergartener who could probably do like third grade stuff. That to me is gifted. The Gifted and Talented test that they give them, it’s, you know--you probably have to be bright to do it, but you also have to be a good test-taker.”

Lauren went on to say that her son scored a 94 on the test and that even though he passed the 90th percentile cutoff score and was guaranteed a seat in a gifted class (just not at The Community School because it was not a high enough score), she did not believe her son was “gifted.” In fact, she would never “in a million years tell anyone that he was gifted.” She said, “I think they have it named improperly. It should be like “accelerated” classes or something, but gifted to me, like I said, is somebody whose I.Q. is off the charts and who’s like playing piano without looking at music and that type of thing. That’s gifted to me. (pause) And I think a lot of parents feel that way.”

Despite parent's stated feelings about the G&T label, the validity of the G&T tests and the definition of giftedness, though, I heard that all of the Gen Ed parents who originally got their children tested for G&T in kindergarten retest them for 1st grade G&T admission. When asked if most people in her Gen Ed class were retesting their children, Lauren answered, "Yes, I think everyone feels like, Well, we owe it to our kids, we might as well, is it better? I don't know. So I mean, you feel like you want to give your kid every advantage, right? I mean, if you lived in the city, you would probably have your kids tested for G&T, right? Because that's what you do. I don't think you're going to say, 'No, I'm going to hold my kids back.'"

This quote relates to Annette Lareau's (2003) concept of "concerted cultivation" through which she explores how different social classes interact with institutional settings. Lareau found that middle class parents are more proactive and "assertive" when interacting with school professionals by making sure that their children have certain opportunities no matter what. Connected to this study, I also found that advantaged parents use their "concerted cultivation" when they get their children tested and retested for G&T, because as Lauren replied, "that's what you do"... to "give your kid every advantage." Lauren and other Gen Ed parents in my sample said that they felt pressure to retest their children because other parents were doing it and the G&T program was perceived to be "better" in terms of the people, even if, as Lauren's quote above suggests, they were not entirely sure what was so different academically between the programs.

As I illustrated above, the G&T label is socially constructed since, as virtually all the parents I interviewed admitted, they did not believe their children were "truly" gifted and did not believe the G&T tests were adequately measuring giftedness, as they define the term, because children were being prepared for the tests. Yet, what was ironic is that despite their critiques of the G&T program, they still retested their children every year to get into the G&T program to reconcile their fractured habitus and be in the place that fit their advantaged position in society.

As I will demonstrate in the next theme, one reason that parents thought the G&T test results were "skewed" in New York City and favored White, more advantaged children was because most

parents were preparing their preschool children to take the tests, which is what advantaged parents have been doing for years to get their children into specialized high schools and colleges.

G&T Test Preparation—“I did do it, and I feel a little bad about it.”

In fact, while test prepping has become ubiquitous among families of older students trying to get into competitive high schools and colleges, advantage parents in this district prep their preschoolers for the G&T kindergarten admissions test, not only to pass the 90th percentile cutoff score, but to get the highest score possible so they can get into The Community School’s G&T program. And, even as they consider the gifted label and measures as socially constructed, so too is their sense of what they need to do to give their child “every advantage” in the system. Related to the central theme of this study, advantaged parents’ embody contradictory dispositions related to their sense of the “place” where they and their children belong within a segregated two-track school, and their drive to provide their children with the “best” education, even when they are uncertain about what that means within this context.

According to the interview data, I found that 31 out of the 41 parents, or 76 percent, in my sample admitted that they did some kind of test prep activities with their children. Parents in the younger grades that I interviewed said the only reason they prepped their children for the G&T tests—either at home with workbooks or by hiring a private tutor -- was because they knew that other parents were. Basically, they argued that if they chose not to prep, their child would probably not get into the program because other children had been prepped (and they had to get a 98 or 99 to get into The Community School). Claire, a parent with two children in the G&T program, questioned how “fair” the G&T admissions process was when she said, “And I still question whether or not it’s fair because there’s so many kids that test really well. There are kids that are getting ninety-six or ninety-seven on these tests and don’t get in because the cutoff is like ninety-eight or ninety-nine” for G&T admission into The Community School.

Jessica, a 1st grade Gen Ed parent explained that “cognitively” she believed that her daughter was a better fit for the G&T program but if, as she said, “I don’t do anything to help her prepare for it and every other child is preparing for it, then she just automatically could not get in because she doesn’t have

that preparation. So I did do it, and I feel a little bad about it, but it was a conscious decision and I feel like it was one I had to make” to get her into the G&T program.

Furthermore, Jessica said she feels that the difference between the students who get into the G&T program and the ones who do not depends on whether they were prepped or not for the test, which she said is just the “status quo these days.” She also said that technically you are not “supposed to prep” and on all the DOE documents it says that if the proctor believes that your child was prepped, then they can stop the test. But, even though she felt that it was “cheating,” she tutored her daughter anyway to give her that chance for a better education.

What I heard over and over again was that the more advantaged parents in the system are tutoring their children for the G&T test not only to get a passing 90th percentile score, but give their children an extra advantage to get the highest score possible so they can get into the most popular schools, like The Community School. And, even though one of the DOE’s goals with the G&T policy change was to admit a more diverse G&T population, because of the test prepping and the extra advantages that White families have in the system, the G&T classrooms across the City have actually become more White. This is because the DOE changed the admissions policy to be a single score on a standardized test (see Table 1 in chapter 4), which favors more advantaged children in the system. In fact, the percentages of Black and Latino students in G&T classrooms have dramatically decreased since the policy change. These segregative patterns echo what many gifted and talented scholars have already warned about, namely that using an “entirely test driven admissions process will only exacerbate the problem of equity and racial imbalance” since it is very hard to identify lower- income, minority children as being “gifted” using tests alone (Raschka 2008).

As Lillian, a White, 1st Grade G&T parent, reiterates:

I mean, because people have figured out how to take the test. You’re not-the whole point, I think, for the G&T was to create more diversity and to-but you’re not getting diversity really. You’re still getting the highly educated parents with, you know, those kids going to those schools. You’re not really finding a gifted and talented-it’s, yes, the kids are smart, but it’s not because of anything other than their background probably, and what they’re exposed to... yeah, my son’s smart, he’s highly driven, but again if your child’s not exposed to a lot of these things, they’re not going to do well on the test.

This preparation for the G&T tests serves to privilege the more advantaged parents in the system even more and contributes to the social reproduction of the system. Betsy, a White, 2nd Grade G&T parent whose son was in the Gen Ed program for Kindergarten and 1st grade admitted that she paid a private tutor to prepare him for the G&T tests. She explained, "...a lot of the wealthier parents pay to have their kids tutored or else, you know, they just are providing the kind of stimulation that works well with testing. Not that these other [Gen Ed] kids aren't bright it's that, you know, they're not necessarily- they didn't get verbal stimulation or whatever it is, that helps them test well."

Kathy, a 4th grade G&T parent said that she did a lot of preparation for the G&T tests with her daughter. She joked, "that leading up to the test, every night before bed, we'd play these little games where I make the block stack and she'd make the block stack and all this stuff. And then she took the test the next day, and that night she's like, "Well, are we playing our game?" And I'm like, "No, we're all done with that!" (laughs) "The game is over!"

Lauren, a Kindergarten Gen Ed parent admitted that she tutored her son before he took the G&T test for 1st grade: "Do I think tutoring helped this year? Kind of a little bit. I think maybe a little---had I done----I did it like four sessions. You know, I really didn't do it. The only reason I did it was because my son's teacher said it's important when they get older. She said, yes, it's really important for disciplinarian reasons in the older grades that they should be in G&T. So then I kind of freaked out a little bit." So, not only do parents tell other parents to prep and retest their children for G&T, but apparently teachers are also advising certain Gen Ed parents that they should retest for G&T because of the behavior problems in the Gen Ed program.

According to the interview data, even when the parents cited above do not entirely "buy into" the labels or the validity of the G&T tests, they prep their children and test and retest them every year to get into the G&T because that's what other advantaged parents like them are doing. Therefore, they maintain the segregation between programs since most of the advantaged Gen Ed parents who do not originally get into the G&T program, like Betsy above, retest their children every year and eventually get them into the

G&T program by the time they enter the 2nd grade. Therefore, the Gen Ed classrooms in the younger grades are becoming more diverse because more White families from the neighborhood are choosing the Gen Ed program now (the G&T programs remain mostly White), but the older grades are still segregated because these same Gen Ed parents are retesting their children for G&T.

In the next section, I describe another factor that plays a part in how parents made sense of where their children belonged within the school. In this theme, I explore how parents made sense of their children's sense of the structures in terms of the race, class, and academic distinctions that students make between G&T and Gen Ed students.

How Parents Make Sense of Their Children's Sense of the Structures

Thus, parents with children in the Gen Ed program all retest for G&T placement not only because they wanted their children to be surrounded by similarly advantaged parents and students like them, but also because they did not want their children to feel “less smart” because of the Gen Ed label that they were given. Parents worried about their child's academic self-concept, because, as one parent said, the G&T or Gen Ed label “sets kids up for who they think they are as a student especially when it's purely divided by racial lines.” Parents also referred to the “stigma” of the Gen Ed label in terms of a child's academic ability—e.g. being “pegged as one of the not-so-smart kids” compared to the G&T students (see also Chapter 5 in terms of parent involvement), which served to reinforce for parents where their child belonged in the system and contributed to the fracturedness that emerged if they were not ‘in their right place’ in the status hierarchy. In other words, Gen Ed parents felt a judgment about their child's intelligence based on their score on a standardized test. On the other side, G&T parents were also concerned about their child feeling “better than” the Gen Ed students if they found out about their “G&T” status and their placement within the school. This finding shows how parents made sense of their children's sense of the structures and, in turn, how that might affect the ways in which parents' act or talk about G&T versus Gen Ed and their sense of place within the structures.

To illustrate, Kelly an incoming Kindergarten Gen Ed parent described the differences between the G&T and Gen Ed classrooms and what she worries about by having her son in the Gen Ed classroom.

She said, “everyone in the G&T class is either White or Asian. There are very few White children in the Gen Ed classrooms and it was mostly Hispanic. That’s the way it is. I actually like diversity, so I don’t have a problem with it from that perspective — but what I do worry about is that he will pick up on it at some point and feel pegged as one of the not-so-smart kids.” Therefore, despite the fact that she “likes diversity,” Kelly worried about the “stigma” of the Gen Ed label, not just for her in terms of parent involvement, but also for her son who might figure out what the G&T and Gen Ed labels mean and feel somehow less smart because he’s in the Gen Ed program.

Thus, the negative stigma of the Gen Ed label was not just felt by the parents, but also, according to the parents, was felt by their children, too. As one G&T parent, Cecelia, explained, there can be a perception with the students that the Gen Ed class is considered the “dumb kid’s class.” What I also found is that this feeling of being less smart can also create conflict and misunderstandings at home when siblings are placed into two different academic programs.

Margaret, a parent with children in both programs, explained that since her older son was already in the G&T program, she did not want her younger daughter who was placed in the kindergarten Gen Ed program to have the “stigma” of being in the Gen Ed. She explained that:

...even the label of it is just, you know, “Gifted and Talented.” I mean, any child at any age, at five years old, understands those words. And Gen Ed, you know, that’s like—I don’t know, Gifted and Talented definitely has the ring of being the special class. Like [my son] at one time said something like, “Well”—he asked if [his sister] was in Special Ed. He just didn’t know, he didn’t know what the difference was. And I don’t think [my daughter] has an awareness yet that she’s in a different program. But it just bugs me so much that she is, and—well.

Later in the interview, when I asked Margaret how she would define giftedness, she hesitated and said, “I don’t know.” But, when I asked her whether she thought the G&T tests adequately measure giftedness, she adamantly replied:

Not at all. I think that every kid has the potential to be, you know, to be great and to be a great student and a creative student and add a lot to their classroom, and I think dividing it up like that is really sort of dangerous... *because it sets kids up for who they think they are as a student* or—and especially like when it is purely divided on these racial lines, yeah, just, it adds this really negative culture at the school and it’s divisive.

Despite Margaret’s critique of the G&T system, though, she still prepped and retested her

daughter for 1st grade G&T placement to avoid the negative stigma of the Gen Ed label. Therefore, she embodied the G&T label because of her older son's placement in the program and her sense of where she belonged in the social structures, resisted it by being critical of the segregation and "negative culture" that having the G&T program produced, and reproduced the structures by retesting her Gen Ed daughter for G&T---resulting in a fractured habitus between where she felt her daughter belonged in the school and where she was initially placed.

Brianna, a parent with two younger daughters in the Gen Ed program and an older son in the G&T program, provided a sad portrait of how children within the same family can perceive their academic self-concept because of their different educational placements. She explained that having her three children in different programs "creates an emotional conflict" between them. In her eyes, "I wouldn't say one is quicker than the other." But, her children "feel the difference" because parents at the school talk about the two different programs in front of them and her older son acts like "I'm better than you guys."

Therefore, Brianna said she has to assure her children that they are "all the same," but they "still don't understand why they are in different programs." She said, "especially my middle child, she's in 3rd grade [in the Gen Ed program] and she feels unhappy and insecure. I try to convince her, even though [your brother] is in G&T, it doesn't mean he's smarter, but again I try to tell them that you can achieve in your own way. But still, there is conflict." Brianna went on to say that she would prefer that the two programs did not exist at The Community School and if she could she would switch schools because of how divisive it is, especially in her own family. She replied, "*They don't understand, but still they do understand.* Emotionally, they feel themselves on the inside, why am I here? Why is my brother in a different class? Is there something wrong? They don't know, but still they feel it." In other words, they sense the stigma and the inferiority that the Gen Ed label connotes.

Tessa, a parent with two older daughters in the G&T and her youngest son in the Gen Ed program, when asked what she felt were the advantages or disadvantages of having two separate programs within one school responded, "I worry about singling kids out at an early age. I was very

concerned about it because my son's not in [G&T] next year. They've got friends, I don't want them to think - I wouldn't want any kids to think that they're either special or that they're not good enough. I really struggle with the fact that it's highlighted at such an early age. But that's my biggest issue."

While Gen Ed parents do not want their children to feel less than the G&T students, on the other side, I also found that G&T parents, especially in the older grades, do not want their children to know that they are in the G&T classroom either. They do not want them to feel "special" or "better than" the Gen Ed children. In contradictory ways, advantaged parents all strive to be in the "better" G&T program because that's where they felt they belonged, yet they do not want their children to know which program they were in because of the segregation, stigma of the labels, etc. Lillian, a 4th Grade G&T parent said, "I think kids figure it out that they're in one program and the other kids are in another so they feel somehow superior to those kids. I think that's all wrong, to start that at such a young age. And I also feel like kids - even if kids are faster with academics, it behooves them to be around kids that may not be so fast in a lot of ways. They can help those kids, they can learn from that." Another 4th Grade G&T parent, Caitlyn, did not want to tell her daughter that she was in the G&T program, even though she realized that she was in a G&T class, because "I didn't want her to think that the [Gen Ed] kids were lesser or something - I just didn't want her to feel like, 'I'm special, I'm smart, I'm a gifted person.' I think it's kind of a weird concept for a child. I don't think they can handle that really."

Although parents disagreed about when students figure out which program they are in, it is clear that children eventually do figure out that there are two different hierarchical academic programs within the school and can "feel" and even see the differences. As I will show in Chapter 7, parents explained that students "see" the visual distinctions in terms of the student's race/ethnicity between the two programs, but they also realize that there are academic differences, as well. Thus, it's not only about feeling a stigma from being in the Gen Ed classroom, it's also feeling "somehow superior" if you are in the G&T program that parents worry about for their children's academic self-concept. This feeling of being smarter, better, or special not only happens at school between students, but as I showed with Brianna above, it can also create conflict at home in the same family.

In the above sections, I focused on the 83 percent of parents in my sample who questioned the measures used to define “giftedness,” the validity of the G&T program, and the labels and categories their children are given, based on one test score, in the school. I turn next to an analysis of the 7 G&T parents who I found were more vested in the meaning and significance of the G&T program. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this group of G&T parents were the ones with children in the younger grades who had the least experience with the school or the Gen Ed program, and were found to internalize the G&T label based on their children’s score on the G&T test. Thus, contradictory dispositions emerge since their child’s G&T test score gets legitimized as being reflective of their actual ability, even if it is also a social construction of their advantaged backgrounds. In this next section, I describe how these G&T parents in the younger grades embody their place within the structures because their child got a top score on the G&T test and, thus, are placed in the appropriate program for someone with their privileged background. Their child’s intelligence and ability gets legitimized by the test score, even if before the test they did not necessarily believe their children were gifted or know if they would “pass” the cutoff score for G&T.

For Some G&T Parents—“My kids are good enough to be in G&T”

An example of how G&T parents internalized their child’s academic ability based on their score on the G&T test was, Cecelia, a Kindergarten G&T parent, who said she was “thrilled” that her daughter got a “99” on the test and got into The Community School’s popular G&T program. She described her daughter as being “immensely gifted in a structural artistic way” and so she was “happy” that the G&T test “picked up” on her daughter’s “particular type of giftedness.” Furthermore, as I will describe in more detail below, she said that there are a lot of “wealthy parents” in the G&T program and the “status” and “value” of the G&T label “matters to them, even though it shouldn’t.”

Even though Cecelia’s daughter got a very high score on the G&T test, before she took the test, Cecelia was not sure how she would perform. She told a story about practicing the G&T test with her daughter at home, and on the day of the test, her daughter wanted to practice it one more time. She said she thought she had “totally blown it” when her daughter wanted to fill in the bubbles for the correct

answers on the test, even though children do not have to, and that she colored in every bubble for each question. When Cecelia told her daughter only to fill in the bubble for the right answer, her daughter got mad and said she did not want to take the test anymore.

Cecelia said, “I mean, it’s just so insane. Like the score they get on this test, it’s potentially worth like—the more I think about it—it’s like a half a million dollars [for private school tuition], and it’s like a three-year-old taking the test, when you calculate the number of years in school! It’s just so crazy.”

Throughout the interviews, I heard that these 7 G&T parents, like Cecelia, would internalize or “buy into” the G&T label since their child scored high enough on the standardized test to be offered a G&T seat. This legitimization occurred even if going into the process these same parents said they did not believe their children were gifted. As one parent replied, after parents get their children’s G&T test scores back, “Suddenly, you are what the test says you are.” Therefore, if their child got a 98 or 99 on the test, their advantaged backgrounds were rewarded in the form of educational placements for their children (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

In fact, according to Gen Ed parents, there was a perception that most G&T parents in the school believed in the gifted labels that their children were given because of the “status” of the label. Thus, there was a perception in the school that G&T students were “smarter” because of their score on the G&T test. In this way, once parents got their children into what they believed was the best program for someone with their advantaged background, in this case the G&T program, they were more likely to believe in the labels or categories that their children were given—based on one test score-- within the school. Their sense of place is constructed by internalizing the G&T label that their children are given, which matches their advantaged position in society, even if at the same time they might be critical of the segregation within the school or lack of diversity in the G&T program.

What I also found was that in The Community School’s context, the separation of race and class between the different academic tracks served to further legitimize the academic identities and habitus of White, advantaged parents (and children) of being “smarter” or “better” academically because they were consistently placed in the separate, G&T classes. This racial and SES segregation between tracks that has

characterized the school since the G&T program was started in 1997, served to reinforce for parents where their child belonged in the system (e.g. social boundary), and whether they should get them tested and retested for the G&T program (e.g. symbolic boundary) because that's where they felt they belonged.

An example of how G&T parents socially construct their child's ability and their place within the structures, was when Anne, a 2nd and 4th grade G&T parent explained why she felt "pretty confident" that her older son would get into her "first choice" school, which was The Community School's G&T program, since he got a "99" on the test. Her youngest daughter only had to get the 90th percentile for a G&T seat because she was a sibling, but she also coincidentally got a "99" on the G&T test. When asked to define giftedness, Anne replied that a gifted child would be, "an abnormally smart kid [who is]... just able to learn at a young age behaviorally and sort of just, that ability to sit and listen at a younger age and follow directions at an early age often leads to that [G&T] label." She went on to explain in more detail who is labeled gifted in the school and who is not, which she implied is more about race and class than intelligence:

I think it's – I personally don't think it's so much intelligence at this age as it is sort of support at home and hearing language in a way that it becomes more intuitive. It's just easier, I think, for some kids who have someone backing them up a little bit on this type of stuff because I think nothing they do at this age is rocket science. Every kid should be able to learn this. [It's different] in a Gen Ed setting where not all of the kids have this support to get to where they could be and they don't have the preschool behind them to help them get to where they need to be.

Thus, Anne uses symbolic boundaries to define G&T (e.g. children who have support at home) and Gen Ed (e.g. children who did not go to preschool) categories to determine where she belongs in the race and class based hierarchy. She also internalized the G&T label that her children were given based on their scores on a standardized test and clearly felt like her children were in the right placement because it fit with her advantaged background in the system.

Thus, I found that one of the first things that these 7 G&T parents told me was their child's score on the G&T test. For instance, Cecelia, a Kindergarten G&T parent, when asked what her school choice options were for her daughter, explained, "Well, first of all, she got a ninety-nine on the test, so that opens up all the city-wides to you, and plus the district...G&T's are all good, so you rank them all, you get one,

you know? There's like no ifs, ands or buts." She went on to explain that if she did not get her daughter into a G&T program, she would have moved out to the suburbs because private school financially was not an option for her family and she lived in a failing school catchment area.

For parents like Cecelia who lived outside The Community School's catchment and did not have The Community School's Gen Ed program to fall back on, getting into a G&T program was sometimes the only option out of their "failing" majority Black and Latino zoned school. This situation created stress and anxiety for parents to have their children score high enough on the G&T test to be 'in their right place' with others like them. Rosie, a 1st Grade G&T parent who also lived outside of The Community School's catchment, did not originally think her daughter could pass the G&T cutoff score, but explained that she had her tested for G&T because she had to give her that "chance." Rosie was totally surprised when her daughter's G&T test results came back, and she found out that she got a "...98...she was really 98.5 but they round down. Like I said, it blew me away. It was like one of those...moments in parenting where you're like – the success. You're like, 'My child is gifted' – and you know – I called my husband – and you're like, 'I'm doing something right, what am I doing?' Because it feels good because there's so many defeating moments in parenting..."

Thus, I found that even if before they took the test parents did not think their child was "gifted" or could even pass the G&T test score cutoff after they got their test scores back they "buy into" the number and G&T label even more. In other words, their score gets legitimized as being reflective of their true intelligence.

Ashley, a 2nd grade G&T parent who also had older children go through the G&T program at The Community School thought that her children were "gifted" and were placed in the appropriate program since it gave them the "stimulation to match their thinking, their cognitive ability." When I asked her what the advantage was to having the G&T program at her school, she replied, "it provides for me at least what my kids have in terms of their academic profile I guess. I mean if I had a child who is very musically gifted I would definitely be looking to put that child in a music program I think. And so I guess, ya know it's the same thing." Other G&T parents who believed their children were truly gifted also

appreciated that the G&T tests picked up on their child's particular "type" of giftedness.

Therefore, for these 7 G&T parents in my sample, once they got their child's G&T test score back, it validated their belief in their child's intelligence and ability, and made them also believe in the validity of the G&T tests for G&T placement. And, if parents were lucky enough to get their children enrolled in the G&T program of their choice, they were also more likely to be satisfied with their child's placement and "buy into" the distinctions between programs. Lauren, an incoming parent to the school, explained that after the G&T test scores came back some of her friends were saying:

Well, I don't know, if she got into Anderson [one of the G&T city-wide schools] it would be great but she got a 99 and the younger sibling would only have to get a 97 but then, what would it be like if the class was mixed 99 and 97? But the day before the tests, they wouldn't say that. And you can't help it. It's a magical thing. It's not a reasonable thing. Suddenly, you are what the test said you were. And I feel bad for everybody, the parents, the children, and the schools! It's such a crock. When my daughter got into [this one school], it's a lottery. And we were still like, 'Good job!!' It was a lottery. And so of course if you get a 99 or whatever, you're going to be like, 'Well the test is not so bad.' It's unfortunate.

As Lauren explained, even if parents do not entirely believe their child is gifted, feel bad about getting them tested so young, or are bothered by the lack of diversity in the G&T programs, regardless of their earlier beliefs, once they get their child's test scores back, "suddenly you are what the test said you were."

In other words, once parents get their children into what they believe is the best program for someone like them, in this case the G&T program, they are more likely to "buy into" the labels or categories that their children are given within the school, even if "they try not to." Therefore, their sense of place is constructed by internalizing the G&T label that their children are given, which matches their advantaged position in society. As Jessica, a White 1st Grade Gen Ed parent who was currently testing her second child for G&T, replied, "I think if the kid is in G&T, they really like it. If you're not in G&T, there's a little bit of pining and sour grapes." She went on to explain that the G&T students are perceived to be smarter because they scored high enough to get into the program, and even though she tried not to "buy into" the labels in the school, especially since her first child was in the Gen Ed program, to a certain extent she and other parents did. Jessica explained:

As much as I try not to buy into it, and also as much as I hope my kindergartner will get into G&T because I think she is, I think she is the kind of kid that focuses a lot, and she really wants to learn. So I try not to buy into it, but I have to say that I do. There's a little bit that's like, oh yeah, you know, *my kids are good enough to be in G&T*. And I don't really believe it, but you know, there's two baskets, and I mean there's a [G&T] basket and there's the other [Gen Ed] basket, so.

In this way, even though parents said that they “try not to buy into” the G&T label and the G&T status “shouldn't matter,” once their child gets a top score on the test they “buy into” the G&T label anyway because, as I illustrate below in the next sub-theme, it “connotes a certain level of achievement” or “value” for parents to tell other parents that their child is “gifted” and “talented.”

The “Status of Being Chosen” for the G&T

In fact, parents said that the G&T label is a “value” or status that matters to many parents, even though they also admitted that “it shouldn't matter.” This illustrates the contradictory dispositions that emerge when parents are constructing their sense of place within the structures, which, as I have illustrated, is either by resisting or internalizing the labels that their children are given based on one test score. For example, when asked if parents talk about the possibility that the G&T program could be phased out in the future, Cecilia responded, “It's not a topic that's come up a lot, at least within my class's parent body. I think that people are very attached to the idea. I think it would take a lot to let it go because, of course, it's like value, which is like what you say, yeah, my child's in public school, but she's in G&T and there's a lot of wealthy parents in that school and I know that it matters to them, even though it shouldn't.” In other words, the G&T label is particularly important when they are telling other parents outside of the school which program their child is in because it connotes a certain level of status—thus, matching their privileged position in society.

Alice, whose son was in the Kindergarten Gen Ed classroom before he switched to the G&T for 1st Grade said that she would have been “fine” if her son stayed in the Gen Ed program, but to outsiders there's a certain “status to being chosen” for the G&T program. She said, like other parents also explained, that the students in the G&T program are perceived to be smarter and “connotes a certain level of achievement that I'll buy into and make him look more attractive to other parents...so why wouldn't I want my child to have that, for people to judge him as well as possible?”

On the other side, like Jessica said above, for the Gen Ed parents who got their children tested for G&T but did not get into The Community School's program, there was a little bit of "pining and sour grapes" over having the two programs in the school. Many Gen Ed parents, like Lisa who had a child in the Kindergarten Gen Ed program, felt that G&T parents acted "superior" because their children scored high enough to get into the program, when she explained, "I think [having the G&T program] just creates too much animosity between two groups, or a feeling of being better because one is in the program. It creates a lot of tension." Lisa told a story about having friends from preschool who have their children in the G&T program now and "always used to talk" to her before, but ever since her son was placed in the Gen Ed program they "don't even acknowledge" her when she walks by. She said, "if I feel it, I'm sure other parents do. It creates a distinction, especially in this day and age. It's ridiculous. Again, it's weird."

Therefore, from the Gen Ed parent's perspective, they sense that many G&T parents "buy into" or internalize the labels and categories in the school, like the status and exclusivity of the program, and act like their children are special or better than the other children in the school because of their score on the G&T test. Margaret, a parent with children in both programs, said that some G&T parents will sigh when she tells them that her younger daughter did not get into the G&T program, and act like their "G&T" children are "clearly more special and clearly more gifted and talented" than the Gen Ed students.

Tara, a 3rd Grade Gen Ed White parent said, "I think they [G&T parents] like the idea of having a separate program. Feeling like their kid is smarter or whatever the perception or terminology they want to use. I think they like that." Domenica, a 1st Grade Gen Ed parent, also pointed out that although her and her friends from the G&T program do not "buy into" the labels, most G&T parents in the school do: "They actually feel that their kids are gifted if they get into the program. It's this whole competition kind of feeling, and once you're in the school - like in our school, it becomes a little segregated..." She went on to say that she has a problem with the name of the G&T program "because I think the parents and the kids do end up believing they are actually geniuses, that their kids are special compared to the other kids."

Lisa, a mother in the kindergarten Gen Ed program, explained that once G&T parents enter the school, "it feels like they're part of the G&T program but not of the whole school. They make

it really - there is a difference. ‘Yeah, my kid’s in the first grade *G&T* class’ versus some other person who will say ‘She’s in first grade’. They really make the emphasis that it’s not the same as the rest. But it’s the parents, because the kids don’t know that [at least in the younger grades].”

In so many words, what parents explained was that if you have a child in G&T you’re more likely to be satisfied with your child’s placement in the school and internalize the G&T label that they are given because of their score on a standardized test. In this way, I found that these 7 G&T parents felt like they were ‘in their right place’ in the race and class based hierarchy because it matched their privileged position in the larger system and society. On the other side, parents with at least one child in the Gen Ed program developed a fractured habitus because where they felt their children belonged—e.g. in the G&T program with other students like theirs—is not where they were originally placed.

As I explained above, parents who have children in both programs are the ones that can really compare the differences between programs the best since they have experienced first-hand the two different sets of Gen Ed and G&T teachers, students and parents. Melissa, a parent who has a Kindergartener in Gen Ed and a 4th Grader in G&T, told me that “some parents... would hate to see the G&T go.” When I asked her, which parents felt that way, she responded, “the parents who have children in the Gifted who would never consider putting them in the Gen Ed. But it’s tough to know until you’ve been at the school for a long time and you know, or until you do the Gen Ed and you realize that it’s not that big of a difference.” Thus, I found that the G&T parents that Melissa is referring to that would never consider putting their child in the Gen Ed tend to “buy into” the labels and categories the most because of their child’s score on the G&T test and their placement in the “better” program. They said they believed that there are real distinctions between programs in terms of the student’s academic ability and behavior, partly as Melissa explained, because they have never experienced the Gen Ed program or interacted with the students before. The other reason is because there are still sharp distinctions made between “us” (advantaged parents) and “them” (lower income parents of color who choose the Gen Ed program) that continue to symbolize who belongs in G&T and who does not.

The Gen Ed parents could sense that the G&T parents thought they were better or that their children were smarter compared to the Gen Ed families, which served to exacerbate the feeling of being second best in the school even, as I will show in the following chapter, when parents tried to downplay the academic differences between programs.

Conclusion

In sum, what this second theme illustrates is that parents either internalize or resist the labels that their children are given in order to make sense of their place in this hierarchal two-track school system (Bourdieu, 1984). For instance, I found that parents who are in the G&T program, specifically G&T parents who are in the younger grades, are more likely to “buy into” or internalize the G&T labels to varying degrees, while the parents whose children are initially placed in the Gen Ed program develop a habitus that does not quite fit (e.g. “fractured” habitus) with where they felt they belonged. The advantaged Gen Ed parents resist their placement by retesting their children for G&T even if they said they believe the G&T label is socially constructed, relating “giftedness” in this context more to student’s advantaged backgrounds and G&T test preparation than their true intelligence. Thus, as the more advantaged parents in the system interact with the school choice policies in place (including the G&T admissions policy), they help to create and recreate, school structures and shape educational opportunities, not just for their children but for all children that are educated within the school.

In the next chapter, I explore how parents are making sense of and adapting to the changing demographics in the Gen Ed program when distinguishing where they belong. A central theme throughout all of these findings is that this boundary making process is more about the people they are surrounding themselves with than their desire to expose their children to “diversity” (like I described in Chapter 5), their social construction of the G&T label (Chapter 6), or like I will describe in Chapter 7, how they are redefining what the boundaries between programs mean as the Gen Ed program is becoming more White. Thus, parents develop contradictory dispositions between who they are, where they believe they belong, and where they and their children are placed in a segregated two-track school.

CHAPTER SEVEN

How Parents Recreate and Reproduce the Boundaries in a Demographically Changing School

It is clear from the first two findings that The Community School's advantaged, White parents with children enrolled in two hierarchical programs embody contradictory dispositions related to their simultaneous desire for their children to learn in a diverse environment, their drive to provide their children with the "best" education, and their sense of the "place" where they and their children belong within a segregated two-track school. In Chapters Five and Six, I illustrated that parents want to be with other similarly advantaged parents like them, not because they "buy into" the labels and categories in the school or are certain that the G&T program is the "best" educationally, but rather because it matches their relatively high-status position in the social hierarchy, despite the seemingly paradoxical value they also place on "diversity."

In this third and final findings chapter, I will demonstrate how the findings discussed in the prior two chapters can shift and become redefined as a growing number of White, advantaged parents choose the Gen Ed program in The Community School. Thus, I learned that the advantaged parents made sense of and adapted to the changing social and symbolic boundaries within the school by choosing the Gen Ed program when that was their only option in The Community School and then redefined what the symbolic boundary of the two programs meant. In fact, just prior to and during the time I conducted the interviews with these parents, the Gen Ed program was becoming a more "acceptable" place for White, more advantaged families to enroll their children (at least in Grades K-2). Thus, even as I was studying The Community School, a subset of these advantaged parents were in the process of recreating the meaning of the symbolic boundaries between programs. Thus, in a relatively short period of time, the distinctions between the G&T and Gen Ed programs shifted from one "based on skin color alone" to a more complicated overlap between the two programs, with the Gen Ed program attracting more advantaged, White families from the neighborhood to fill the Gen Ed seats. Therefore, since 2008 the school's White student enrollment has increased from 46 percent of the total in 2008 to 56 percent in 2012. Meanwhile,

the Black and Latino student population has decreased steadily in the school, going from 48 percent to 34 percent as more and more seats in the Gen Ed program were being filled by White, advantaged students from the neighborhood, leaving few seats for Black and Latino students who lived outside of The Community School's attendance zone to choose to come (see Table 4 in Chapter 4).

Thus, like the prior two chapters, I will show how contradictory dispositions develop within advantaged parents in different ways depending on their child's grade level and placement within the structures. In this moment of recreating the boundaries, parents with children in the Gen Ed program and G&T parents in the older grades who had the most experience in the school considered the "diversity" in the Gen Ed classrooms (meaning more White students) as a "positive thing" in the school and a sign that the school could (and should) phase out the G&T program. But, regardless of the positive benefits of "diversity" in the younger grades, the boundary between G&T and Gen Ed in the upper grades was still being reproduced because advantaged Gen Ed parents who said they would support a move by the school or the system to phase out the G&T program altogether, still retest their children for G&T to give their children the "best" education and be surrounded by similarly advantaged parents like them.

Meanwhile, these same parents with children in the Gen Ed program who are retesting for G&T also say that the G&T program is still "needed" at The Community School in order to attract the right "kind" of "G&T" parents to the school (e.g. advantaged parents who live outside The Community School's catchment) and create distance from the lower income students of color in the Gen Ed program. They realize that without these G&T parents, the school might not be able to attract the same "kind" of highly involved parents who donate time and money to the school, which also increases the reputation of the school.

In fact, the G&T parents in the younger grades (see Chapter 6), who internalized their child's gifted label, were the most adamant about not wanting the G&T program to "go away" because they thought their child's G&T placement was appropriate. For G&T parents who live outside of the catchment, they also did not want the G&T program to be phased out because they worried if there was no G&T program they would not be able to go to The Community School anymore because they were not

zoned for the school (which was also a concern brought up by incoming G&T parents at the G&T school tour). Thus, for G&T parents who have their children in the place that fits their advantaged background, they understandably do not want to phase out the G&T program because they believe in their child's "gifted" label (see Chapter 6) and/or do not want to give up their high status placement in the race and class based hierarchy. They rationalize that their children are being exposed to school level diversity and are concerned about what segregation still exists within the school and across the programs (see Chapter 5), but still would not want to see the G&T program go. Thus, contradictory dispositions emerge when they simultaneously embody the G&T categories and labels that their children are given, support the on-going boundary between programs, but also appreciate that more White families are choosing the Gen Ed program now.

Thus, I contend that it is because there are two segregated and hierarchical academic tracks to choose from in the first place, that advantaged parents feel contradictory between their sense of the place where they belong, their desire for "diversity," and their drive to give their children the "best" education. But, it is the parents with children in the Gen Ed program that become fractured because their child's placement within the structures does not match their sense of place within the larger system and society.

Therefore, within a school in which the racialized distinctions between the two previously separate and hierarchical academic programs of G&T and Gen Ed are starting to shift, at least in the lower grades, the social and symbolic boundaries between the two programs and the students within them are recreated and reproduced. These findings support the literature on how parents participate in boundary work in education to help create, recreate and maintain distance between racial and socio-economic groups (Epstein, 1992; Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Molnar, 2002). It also furthers our understanding of how boundary maintenance is controlled, and parents use their *habitus* to shape their school choice preferences and determine where they belong in a demographically changing school site with two academic tracks.

In addition, this chapter provides evidence of the multiple ways that advantaged parents adapt to the changing boundary lines in a school where White students are being placed into two different

hierarchical programs. In fact, what I found was that parents, especially parents with children in the G&T programs, have developed strategies to make all parents in the school feel like they are part of the same school instead of two separate ones. G&T parents and parents with children in both programs in particular spoke about a silence or ambivalence about the two programs in the school and a tendency to “downplay the differences” by saying that the curriculum is the same in both programs or the teacher matters more than the program. They follow these “unspoken rules” in order to to be “sensitive” to advantaged Gen Ed parents (especially parents with children in both programs) and to hide the existence of the two programs from their children.

The school itself has also adapted to the changing demographics, as one parent said, by “working hard to make it an equitable place and make it good for all the students.” In particular, the new principal moved one of the “best” G&T teachers in the school into a kindergarten Gen Ed classroom-- probably to appease White incoming parents who had no choice but to choose the Gen Ed program. In fact, another parent said that having that teacher in Gen Ed “helped the morality of the school knowing that there was a good teacher in there.”

Yet, even when parents attempt to downplay the academic differences between programs and say they appreciate the diversity that their children are being exposed to in the Gen Ed classrooms, as I have shown, the parents with children in the Gen Ed program still reproduce the boundaries between programs when they decide to prep and retest their children for G&T, and according to parents most of the retesters eventually get in or leave the school. In other words, they attempt to reconcile their fractured habitus by getting their children into the G&T program that fits their privileged position in the larger system and society. This becomes an increasingly important issue to advantaged parents as their children get older and enter the grade levels in which the Gen Ed program remains predominantly non-White. At the same time, by minimizing the academic differences, G&T parents question what they are getting that is any different than the Gen Ed.

For all parents, they believe that as long as The Community School enrolls a critical mass of lower income students of color living within the catchment area, as well as more advantaged students like

theirs, they “need” two separate programs within the school to keep the boundaries intact between “us” (advantaged parents) and “them” (lower income parents of color who enroll their children in the Gen Ed program). Ultimately, it is through advantaged parent’s boundary maintenance that we can uncover the contradictions in their choice making, and see how a fractured habitus emerges between what they say they want and need in a school, where they believe they belong, and where their children are actually placed in the system.

Re-Creating the Boundaries: How Advantaged Families Who Choose the Gen Ed Program Are Changing What the Boundary Line Means

According to the parents I interviewed, even though the G&T program remains majority White, the segregated atmosphere between the two programs in The Community School has slowly been breaking down over time because the Gen Ed program is admitting more White students from the neighborhood. This demographic shift in the Gen Ed program is seen as a positive development in the school since, before 2008, students were seemingly placed in G&T and Gen Ed “based on skin color alone.” Thus, the White, advantaged parents who are choosing the Gen Ed program now, including the parents with children in both programs, are recreating what the boundary line means---from a Gen Ed program that only enrolled Black and Latino children, to a Gen Ed program that also started to enroll “successful” White families living in the catchment area.

In fact, as I have noted in prior chapters, *before* this demographic shift occurred, the racial segregation was very stark between programs. By the time I interviewed these advantaged parents, enrollment in the K-2 Gen Ed classrooms was roughly 30 percent White³¹ and growing as more and more White parents made the choice to enroll their children in their neighborhood public school even if their child did not get into the G&T program. As parent’s explained, the sharp racial distinctions between the G&T and Gen Ed programs for students in grades 3-5 remained at the time I conducted my research since White families would prep and retest their Gen Ed children until most of them eventually switched to the G&T program or left the school.

³¹ This figure was based on what parents told me, not what the NYCDOE or School C provides because they do not break down enrollment numbers by G&T versus Gen Ed.

G&T parents of students in the older grades said they never would have chosen the Gen Ed program for their children when they were in kindergarten because of the segregation. Tanya, a 1st Grade Gen Ed parent who lives in The Community School's attendance boundaries explained that older women from her neighborhood had told her that The Community School was not a place where you would have sent your [White] children to back in the 80's or 90's unless they were in the G&T program because students were placed into the G&T and Gen Ed "based on skin color alone."

For this first theme, I will describe how parents are making sense of the shifting social and symbolic boundaries now that more White, advantaged parents are initially choosing the Gen Ed program for their children's education. I will also illustrate how parents in both programs view the diversity in the Gen Ed program as a positive development of the school and a sign that the G&T program could (and should) be phased out now.

The Changing Boundary in the Gen Ed Program: "The Recession Did A Lot for That"

As I described in Chapter 4, there are many reasons why the Gen Ed program was starting to enroll more White, advantaged parents from the catchment area---resulting in a school population that is becoming more White—from 46 percent in 2007 to 56 percent in 2012--and thus, less Black and Latino over time (see Table 4 in Chapter 4). Parents gave three main reasons for the Gen Ed program becoming a more "acceptable" option for White neighborhood families to send their children to school, including the overcrowding in the most popular, disproportionately White schools (especially Schools E and F in Table 3), the recession, and the change in the G&T admissions policy. In addition, since there is an increased demand from the White neighborhood families into the Gen Ed program, The Community School did not need to bus in Black and Latino students from outside the district to fill the Gen Ed seats.

Dana, a 1st Grade G&T parent, explained why the Gen Ed program is starting to enroll more White families from the neighborhood: "The recession did a lot for that. A lot of people who would be sending their kids to private schools didn't. And then also a lot of people who would be moving out to the suburbs didn't because they were worried about their jobs and they couldn't sell their apartments, so it

was a very different dynamic between the two programs.”

In fact, starting around 2008, the economic crisis hit New York City. According to parents, like Dana above, and the popular press, the bursting of the housing market bubble and the resulting economic crisis, which began in 2008, caused many City Limits parents to choose public over private schools (Raschka, 2009). This was the case not only for kindergarten admission, but, as I heard through the parent interviews, some private school parents started to enroll their youngest children into public because they could no longer afford private school tuition for all of their children anymore. This speaks to the changing attitudes of parents who thought they would choose private school or G&T programs and instead decided to “take a leap of faith” with The Community School’s Gen Ed program because other parents like them were making similar choices.

As a result, since 2008, the Gen Ed program has become a far more acceptable option for White, “upper middle class” families. As Jessica, a 1st Grade Gen Ed parent, made clear, the “Gen Ed program itself” is not becoming more “acceptable” to White families in the catchment area, the “demographics are becoming more acceptable. I really think that’s what it was.” This illustrates how parents are making sense of the changing social and symbolic boundary lines within the school when determining track placements---with the biggest change being that advantaged parents living in the catchment area are choosing their zoned school now, when they never would have before the demographic change.

In fact, like I will show in the next section, the diversity in the Gen Ed classrooms in kindergarten through 2nd grade is seen as a “positive thing” in the school because the segregation between programs is diminishing. The Gen Ed program is seen as the place where “successful families” send their children to school, compared to before when it was considered the place where all the “minorities” enroll their children (e.g. symbolic boundaries). Thus, on one hand, parents with children in the Gen Ed program hoped the school would become a “true” neighborhood school that attracted more neighborhood (meaning White) families and the G&T program would be phased out. But, ironically, these same parents all strove to be in the G&T program themselves because they wanted to give their children what was considered the “best” education with similarly advantaged families like theirs.

The diversity in the Gen Ed program was not only a positive thing for advantaged Gen Ed families in the younger grades who were experiencing the diversity first hand in their own children's Gen Ed classrooms, but it was also a good sign for G&T parents in the older grades who were "concerned" about the segregation between programs because parents in the younger grades would not "have that feeling of segregation" anymore.

The Simultaneous Desire for a G&T Placement and for the G&T Program to be Phased Out

As I explained in Chapter 5, the advantaged Gen Ed parents in the younger grades stressed the benefits of exposing their children to "real life" diversity because their actual classrooms are "diverse." For instance, Tessa, a parent with children in both programs, when talking about her daughter's experience in the Gen Ed classroom said, "I like the diversity that my kids are experiencing, and not just ethnic but socioeconomic as well... And I think the kids are learning from - learning much more about different cultures and everything and they love it."

Thus, because there are more White families choosing the Gen Ed program now, these same parents with children in the Gen Ed program said they believed that the G&T program should be phased out. But, ironically, even though they want the G&T program to be phased out, they also test and retest their children for G&T admission because it mirrors their advantaged place in the stratified system as a whole. Tessa, for example, got her two daughters switched from the Gen Ed program that she liked so much because of the diversity, into the majority White G&T program because she thought her children were "bright kids" and wanted to provide them with the "best education that you can... within your means." In contradictory ways, Tessa also questioned the reason for having the G&T program anymore when she said, since "the climate has changed and you can have successful families in the Gen Ed, what's the advantage to having [the G&T] then?"

In this way, Tessa and other parents with children in the Gen Ed program embody contradictory dispositions as they are torn between their beliefs in diversity and phasing out the G&T program, but also wanting to give their children what they consider to be the "best" education "within your means," which in this case is the majority White G&T program (that they also want to phase out). A fractured habitus

emerges because Tessa' sense of place in the larger system does not match her sense of placement in the segregated two-track school. Therefore, she retested her daughter for G&T to reconcile her fractured habitus and be in the place where she felt she belonged.

Gen Ed parents also questioned why The Community School continues to offer a G&T program since there are more advantaged families from the catchment choosing the Gen Ed program now, even though they all retest their children for the G&T. They argue that the reason the DOE introduces G&T programs in certain schools is to attract middle-class White parents into the public schools. Since that is starting to happen in the Gen Ed program now, they no longer need the G&T program.

While these same parents believe that some schools “need” G&T programs because they are “failing” schools and need to “bring certain classes of people” into the school to make it better, at The Community School because the demographics are becoming more similar between programs parents believed that they could phase the G&T program out. In fact, I found that 73 percent of all parents, or 30 out of 41, in my sample would support the G&T program phasing out in their school. The parents who did not think the G&T program should be phased out are the G&T parents in the younger grades and those who lived outside of The Community School's zone. But, the majority did not believe the G&T program was “necessary” at The Community School anymore, as Jessica, a 1st grade Gen Ed parent, explained:

It's not that I'm against if they have gifted and talented programs. I just think that for our school, it's not necessary. The socio-economic demographic of our school is so similar, there's just not that much difference between these kids. We're not trying to bring certain classes of people into this school to make it better. They used to have to do that. They don't anymore because that's who it is now, that's what the make-up, the natural make-up of the school is now...

A Kindergarten Gen Ed parent, Lisa, also said she did not think having the G&T program was “necessary” at The Community School anymore since the K-2 classrooms are demographically similar.

She said:

I think the reason for it has gone away now, like maybe when the schools were more diverse and you really wanted your children to be in a well-behaved class where the kids were more focused, then maybe it made a difference. But I don't think the reason for it being offered now, other than that they might lose some kids. But you know, if my kids do better in Gen Ed, if their classes are representative of what the whole school would look like, it would be fine.

The students that these parents said the school might “lose” are the G&T parents who lived outside the catchment area, which is one of the main reasons, as I will demonstrate below, that parents said the G&T program was still needed in the school. Lisa went on to say that if the purpose of having a G&T program is to attract middle-class or upper-middle class families into public schools, then it’s “working,” but, as I will describe in more detail below, if the purpose is to give advanced students an accelerated classroom environment, then it’s not doing it’s job probably because the curriculum is the same.

Thus, in contradictory ways, Gen Ed parents like Jessica and Lisa advocate for the G&T program to be phased out because it is no longer serving a “purpose” in the school because advantaged families are starting to choose the Gen Ed program. Yet, Jessica and Lisa still retested their children for the G&T program anyway because that is where they felt they belonged with the other similarly advantaged parents like them. In this way, because there are two hierarchical programs to choose from in this school, advantaged parents want to reconcile their fractured habitus by getting their children in the high status G&T program that fits their privileged position, even if it contradicts with their belief in phasing the G&T program out.

These parents with children in the Gen Ed program also seemed excited about the potential of The Community School becoming a true neighborhood school, like School E or F, since it is attracting more “local” neighborhood families (e.g. not bused in) to the Gen Ed program. In fact, parents would talk about how the segregation between programs is getting better in the younger grades, which they thought was a positive development of the school. For instance, Elaine, a 3rd Grade Gen Ed parent, compared how segregated the Gen Ed classrooms in her grade were to the Gen Ed classrooms in the younger grades, saying that more diversity in the younger grades is a good thing: “We kind of got the tail end of the bad part of it, I think we’re the last grade that it’s really, really split. I have a very good friend whose daughter is in 2nd grade in Gen Ed and it’s much more mixed in her Gen Ed than it is in mine. I mean that’s good for the future parents that are coming in and the future kids.”

For G&T parents in the upper grades, they also see the diversity in the Gen Ed program as a “positive thing” in the school because they are concerned about the stark segregation that they are experiencing between programs. Melody, for instance, who has two children in the G&T program said that the “division” that the G&T has “caused in the older grades is not a positive thing.” She believes “in the future” that there will be more White, advantaged families “who actually want to live here to be in the catchment.” She said, “Like our apartment is going up for sale in two weeks. I’m advertising [The Community School] and I’m seeing that as a positive thing, that it’s in this catchment for a Gen Ed spot.”

Chrissy, a G&T 4th grade parent, compared The Community School when she started there five years ago till now:

When we first started...it was much different. There was a clear divide between the G&T and the Gen Ed. Frankly, it was a concern for us. It seemed like the haves and the have-nots. Throughout the years, however, it has changed. So the Gen Ed now in our particular school – in kindergarten, in 1st grade, even in 2nd grade, are children that typically would have been in the G&T. They’re the upper middle class. [This change] is a great thing for our school though, because we have parents that won’t have that feeling of segregation, you have parents in both classes that are really pulling together to make the school a better place. So I’m thrilled for those lower classes. Didn’t happen for my daughter, but it is – I believe it’s a much better thing.

Although these G&T parents in the older grades thought the diversity in the Gen Ed classrooms “was a great thing” for their school since the segregation between programs was diminishing, that did not necessarily mean that they wanted the G&T program to be phased out, especially if they lived outside of the catchment area. In other words, they still felt that they and their children were ‘in their right place’ in the social hierarchy, and believed that the G&T program, as Melody said, “still has its place” in the school. In fact, Melody said that when she was choosing kindergarten programs for her children, she never would have chosen the Gen Ed program at The Community School, especially for her oldest son in fourth grade, because the programs were segregated. As Melody said, “there would not have been any blond children in the Gen Ed program before that.”

Thus, parents with children in the Gen Ed program seemed hopeful that The Community School would be a true neighborhood school with no G&T program in the future—only accepting “local” students from the catchment area. But, they were also skeptical that the G&T program would be phased

out, as I will illustrate below, because it attracts the right “kind” of G&T parent to the school from outside of the catchment area who are highly involved and make the school “better.” In addition, they argued that there are still Gen Ed parents from the “project housing” buildings sending their children to the Gen Ed program.

For these parents, they believed that as long as The Community School enrolls a critical mass of lower income students of color living within the catchment area, as well as more advantaged students like theirs, they “need” the G&T program to keep the boundaries intact between “us” (advantaged parents) and “them” (lower income parents of color who enroll their children in the Gen Ed program). Because of this boundary, advantaged parents in the Gen Ed program felt like they were in the second tier program if they were not with the similarly advantaged families in the G&T program. Thus, a fractured habitus emerges when their sense of place in the Gen Ed program does not match with their privileged position in the system and larger society.

In the next section, I explain how G&T parents and the principal have developed strategies to “downplay” the academic differences between programs so advantaged parents in the Gen Ed program do not feel like they are the “step child” in the school. In fact, G&T and Gen Ed parents will say that the curriculum is the same or the teacher matters more than the program either to argue that the G&T program is no longer needed or to question the legitimacy of the program since the curriculum is the same. This also reflects back to why parents want the G&T placement in the first place, which is because of who they are surrounding themselves with, not what is taught.

Adapting to the Changing Boundaries in the School: “You Try to Minimize Any Sense of Difference Between Programs, Especially With the Parents”

As a result of the changing demographics in the Gen Ed program, parents told me that the school’s culture has changed to be more sensitive to this new group of advantaged, White Gen Ed families, particularly for the parents with children in both programs, so they do not feel like they are in the “second tier” program. In fact, because of these demographic changes, I found that parents have created unspoken rules to try to “minimize any sense of difference” between the two programs. They

follow these unspoken rules to diffuse the tension between the two sets of advantaged, mostly White parents who have their children in either, or both, hierarchical program(s). Additionally, they explained that they do not want their children to find out about the two different programs because, like I described in Chapter 6, they do not want them to feel superior or inferior based on their G&T and Gen Ed labels.

Besides not talking about the two different programs, advantaged parents in the G&T and Gen Ed program will downplay the academic differences between programs by saying that the curriculum is the same or the teacher matters more than the program. In fact, I found that G&T parents downplay the differences to relieve the tension between the G&T and Gen Ed parents within the school. The Gen Ed parents, on the other hand, downplay them to argue that the G&T program is no longer needed if the curriculum is the same and the demographics are becoming more similar between programs.

The Silence About the Two Programs Within the School—“If they’re in Gen Ed they’re pretty sensitive.”

One strategy that The Community School parents used to “minimize any sense of difference” between programs was by not talking about which program their child was in or what score they got on the G&T test, especially in front of their children because they did not want their children to know and it just caused tension between the parents. Ironically, parents want a G&T placement and will prep and retest to get one if they originally get placed in the Gen Ed, but at the same time do not like the “division” and the feelings of superiority or inferiority that this system created in the school.

Therefore, parents in both programs learn to follow “unspoken” rules to “minimize any sense of difference” between parents. Alice, a 1st Grade G&T parent, whose son started in the Kindergarten Gen Ed program before he switched over to G&T, explained one of the “unspoken” or “commonsense” rules in the school:

First of all, one of the rules is we don’t talk about G&T versus Gen Ed in the school, you know, that there’s a difference in the programs. *You don’t say, is your kid in Gen Ed? Is your kid in G&T? You know, you try to say what class they’re in or whatever.* You don’t really talk about it with your child. You don’t, because you try to minimize any sense of, you know, difference, especially with parents. If they’re in Gen Ed they’re pretty sensitive. So we didn’t really talk to people about did you have your child tested or what was their test score, and so that’s--I didn’t really talk about that with other families in the Gen Ed.

Alice explained further that when new parents come into the school they “are a little naïve” and just start asking other parents which program they are in, which causes tension between parents. Since Gen Ed parents already feel like they are in the “second tier” program and that the G&T is getting a “presumably better education,” I found that it is the G&T parents who “try hard” to make everyone feel like “we’re all in the same school.” It was interesting that when I asked Alice later in the interview to talk more about the “rule” that you’re not supposed to say “G&T” and “Gen Ed” in the school, she said, “well it isn’t a rule.” She explained that it’s “unspoken” between parents. When I asked her how she knew about this “unspoken rule,” she replied: “Somebody once said to me a long time ago, don’t talk about it. I mean, you hope it’s common sense. Why would you go around saying, ‘My kid is da-da-da.’ It gains you nothing except hostility.”

As an example of this “common sense” rule, when I was observing two Community School parents meeting each other for the first time outside of school, I heard them say their child’s grade and room number, for example “I’m [Cecelia] and my daughter is in K103.” To outsiders and to children who do not know which classroom is G&T or Gen Ed, they would not know the difference, but to insiders in the school, the parents are simply using code language to tell other parents which program they are in because they all know that “K103” is a G&T class. During my interview with Cecelia, she brought up the topic of the school’s “culture” and said that she’s “amazed” at the “distinctions” between the two programs. She explained, “Like I’ve noticed that a lot of the parents don’t want to talk about it in front of the kids about who’s in G&T and who’s not and I think that there’s at least a branch of the parent body that wants to eliminate it, but I don’t know how that’s going to go down.” Cecelia said that it’s not only parents in Gen Ed that would like to see the G&T program “go,” it’s also some G&T parents as well:

Like there’s a woman that we ride the bus with a lot, and her kids are in G&T, and she definitely like, whenever we talk about it, we have to talk about it in code because she doesn’t really want her kids to know about the difference, and then she was saying that eventually, she thinks it [the G&T program] will be eliminated, and she seems supportive of that.

As Alice explained above, parents try not to talk about the two programs and use this type of code language because they want to be “sensitive” to the Gen Ed parents, especially the parents who have

children in both programs at the school. They also do not want their children to find out about the “difference,” as Cecelia mentioned above because of the feelings of inferiority and superiority that the labels connote, which could also affect their academic self-concept (See Chapter 6). Jennifer, a 1st Grade G&T parent, explained what was happening inside the school since the demographic shift has occurred:

There seems to be a wind blowing - a vibe in the air - that some parents don't like the idea - they recognize that there is this division in the school and they don't like that. Some administrators don't like the fact that there's Gen Ed and G&T education. As a result of that, it's not talked about... I think people downplay it because there's a lot of kids that begin in Gen Ed, test and test and test to get into G&T. ...So it's not something that people talk about. I never even hear the phrase in the school. People don't use it. So there's no sense of, 'Let's have a meeting of all the G&T teachers and parents.'

Regardless of the silence or ambivalence about the two programs in the school, though, what I heard is that parents and administrators are starting to “recognize that there is a division in the school,” possibly more so now than before because there are more White families in the Gen Ed program. Again, contradictory dispositions emerge when parents strive to get their children into the G&T program because it is where they believed they belonged in this hierarchical two-track school, even if they also did not like the “division” that the G&T caused and would like to see the G&T program phased out.

In fact, G&T and Gen Ed parents will try to downplay the differences further, as I will describe in the next sections, by saying that the curriculum is the same or the teacher quality is similar across programs—providing more evidence that what parents are looking for is not a G&T program, but what they really want is to be around other similarly advantaged parents like them. Building off of the findings in Chapter 6, I explore how parents' social construction of what is the “best” education for their children, is related more to how parents make sense of where they fit in this segregated two-track system than it is any objective assessment of the curriculum and teaching available in each of the two programs.

“The Curriculum is Exactly the Same” in both programs

Therefore, one way that The Community School parents try to minimize the differences between programs is by saying that academically the two programs are similar because the curriculum is the same.

For instance, G&T parents will say the “curriculum is the same” so Gen Ed parents do not feel like they are in the second tier program. At the same time, though, they question what they are getting in the G&T program that’s any different than the Gen Ed program if the curriculum is the same. Thus, contradictory dispositions develop for advantaged parents who want their children in what’s considered to be the “best” program with other similarly advantaged parents like them, but are not sure what that means in this context if the curriculum is the same in both programs.

When I spoke to the School Choice Consultant that many of these parents hire to help them navigate the school choice process, she explained that out of all the schools with G&T programs, “[The Community School’s] G&T parents have been the most vocal in terms of saying ‘I’m not sure what my kids are getting compared to the kids next door in the Gen Ed, what’s making this a G&T program?’... They don’t want the Gen Ed to sort of be the stepchild. But in doing so, they’ve made it less convincing to the families in G&T that they are getting something different by being in G&T.” In fact, I heard during my interviews that G&T parents were frustrated that there was “nothing specific to the G&T curriculum at [The Community School],” especially compared to the district-wide G&T schools that worked a grade or two ahead, like the “highly gifted” and coveted Hunter, Nest or Anderson. Some thought that their child could be challenged more, but there was no way to do that with the set curriculum, e.g. the district-wide *Everyday Math* curriculum, and no specialized teachers to help the advanced students move ahead.

When asked what the difference is academically between the two programs, Dana, a 1st and 4th Grade G&T parent replied,

...they have the same curriculum, they have the same workbooks. They’re supposed to--the G&T, they expect them to go faster and go a little deeper, but they’re not working a grade or two ahead. Whereas at Anderson, they’re expected to go a grade ahead in math and if you’re not working a grade ahead in math, you get a tutor. Whereas at [The Community School], if you could work a grade ahead in math, there’s no opportunity to, which is a little like (laughs), I’m like take the five kids who can work a grade ahead and let them. But there’s no reason for doing that, which I find a little--it would be nice to let them...

Tessa, a 1st and 2nd Grade Gen Ed parent who just got her daughters into the G&T for next year,

explained that she thinks the G&T goes into a little more depth than the Gen Ed program. But, she said that it's "more about the people that you're surrounding yourself with" than the curriculum. She went on to say that "it would certainly be my hope" that her children would be challenged more since they are in the G&T program now, but questioned, "if it doesn't, what would be the point of it?"

Kathy a 4th grade G&T parent, who does a lot of school tours said that incoming parents will ask about the "G&T/Gen Ed mix and what do you think of that?" Her answer to parents is:

The curriculum is exactly the same [in G&T]. There is no advanced specialty curriculum. But what happens is that if everybody in [the G&T] classroom immediately nods their head when you say 'Henry Hudson was the first guy in Manhattan,' then you're able to move on to discuss what was life like on the boat with Henry Hudson, do you see? ...but if you stop for behavioral reasons because somebody doesn't get it, you have to stop. I think I used a bad example. I think everybody would get the Henry Hudson... (laughs). I think it's more like when you're doing fractions, math, I think that's probably one of the big---and reading. To me, that's all you're getting out of Gifted and Talented.

According to Kathy, G&T and Gen Ed students are learning the same things, but the pace is faster in G&T because there are fewer disruptions in the G&T class. Therefore, who your children are surrounded by, in this case in terms of student behavior, was the reason why parents strove to be in G&T.

From the G&T parent's perspective, they want their child in the G&T program largely because of who else is in the classroom, not what is taught since they realize that the curriculum is the same in G&T and Gen Ed. Coincidentally, this is also the reason that Gen Ed parents give for retesting for the G&T program. Beatrice, a 1st Grade Gen Ed parent, explained that the "biggest reason that you want your kid in the G&T program" is because of the "behavior problems" in the Gen Ed classrooms. She also thought that the separation between programs feeds the perception that G&T is getting something better, when in reality she said that "the curriculum is the exact same." But, she explained:

The perception of G&T and Gen Ed is night and day. And they don't ever intermingle in projects, Gen Ed and G&T, which I think is a mistake if the curriculum is the same. The kids have no involvement with one another, so you're creating this perception with the kids and with the parents especially that they're doing something completely different when in reality they're not. ...my feeling is if the curriculum is the same, why are you wasting all of this money on this 'special program' when it's all the same supposedly?

Thus, for parents like Beatrice who have children in the Gen Ed program, contradictory dispositions emerge when they are critical of offering a G&T program that is not that different

academically, but still retest their children to get into the G&T program that they say is “all the same.”

In addition, for parents with children in both programs, they could compare the curriculum first hand and also agreed that there is no difference between programs when they compare their children’s G&T and Gen Ed homework. Margaret, who could compare her older son’s homework from when he was in the kindergarten G&T class with her younger daughter’s homework in Gen Ed, said, “what [my son] did in his G&T class, he had a notebook with these certain assignments. You know, very New York City programmed. [My daughter’s] doing the exact same stuff, [in the Gen Ed] the exact same stuff, down to the same poems where they have to cut out and glue and circle the rhyming words and underline the verbs. It’s all the exact same stuff.” Even though they are doing “the exact same stuff” in Gen Ed, Margaret still decided to get her daughter retested for G&T because of the negative stigma of the Gen Ed label. Therefore, no matter how much parents tried to downplay the differences between programs, parents still felt that the G&T program was the “better” program because of the people enrolled there, and thus retest for the G&T program because it is where they felt they belonged.

Thus, according to advantaged parents with children across grade levels and programs, there seemed to be little difference between the two different programs academically, since the curriculum is the same. As Tessa explained, it is “more about the people that you’re surrounding yourself with” than what’s being taught. Advantaged parents with at least one child in the Gen Ed program said the “curriculum is the same” to question the legitimacy of the program and why the G&T program is still needed at The Community School if there are White families choosing the Gen Ed program now. They made this claim even though that is the program they all strove to be in because of the behavior problems in Gen Ed and the negative stigma associated with the Gen Ed label.

Caitlyn, a 4th grade G&T parent could not explain what was different between the two programs in terms of the curriculum, and even argued that in some cases the teacher matters more than the program. She replied:

I don’t think [the curriculum] is [different] at all, because I remember asking, ‘Well, is it accelerated?’, no, ‘Is it more in-depth?’ I don’t really know that it’s that different, frankly....because when I’ve observed some of the Gen Ed classes, they’re going very in-depth

into things depending on the teacher. And they have some duds, but it's more because they have teachers that they can't get rid of frankly who have been there a long time, but they're terrible teachers. But they're in the G&T and the Gen Ed...

In fact, as I will explain in more detail in the next section, another way parents would attempt to minimize the differences between programs was to say that sometimes the teacher can matter more than the program since there are "terrible" teachers in both programs. Like I mentioned earlier, the principal also tried to minimize the "clear divide" between "good" G&T teachers versus "bad" Gen Ed teachers when she moved one of the best G&T teachers into a Gen Ed kindergarten spot where many advantaged White parents were starting to enroll their children.

Teacher Matters More Than the Program—“It’s not the classroom, it’s the teacher that’s leading it.”

Like Caitlyn explained above, parents said that sometimes which teacher you get is more important than the program since there are good and bad teachers in both programs. As I will demonstrate, parents spoke about one teacher in particular who used to teach G&T but now teaches Gen Ed. This “phenomenal” teacher told Gen Ed parents that she used to teach G&T and still teaches her class that way, thus, making parents feel a little better about their child’s placement—at least for kindergarten. Violet, a parent with children in both programs, when asked what is the biggest thing that stands out to you between the programs, said: “I think it solely depends on the teacher because everything in each program is teacher-driven. And I have to say - my younger son is in the Gen Ed program, his teacher used to teach G&T and it solely depends on if they challenge them when they need it... So it’s not the classroom, it’s the teacher that’s leading it.”

Tara, a 3rd Grade Gen Ed parent, explained that she retested her daughter for G&T every year because she felt pressure to retest since the G&T is perceived to be getting a better education, the children are smarter and better behaved, etc. She retested her daughter because other parents like her were retesting, even though she replied, “I was really happy with Gen Ed, I felt that she was getting a great education and she had great teachers. The teachers - one of her teachers did teach G&T before she taught her class and she was a phenomenal teacher. She went up five reading levels. So it really depends on the teachers.” In other words, she retested her daughter to feel like she was in her ‘right place’ given her

advantaged background, even though she was “happy” with the Gen Ed program.

Other parents explained that there used to be a “clear divide” between the good and bad teachers in the G&T and Gen Ed. But, as Chrissy, a 4th grade parent explained, the new principal changes the teachers around every year. The principal, in fact, intentionally moved the “best” G&T teacher into Gen Ed, which one parent said “helped the morality of the school knowing that there was a great teacher in there.” Lisa, a Kindergarten *Gen Ed* parent, who has this particular teacher mistakenly told me at the beginning of the interview that her son was in the kindergarten *G&T* at The Community School. After a couple of questions, though, she realized her mistake. She explained, “[my son’s] teacher ... used to be a G&T teacher but she’s Gen Ed now. The way she describes her teaching method is that, although it’s a Gen Ed classroom, she teaches them as if it’s G&T. That’s what I meant to say, sorry.”

In other words, the advantaged, White parents from the neighborhood, including the parents with older children who had this teacher when she used to teach G&T, felt better about sending their children into the Kindergarten Gen Ed classroom, and even apparently thought of the classroom as G&T, when they knew that one of the best teachers in the school was teaching in that classroom. In this way, they attempted to reconcile their fractured habitus between where they felt they belonged and where they were actually placed.

As I have shown, even though parents downplay the academic differences, admit that there is no difference in the G&T curriculum or some get “good” Gen Ed teachers, they still spend hundreds of dollars on test prepping and retest every year to get into the “so-called ‘better’ G&T program” to be surrounded by similarly advantaged parents and students like them. In this way, they continue to use “us” and “them” distinctions to determine their place within the structures.

It was also clear that however hard parents tried to hide the existence of the two programs from their children, according to their parents, students eventually figure out about the two programs within the school. Parents said what stands out to their children the most are the racial distinctions and behavior problems that separate the G&T from the Gen Ed. Thus, the process by which parents and students, as I demonstrate below, distinguish where they belong are based on the social and symbolic boundaries (e.g.

categorizing people into G&T and Gen Ed groups by their race/ethnicity and classroom behavior) that are created and maintained in this segregated two-track school. The categories and distinctions that are maintained between programs cause parents with children in the Gen Ed program to feel out of place in the race and class based hierarchy.

The Distinction Still Remains: “Why are all the brown skinned kids in the other class?”

A concern that kept being repeated in the parent interviews was that the advantaged G&T and Gen Ed parents did not want their children to find out about the two different academic programs in the school. As I already demonstrated in Chapter 6, for G&T parents, they did not want their children to feel special or superior to the Gen Ed students while the Gen Ed parents or parents with children in both programs did not want their child (or themselves) to be stigmatized for being in the lower status program. As I will illustrate in this section, even though the boundary line between programs is shifting now to include more White families in the Gen Ed category (in grades K-2), the racial segregation still remains in grades 3-5 because these same White families are retesting their children for G&T. For both sets of parents, then, they were bothered by the segregation and perception of difference that still remains between programs, especially when their own children realize where they are placed within the hierarchy.

Denise, a 1st Grade Gen Ed parent, said the biggest distinction that still remains between programs is the level of diversity (meaning a mix of racial/ethnic backgrounds): “I kinda feel like when you’re standing in the playground and they bring down the 1st grade classes, and you watch them come down, *the G&T classes are a much less diverse group of kids than the Gen Ed class*. Clearly, that’s the most visible thing.” Thus, because the “visible” differences between programs still exist even though there are more White students being placed into Gen Ed, I saw how advantaged parents made sense of the boundaries and categories in the school and all strove to be in the G&T program because of the people, not the program.

Betsy, a 2nd Grade G&T parent whose youngest son was in the K and 1st Grade Gen Ed program before switching over to G&T, explained that retesting for G&T is a “problem that exists in the school” because:

people do what I did and they'll send their kids to the Gen Ed program for kindergarten, for first grade, for second grade, but we haven't really had—and maybe this is changing, I hope so—those families stay through the upper grades. They tend to leave, either to switch over to the G&T or maybe leave the city or maybe go to a different school. Like you'll just see that, if you walk around the classrooms, there's a lot more diversity in the lower grades than there is in the upper grades. And by diversity, I mean like there's more White kids.

Thus, Betsy implied that parents did not want to be the minority in the Gen Ed classrooms in the upper grades, therefore, they retest for G&T until they eventually get in, leave the city or go to a different school.

Ironically, advantaged parents all strive to be in the G&T program and prep and test (and retest) their children because that's where they felt they belonged, but did not want their children to know about the two different academic programs in the school. This is tied to their contradictory dispositions in terms of who they are (e.g. someone who believes in diversity and is concerned about the segregation and the G&T label), where they believe they belong (e.g. with the other parents and students like them in the higher status G&T program) and where they are placed in the segregated system. Like I described above, some parents will even use code language in front of their children in order for them to not hear the G&T and Gen Ed labels used. But like one mother said below, it's a little "idealistic" to think that students do not realize where they are placed in the system—especially when the racial segregation still remains and they are getting tutored to take the tests.

At the G&T school tour that I attended, incoming G&T parents also seemed concerned that their children would figure out which program they were in. But, the principal and the PTA parents leading the school tour assured them that students do not know about the two programs until they are older. In fact, the G&T parent giving the school tour said that her son did not figure it out until 4th grade.

The majority of parents though, were more skeptical and thought children figure out which program they are in early on, especially since first and second grade students have to retest for G&T within their own Gen Ed classrooms and the majority of children are being prepped for the G&T tests—sometimes by professional tutors. As Margaret, a parent with children in both programs, explained "even the label of it is just, you know, "Gifted and Talented." I mean, any child at any age, at five years old,

understands those words. And Gen Ed, you know, that's like—I don't know, Gifted and Talented definitely has the ring of being the special class.”

According to parents, though, even if students do not know about the *academic* distinctions between programs, what they do notice is the behavior and demographic differences between classrooms.

Lillian, a 4th grade G&T parent, when asked if students know the differences, said:

Now they do, yes. Sometimes they'll say - my son said to me this year - I don't remember how it came up, it was a show or something -- I said 'what did this class do?' and he said 'Oh, the dark-skinned kids?' I was like 'What!, he goes 'You know, the class with the dark-skinned kids.' I mean, he just observed that in his class, there's one or two maybe. He's kind of noticed, but I don't think he's put two and two together that they took the test. I never say gifted, because I don't think they're gifted or talented. I think it's just a joke that they took the test and they're in there. So we don't really talk about that, but he knows that - it's so stupid because he can see that they're a different sort of demographic than the other class. And that's all he really knows.

Lillian went on to explain what she felt was a big disadvantage of having the G&T program at her children's school, when she said, “you have this artificially created hierarchy of kids. I think kids figure it out that they're in one program and the other kids are in another so they feel somehow superior to those kids. I think that's all wrong, to start that at such a young age.” Thus, I have shown how a G&T parent like Lillian can question the legitimacy of the labels and the G&T program itself, but still embody the structures because that's where she felt she belonged.

Dana, a G&T parent with children in 1st and 4th grades, said that her oldest son “noticed by 2nd grade” that there were more behavior problems and more “brown skinned kids” in the Gen Ed class when her son asked her, “why are all the brown skinned kids in the other class?”

When I asked Dana whether parents try to downplay the differences between programs, she explained,

It depends on the parents. I know Gen Ed parents who talk about it all the time, and then G&T parents who, if somebody says, “What school do you go to?” they say, “My kid goes to G&T at [The Community School].” It's like they need to say that. I never say it. I don't want my kids to say it. I don't want there to be a difference. That's a little idealistic.

Chrissy, a 4th grade G&T parent said if she could do the school choice process over again she would not choose The Community School's G&T program because students know the “differences” between programs. Instead, she would have chosen a neighborhood school with no G&T program.

“Looking back, I do think I don't believe in the G&T versus the Gen Ed. Looking back, I don't think that

children – my daughter knows that there’s a difference between her class and the other class. And I don’t think children need to know that when we’re trying to teach everybody, children especially, everybody’s equal, and then to clearly say ‘You’re not equal in school.’ I don’t know if it’s necessary to have that.”

Not only do students notice the racial segregation between the Gen Ed and G&T classrooms in terms of race/ethnicity, they also notice the behavior differences. Anne, a 2nd and 4th grade G&T parent said that what her children notice the most is that “the kids are better behaved [in the G&T program] but other than that, I don’t think they would tell you ‘We’re smarter than the other kids’ or something. They wouldn’t - they certainly would never say that. They’d know that the kids behave a little better in their [G&T] classes. They’ll comment on the kids’ behavior.” In addition, Melody, a parent with two children in the G&T classrooms who said her older son did not figure out the differences until 4th grade, said that he noticed the behavior issues in the Gen Ed classes, and made a point to say “that’s the only thing he noticed.”

Even when parents and the principal assure incoming parents that students do not know about the two different programs, it seems that students figure it out at some point along their elementary school career. Despite the silence surrounding the two programs, according to their parents, the thing that stands out to them the most is the behavior problems and skin color that divides them into two different sets of classrooms.

As I have shown, this lingering segregation in the school is what makes the newly diverse Gen Ed classrooms such a positive experience for the Gen Ed children in Grades K-2 and a positive development for the school. Unfortunately, though, regardless of the positive benefits of diversity in the Gen Ed program, parents continue to retest for G&T and the upper grades remain very segregated by race, class and academic ability. The data show that despite the silence about the two different programs in the school, parents and students still see and feel a difference. Gen Ed parents feel like they are missing out on something by not being in the G&T classes with other parents and students like them, therefore they prep and test their children for G&T, which serves to reproduce the boundaries, as I will illustrate in the next theme, and the cycle of segregation continues.

**Reproducing the Boundaries: Why Parents Believe the G&T Program
Is Still “Needed” At The Community School**

According to the interview data, I found that the advantaged, mostly White families all strive to be in the G&T program to be around other similarly advantaged families like theirs, even if they also said they believe that the G&T program at The Community School could (and should) be phased out eventually. As I illustrated above, the advantaged parents with children in the Gen Ed program, including the G&T parents in the older grades who have experienced the school’s culture longer agreed that the G&T program could be phased out, *in theory*, because the demographics between the two programs are becoming more similar. They said that the reason the DOE introduces G&T programs at certain schools is to attract middle class parents from the neighborhood, and since that had been accomplished to a certain extent at The Community School, they could phase the G&T program out.

In reality, though, these same parents would not want to see the G&T program go because it attracts the right “kind of caliber of parents and students” to the school. In this way, parents from both programs seemed conflicted over phasing out the G&T program because they worried that if they did not have the G&T, the more advantaged parents from outside the catchment would not be able to go to The Community School anymore.

A good example of this contradiction within parents over whether they thought the G&T could be phased out occurred when Betsy, a 2nd Grade G&T parent, said during the interview that she sees “the vision and it would be great if we could have the same kind of caliber of parents and students without having the G&T because I would love it if we could just be one school. But I don’t think we’re there yet” because it takes time to build up a good reputation and the “problem is right now, a lot of our kids come from out of our zone, you know, so a lot of those kids—it’s not just about the kids but it’s the parents, those parents are the ones who really do a lot for the school. So if you just went cold turkey, I think the character of the school would change a lot.” But, later during the G&T school tour, when anxious incoming parents asked if the G&T program would eventually be phased out because they have younger siblings and they live outside of the catchment area, Betsy, who was one of the parents giving the tours, did not hesitate when she said “as long as G&T exists, we will have it” at our school. Understandably, in

front of these incoming G&T parents, the vision of becoming one school by phasing out the G&T program was lost.

Lisa, a kindergarten Gen Ed parent, thought that having the G&T program in the school “creates too much animosity between two groups, or a feeling of being better because one is in the program... parents that are in the G&T look at some of the parents that are not like ‘Oh, my son got in.’ It’s a weird feeling.” As Lindsay, a parent with children in both programs, explained, though, parents are “concerned about this kind of system, but a lot of the parents defend having a G&T program. I think they like it.”

Lauren, a Kindergarten Gen Ed parent said she did not believe DOE officials would phase out the G&T program at The Community School, even though she would support that, because “they attract a great group [of parents] and why fix what’s not broken...I don’t think they’d want to upset it.” But, later in the interview she brought the issue up again when I asked her what she would change about the G&T policy. She replied: “I would do away with the G&T programming if it would not disrupt, if it would mean that they were going to bus [Black and Latino] kids in again, no, they need to keep it. But if it would not mean that, then I think it would make everybody’s lives easier. But some parents wouldn’t want it [the G&T program] to go away, so I don’t know.” As I have shown, advantaged parents with children in the Gen Ed program or G&T parents in the older grades seemed conflicted between wanting the G&T to be phased out because of their beliefs in diversity and concern for segregation, but also not wanting the G&T program to “go away” because of the advantaged parents the program attracts. Thus, parents reproduce the boundaries when they retest for G&T and eventually get their children into G&T or leave the school.

Below, I will illustrate how parents rationalize keeping the G&T program at The Community School, even though there are more White families choosing the Gen Ed program, because it attracts the right kind of “G&T” parent to the school and to create distance from the “other.”

Reasons for Keeping the G&T Program—To “Elevate a School”

Parents in the G&T, Gen Ed, and both programs contradicted their earlier argument that the G&T program could (and should) be phased out in the school, when they said that the G&T program is still

needed in order to attract the right type of parents and students to the school and increase the school's reputation. This is the same argument that supporters of G&T programs use when they say that they "are crucial for middle class parents seeking refuge from low-performing neighborhood schools" (Gootman, 2009). In fact, one way that the district seems to be attracting White parents into "failing" public schools is by opening up G&T programs at schools with a majority of students of color, like The Community School did twenty years ago. The school choice consultant explained, "of course [School A] and [The Community School] were not schools anyone [meaning advantaged parents] went to before the G&T was there" because they were majority Black and Latino schools.

As Kathy, a 4th Grade G&T parent, responded, "I believe that G&T programs can elevate a school and then they can be phased out and the school will stay a great school, you know?" In this way, parents believed that the G&T program "pulls the school up" because they attract the right type of parent—e.g. one who has money to donate and gets involved in the PTA, which in this case are the majority White, higher income parents. Then, the theory goes, once the school gets a better reputation because of who is enrolling their children there and what they are doing for the school, then parents from the neighborhood will want to go to the school regardless if there is a G&T program or not. The Community School, apparently, is in the middle of this transition, since more White families are starting to enroll their children in the Gen Ed program, but instead of staying in the Gen Ed program they all retest for G&T and attempt to cross over the gifted/non-gifted boundary to be with other similarly advantaged parents like them. Thus, parents were conflicted about whether The Community School's G&T program should be phased out or not because there are still lower income parents of color enrolling their children in the Gen Ed portion of the school, which causes the rigid boundaries between programs to remain intact.

One White incoming parent to the Gen Ed program, named Kelly, explained why she thought G&T programs within schools improve the overall "quality" and reputation of the school, especially schools that enroll a majority of students of color, like School J (see Table 3 in Chapter 4), which just started a G&T program. She replied:

[School J] has a very keen and motivated principal and assistant principal who are extremely interested in improving the quality of the school. The way to do that is to get the G&T kids there and to get the money from the G&T parents and to get them involved in the school because it doesn't have a very active PTA. It doesn't really have that kind of reputation. As a result, it doesn't attract the kids there that it needs. So moving it there was a good move...and the question is how long do you keep it there before you move it some place else and improve those schools, too?

According to some of the parents that I interviewed, by adding a G&T program at School J, DOE officials are hoping that White, middle class parents from across the district will choose the separate G&T program and eventually the entire school will improve, just like what is starting to happen at The Community School. As I have demonstrated from Kelly's quote above, "G&T kids" and "G&T parents" are in reference to the mostly White and/or higher income parents from across the district who will make the school better by being more involved and donating money. In this way, the symbolic boundaries between "us"/"G&T" and "them"/"Gen Ed" are clearly defined by the advantaged parents in this segregated school system, which then translates into social boundaries that allow advantaged parents to use their uneven cultural capital exchange to gain access into high status G&T programs. Therefore, even though Kelly wished that the G&T program at The Community School would be phased out now because her son got into the Gen Ed program and she was fearful of the "stigma," she also thought adding G&T programs in certain schools that enrolled a majority of students of color is a "good move" because they would attract the right type of "G&T kids" there, which will improve the reputation and the quality of education.

When I asked Courtney, an incoming parent to the G&T program who lives outside The Community School's zone, if she heard that the G&T program would be phased out she replied, "What would happen to me? I wouldn't be able to go there anymore because it's not my zoned school?" She went on to explain why she thought School A's decision to phase out their G&T program and School J starting a G&T program at the same time was not a coincidence. "I mean they said [School A was phasing their G&T program out] because they had more regular [or Gen Ed] applicants, and they ran out of actual physical space, which may be true. But I also feel like it's a good way to get [School J's G&T program] to work better. So they're spreading the wealth a little."

Thus, because advantaged parents buy into and embody the structures—e.g. using self-contained G&T programs to attract White, higher income families, they also said they believe that The Community School’s G&T program is still “needed” not only to attract the right kind of families, but also to create distance from the “other.” Not surprisingly, G&T parents like Courtney, who live outside of The Community School’s catchment area, or 11 out of the 16 G&T parents that I interviewed, make this claim the most since they would not have been able to choose The Community School if there was no G&T program.

The G&T program still “needed” at The Community School because of the demographic differences. Another reason that G&T parents gave for keeping the G&T program at The Community School was because of the racial and socio-economic diversity of the student body. Often times, parents would compare The Community School to other schools in the area that are disproportionately White with no G&T, particularly School A (which is currently phasing out their G&T program), School E and F, by saying that these other schools can go without a G&T program because their student body is demographically more similar than The Community School’s and they do not have housing projects. As Anne, a 2nd and 4th Grade G&T parent who lives outside of The Community School’s catchment, replied:

I think that’s the only way parents with kids who are invested in their education will go [to Gen Ed] is if it’s the same way as [School E] or [School F] [e.g. are located in a higher income neighborhood with more White students]. I just think that’s a hard task when you have - I just think the makeup of the neighborhood is different and the zone is different than we have...I don’t know of any housing projects in [those schools]. I think that sometimes families are struggling more in our school to do basic things and it’s hard to then sort of give the kids the support that they might get when you’re not struggling for the basics. So I think that makes it a little easier as far as those other programs go.

In other words, what Anne, and many other G&T parents who lived outside the catchment area, said was that because there are housing projects and lower income students in The Community School’s catchment, as well as more advantaged students like theirs, they need two separate programs within the school.

In fact, what I heard from parents is that G&T programs are not necessary at schools that are disproportionately White and higher income “with no projects next to them,” referring particularly to

schools in higher income neighborhoods with a disproportionate number of White students, “because it wouldn’t be serving a purpose.” But, parents agreed that having a G&T program at The Community School makes it a better school because it attracts the right kind of G&T parents, who mostly live outside the catchment area. In other words, if you got rid of the G&T program, you would risk losing those highly involved parents from outside The Community School’s zone.

And, even though some of these same advantaged parents would rather the school be all Gen Ed, “a true neighborhood school,” like other disproportionately White and higher income schools in their district, many explained that having the advantaged parents and lower income parents of color within the same school means you need the separate G&T program. Kathy, a 4th Grade G&T parent who also lives outside The Community School’s zone, when asked what the advantages to having a G&T program were, explained:

... when you have schools like ours that have projects in them, and these are people who want the best for their children, just everybody wants---there’s nobody that doesn’t want the best for their child, that’s life. But you don’t have, when you’re working, you and your husband, three jobs and your kids are latch-key kids and there’s not a book in your house because you can’t afford it, it’s not the same as having two parents that have advanced degrees who have read every book about how to raise children, and by the time you start elementary school, you can practically read. It’s not the same and it’s not fair to try to compare them. But if you can do the best that you can, which I think G&T is helping, then why isn’t that a good thing?

In other words, since the project housing buildings in The Community School’s catchment “bring in a different type of population,” the G&T program is still wanted and needed to separate the two different sets of children who come from different backgrounds. Kathy’s quote also relates to the social and symbolic boundaries that parents use to define “us” and “them” categories. For example, when Kathy refers to the parents who are “working three jobs” and the “kids are latch-key kids” versus parents who have “advanced degrees” and “have read every book about how to raise children,” it is clear how parents use symbolic boundaries to sort their children into the high status G&T programs where they felt they belonged. Like I illustrated in Chapter 5, G&T programs become a symbol of where White, advantaged families belonged.

As I have shown in this chapter, parents believed that attracting more White families from the catchment into the Gen Ed program is a positive thing because it breaks down the segregation and turns The Community School into a neighborhood school. On the other hand, the Gen Ed program is still enrolling students from the project housing buildings and the advantaged Gen Ed parents are retesting for G&T. Therefore, the boundary maintenance between “us” (advantaged parents) and “them” (lower income parents of color who choose the Gen Ed program) is maintained and reproduced and the cycle of segregation and stratification continues in the upper grades.

Thus, what I heard from the vast majority of parents is that in an ideal world the G&T could be phased out now to be a true neighborhood school because the demographics between the two programs are becoming more similar in the younger grades. But, in reality, since their school is still divided between G&T parents who are involved and care about their child’s education (“us”) versus the Gen Ed parents who are not as involved and maybe are not as invested (“them”), they are hesitant to make the school all Gen Ed because they would not be able to still attract the same “G&T” (White, middle to upper-middle class) parents from across the district to the school and want to create distance from the “other.” Ultimately, what is causing parents to consider the possibility of phasing out the G&T program is because there are White advantaged parents enrolling their children in G&T and Gen Ed now when they never would have before. Ironically, despite how advantaged parents with children in the Gen Ed program said they would support the G&T program phasing out, they still resist their placement and ‘play the game’ by prepping and retesting their children every year to get into the G&T program to reconcile their fractured habitus and pass along their advantages to their children through educational placements.

Conclusion

In sum, what this third findings chapter illustrates is that within a school that is starting to enroll advantaged families into two separate and hierarchical academic programs, is where you can see how the boundaries get recreated and reproduced over time--with the biggest change being that advantaged parents living in the catchment area are choosing their zoned school now, when they never would have before the demographic change. In this moment of recreating the boundaries, parents on both sides of the

boundary line considered the “diversity” in the Gen Ed classrooms as a “positive thing” in the school and a sign that the school could (and should) phase out the G&T program. G&T parents are also adapting to this demographic shift by trying to minimize the academic differences between programs, in order to make all parents feel like are in the same school instead of two separate ones.

Yet, even as the boundary line between the G&T and Gen Ed programs is becoming redefined in the younger grades to include more White families in the Gen Ed category and parents downplay the differences between programs, the advantaged Gen Ed parents still want the distinction or status of being in the “better” G&T program to be with other similarly advantaged parents like them and create distance from the “other” (e.g. fractured habitus). Thus, as parents explained, they use their uneven cultural capital exchange to prep and retest for the G&T with most of them eventually getting into the G&T program or leaving the school, which reproduces the segregation in the upper grades. In addition, even as parents said that in theory the G&T program could be phased out now because there are more White families in the Gen Ed program, they still believed it served a purpose in the school—to attract the right “kind” of G&T parent from outside the catchment area and separate the “advantaged” parents from the Gen Ed parents who live in the “project housing.” Thus, parents use the boundaries, which become signifiers of their *habitus* and cultural capital, to not only shape their school choice preferences in a demographically changing school site, but guide them into the places where they felt they belonged. A fractured habitus develops when there is a mismatch between where they believe they belong and where they are placed within the structures.

In the next and final chapter, I describe how the policy context that parents are operating within creates the status distinctions between schools and programs in this district, and further, how policies could be implemented to combat the segregation that the system maintains. I also discuss the implications of this research, critiques of the system, and offer policy recommendations based on the findings from this study.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Policy Implications and Future Research Objectives

What is clear about the findings to emerge from this study is that the ways in which advantaged parents interact with school choice policies is not colorblind. In fact, when the 41 advantaged parents in this study, interact with a policy context that gives them the choice between mostly segregated schools and programs, they all strove to be in the high status G&T program that matched their privileged position in the larger system, even if it contradicts with their desire for diversity. These parents struggle for high-status positions in the status hierarchy across programs and classrooms in their school. Meanwhile, they embodied contradictory dispositions related to their sense of the “place” where they and their children belonged within a segregated two-track school, their desire for their children to be exposed to racial/ethnic and socio-economic “diversity” – at least in the abstract and if their children are not in a minority, and their drive to provide their children with the “best” education, even when they are uncertain about what that means within this context. The Community School, nested within a public education system with rigid student assignment policies, is the site where these conflicting desires converge and advantaged parents grapple with the contradictions between what they want and what they think they need, given the existing choices or the structure of schooling and where their children have been placed within it.

This research is especially important and timely now since there has been a recent influx of White, higher income New York City parents utilizing the public school system (see Stillman, 2012; Roberts, 2011; Rérat et al., 2010), therefore, studying the possible contradictions that result from their school choices in a highly segregated system can tell us important information about why social conditions change or get reproduced and how policies could be altered to create fewer distinctions between schools and programs (Roda & Wells, 2013; Michelson et al., 2008).

Therefore, in the current post-civil rights era, NYC district officials could learn from the parents I studied about their contradictory beliefs and actions when determining where their children belong in a highly segregated school system. In fact, this case study in one elementary school goes beyond individual

parent's choices by highlighting how the policy context itself shapes the distribution of opportunities and creates the status distinctions between schools and programs. In other words, within this policy context, many parents said they would prefer to enroll their children in diverse schools that have strong educational programs. But because of the lack of such options available, they continue to make choices that privilege their children and perpetuate the status quo.

This study also contributes to social theory by building new knowledge on the interrelated but complex relationship between parent's habitus and boundary maintenance strategies. By studying how advantaged parents made sense of their children's placements in a segregated school context, I captured how their choices are simultaneously shaped by their *habitus* and the social and symbolic boundaries that they use to define "us" (advantaged parents) and "them" (lower income families of color who choose the Gen Ed program)—even when their own children are placed in the "other" Gen Ed category.

My research leads me to conclude that although some advantaged parents in the City Limits School District will probably choose separate, predominantly White G&T programs no matter what, there is a large, and potentially growing, group of advantaged parents in the system who would choose otherwise if New York City policymakers would create more viable, racially diverse schools and programs within them. In short, racially diverse, vibrant public school options in which teachers think of student diversity as an asset to explore and build upon in the classroom would keep advantaged parents and their resources in public schools. This should be an important goal for maintaining the economic vitality of gentrifying cities like NYC, while helping to provide more equitable educational opportunities for all children.

In this chapter, I will describe how the policy context that parents are operating within creates the status distinctions between schools and programs in this district, and further, how policies could be implemented to combat the segregation that this system maintains. Next, I discuss the implications of this research, critiques of the system, and propose ideas for future research on this important topic.

The Changing School Choice Landscape in The City Limits School District

As a researcher and a public school parent of an older child who used to be enrolled in the NYC

community school district I studied, I come to this research with prior experience and knowledge of the City Limits School District's school choice system. My unique vantage point into this segregated system provided me with "insider knowledge" of the school choice options that the parents in my sample were choosing among. Studying parental school choice within this large "community" school district several years after my own child had graduated from kindergarten allowed me the unique vantage point of being unknown to my respondents and yet aware of their larger context. Thus, my aim was to investigate the process by which families interact with school choice policies in a manner that consistently leads to social reproduction, stratification, and school segregation. Since White, advantaged parents are more likely to get their children into the highest-status schools regardless of the school choice policy in place, my research focused on this subgroup of parents to see whether they would support changes to educational policies that would lead to less segregation across schools and programs.

For the advantaged parents in my sample who choose to live in the City and send their children to public schools, as opposed to leaving the city or choosing private school education, they intuitively know that exposing their children to diversity is "positive" for their children's academic and social development in preparing them for a global society, but at the same time they all strove to give their children what's considered to be the "best" education. They are bothered by the segregation between G&T and Gen Ed programs within the school. These parents, then, are torn between their stated beliefs about diversity and equality, on the one hand, and giving their children the "best" education available in this particular policy context, on the other. Given their options in a highly segregated school choice system, they choose (or strive) to separate their children into majority White G&T classrooms, not necessarily because they believe their children are gifted, but because they know that if there are more involved parents like them in the G&T, then those classrooms will be "better."

It would seem, then, that the larger, social, political and economic context that these parents are operating within creates the conditions for these contradictory dispositions to appear. In fact, MacLeod (2009) writes about this relationship between choices, *habitus*, and the larger context of inequality when he says, "individual choices matter and make a difference, but the stage is largely set" (p. 268). The

“stage is largely set” for New York City parents in this school district context, as well, since, as I will describe in more detail in this chapter, the ways parents interact with the “structure of schooling” in this context tends to result in racial and socio-economic segregation between G&T and Gen Ed tracks within highly diverse schools. The larger structures of inequality that these parents are operating within shape their school choices and opportunities.

This is because of the DOE-dictated admissions criteria for gifted programs, especially the standardized G&T exam that has historically resulted in disproportionate numbers of White and Asian students passing the cutoff score; the extra prepping and tutoring for the standardized G&T tests that higher income parents can afford and others cannot; the separate G&T classrooms located in particular school buildings that enroll a majority of lower-income students of color in the Gen Ed program; the unequal pre-school opportunities, etc. In other words, the ways in which parents internalize the external social structures when determining where their children belong in this hierarchical school choice system is also shaped by the broader context of our stratified society, especially in cities like NYC with high degrees of income inequality, patterns of gentrification, and residential and school segregation.

Ultimately, even if parents want more diverse and undivided schools to choose from in their local community school district, their options are extremely limited to a few choice schools that are currently oversubscribed and difficult to get into because they are located in White, higher income neighborhoods and because there has been a recent influx of White, higher income parents into the public school system.

School Choice Policies in The City Limits School District

Through the years, the City Limits School District has tried many different forms of school choice that allow families to choose schools outside of their zoned, attendance area. In the last decade, school officials have gone from an open enrollment system to a lottery system back to an open enrollment system, which have all failed to create more diverse schools. Before 2005, the City Limits School District employed a voluntary “open enrollment” system that allowed students from anywhere in the district to go to any school that they chose if there were seats available. In this system, the individual schools chose the out-of-zone students that they wanted based on their application materials, which could

be discriminating because of what the family offers in terms of resources (see CIF Report, 2005; Moore and Davenport, 1990).

In 2006, the district decided to put into practice a more regulated “preferred choice” lottery system after an immigrants’ rights group complained and threatened a lawsuit because the schools were segregated and low income parents of color were being discriminated against (CIF Report, 2005). This voluntary lottery system allowed families to fill out an application and rank their top choice schools if they were unhappy with their neighborhood school. Since the district decided to keep neighborhood schools and make the lottery voluntary, residential segregation was still reflected in many of the schools. Additionally, because the lottery was designed in such a way that it did attempt to control for diversity, it proved to be impossible to diversify the schools, especially the most popular ones, because there were very few seats available for the out of zone students.

This lottery system only lasted about three years (from 2006-2009). In fact, the most popular schools were so overcrowded that it did not make sense to hold the lottery anymore because there were no seats available (even for students living within the school’s catchment). Therefore, in 2009, City Limits School District officials decided to go back to the “open enrollment” policy in which parents apply to individual schools, and schools get to choose the students based on their own criteria and if there is room available. Not surprisingly, the same six schools (of which 3 have G&T programs) that were the most popular and disproportionately White back in 2006 are the same schools that advantaged parents concentrate in now.

As I have already described in Chapter 4, throughout all of these changes to the school choice policy for Gen Ed programs, the G&T policy underwent a change in 2008 when NYCDOE officials changed it to a centralized system. The biggest change for this new G&T policy was that instead of relying on multiple criteria for G&T admission, which allowed individual schools to enroll a more diverse G&T student population, they now rely on a single score on a standardized test for admission. Despite warnings from experts that using standardized scores alone would lead to fewer Black and Latino students in G&T classrooms because the tests have been found to be racially biased, former Chancellor Klein

pushed forward with his new G&T admissions policy anyway (Haimson & Kjelberg, 2009). Therefore, even though one of the goals of the G&T policy change was to admit a more diverse G&T population, the exact opposite occurred with more White and Asian and less Black and Latino students admitted to G&T programs since the centralized policy was implemented (see Table 1 in Chapter 4).

Ultimately, these different forms of school choice that City Limits School District officials have implemented in the past---including open enrollment, preferred choice, and G&T programs--- have all led to more and not less segregation between and within schools. This is the case because the central goal of the City Limits program is to maximize parental choice, not to racially or socioeconomically diversify the schools. In this way, the kindergarten school choice program is “colorblind,” letting school diversity chips fall where they may. Thus, my study allowed me to understand how parents made sense of their school choice options and their child’s placement in a G&T or Gen Ed program (or both) amid these racial distinctions across programs and schools.

In addition, policy makers in large urban school districts have historically created “exclusive” and often racially isolated schools of choice, including those with programs for “gifted” students, in an effort to keep more White, advantaged parents in urban public schools (Borland 2009; Gootman 2009; Gootman and Gebeloff 2008; Sapon-Shevin 2003). The assumption behind such programs is that these parents both demand and require separate and unequal educational spaces for their children.

In fact, the political argument that we now live in a “colorblind” society and do not need to consider race when developing educational policies does not hold in this context. The research clearly demonstrates that parents’ school choices are anything but colorblind and, absent policies designed to support school-level diversity, their decisions lead to greater racial and social class segregation between and within schools. Additionally, the majority of these parents are bothered by the racial and socioeconomic segregation within and among schools that result from these policies, but they simultaneously want to provide their children with the “best” education with similarly advantaged parents like them. Thus, a fractured *habitus* emerges because parents are caught between the value they place on diversity (especially if their children are in the Gen Ed program), and the simultaneous desire to hold onto

the G&T program, to attract the right “kind” of parents to the school. The contradictions between these two ways of looking at their local options are reconcilable, through alternative policies that local officials should consider.

Policy Implications

Thus, I would argue that the “problem” of school segregation in this district, and in other urban school districts across the country, is in large part due to the design of the school choice policies in place. In fact, it only makes sense that if advantaged parents, who say they value diversity, had more diverse school options to choose from in the first place, then they would be more likely to choose them. In other words, “White flight” would not take place in certain neighborhood schools that enroll a majority of students of color if the schools were not so segregated to begin with.

In the City Limits School District, the conditions to create and support a diverse public school system exist, but race and class-conscious school choice policies do not. In fact, the City Limits School District has a very diverse public school population with roughly 27 percent White, 34 percent Latino, 33 percent Black, 5 percent Asian and 54 percent eligible for FRPL, and it is also geographically small in size, encompassing a 65- block area in a large city. Therefore, in theory the City Limits School District has the ability to create integrated schools, but because of racially segregated housing patterns and many parents choosing their neighborhood schools coupled with the G&T policy that uses standardized tests for admission into kindergarten, the end result is that most schools are racially and socio-economically segregated—both between schools and within schools that offer G&T programs. Additionally, all schools are easily accessible by public transportation, which most children use. Thus, as the CIF Report argues, “It would, in fact, take very little to desegregate our schools and have them draw from the entire District without substantially increasing the amount of busing” (p. 14).

In order to create a more equitable and diverse school system, I would advocate for the following policy changes: 1. The creation of more diverse schools with no G&T programs—either by creating magnet schools which have diversity as the main goal, or creating more district-wide or “unzoned” schools that draw from the entire school district and are located in existing buildings in diverse

neighborhoods, and 2. The elimination of self-contained G&T programs within schools that also offer Gen Ed programs.

Policy Interventions

Therefore, one option for policy makers to consider would be to create and promote more racially diverse, non-G&T schools such as the highly popular district-wide (unzoned) schools with separate application processes, School R and School S (See Table 3 in Chapter 4), which are located in diverse catchment areas. In fact, School R and School S are diverse at the school and classroom level and are popular school options for advantaged families, as evidenced by their long waiting lists of White children. For example, this option would entail eliminating existing school's catchment zones and opening them up for district-wide enrollment. These new district-wide schools should be existing schools that are located in more diverse neighborhoods, like School G in Table 3, or are not enrolling the White families who live in the catchment area, like School J. These unzoned options could appeal to Community School parents who want to expose their children to "diversity" (or at least not be in the minority in their zoned school).

Since the neighborhoods in this district are highly segregated by race and class, this policy option could potentially create more diverse schools because families from across the district could apply. This option, though, relies on a diverse group of applicants to apply to each school. Therefore, schools would need to advertise their program and attract a diverse group of parents to the school, especially if they did not have a good reputation before. It is also important that these district-wide schools are located in diverse neighborhoods since the interview data suggest that parents want to create distance from the "other," low-income parents of color who live in the public housing buildings. Therefore, it is clear that advantaged parents will probably not choose schools that are in majority black and Latino neighborhoods. District officials could start by switching the six most popular, disproportionately white schools, including the three schools with separate G&T programs, into district-wide or magnet schools to achieve racial/ethnic and SES diversity.

They should also figure out which neighborhood schools are not attracting the advantaged families who live within the school's catchment areas, and make those schools district-wide or magnet

schools in the hopes of attracting the advantaged parents back into their neighborhood schools, like what is happening with The Community School. According to the interview data, the advantaged parents who used the G&T program at The Community School to escape their zoned, majority black and Latino low-income schools, were zoned for Schools B, G, J, and Q. In creative, non-G&T ways, district officials could use diversity and proximity to their home as a way to attract advantaged families into these schools that are majority black and Latino.

Another way to achieve diversity in this district would be to create magnet school options that have racial integration as their main goal. Magnet schools receive federal or state funding and offer special programs or themes (like art, drama or science) to attract diverse students from different neighborhoods. The U.S. Department of Education is emphasizing the benefit of diversity in its competitive magnet school funding process, and local officials should build on New York City's history of magnet school success to bring more of that federal funding to the City Limits School District. Recently, there has been a policy change in this district to change the name of some existing majority black and Latino schools by calling them "magnet" schools. Unfortunately, they are "magnet" in name only. This is because these schools are not using a socially engineered lottery to admit a diverse group of students. Instead, they remain black and Latino, low-income schools with a specific curriculum focus or philosophy. Again, since they are located in black and Latino neighborhoods, advantaged families will probably not choose these new "magnet" schools because of their location.

True magnet programs should be implemented as a tool to desegregate the schools either by using a social engineered lottery with a certain formula to keep the race or class percentages for each school at the district-wide averages, or depending on the school's focus, it could use multiple criteria for admissions, like interviews, observations, and teacher recommendations, to admit a diverse student population.

The parent interview data strongly suggest that more undivided options would ultimately be what advantaged parents are looking for (even if they are in the G&T program themselves). The irony of my analysis is that the history of the City's public school system has been to use the separate and unequal

G&T programs to keep White, middle class families from leaving the public schools. But, as Caitlyn, a 4th grade White parent, explained:

I do get the sense that the average person is just looking for – they don't necessarily want a G&T program, they just want a good basic education for their kids. And I think in New York there are such extremes. I feel like it's hard just to find a middle of the road– [School E] is that way, but ya know, if you don't happen to live in that zone then you have to make it work.

In addition, since 73 percent of parents, or 30 out of 41, in my sample would support the G&T program phasing out in their school, NYC school district officials should consider eliminating self-contained G&T programs within schools that also offer Gen Ed programs. The research findings from this study strongly support this move to phase out G&T programs because of how uncomfortable parents are with the ongoing segregation between programs and the feelings of superiority and inferiority that the G&T and Gen Ed labels produce for parents and students. Parents said that it was not that they were “against gifted and talented programs,” but for The Community School where White students are being placed into two different programs, it is not “needed” anymore. In other words, instead of using separate G&T programs to attract advantaged families into the public schools, which inevitably leads to segregation between tracks, City Limits officials should create diverse schools to attract these same parents who say they want their children to be exposed to diversity to prepare them for a globalized society.

For example, The Community School has maintained a segregated two-track system for 16 years, and only in the last three years have the boundaries between programs started breaking down because more White families are starting to choose the Gen Ed program. In this moment of recreating the boundaries, it can be hopeful for the Gen Ed parents and students who are experiencing the racial and socio-economic diversity in their classrooms. In fact, parents with children in the Gen Ed program praised the diversity that their children were experiencing first hand in their classrooms and G&T parents also saw the diversity in the younger grades as a positive sign that the segregation was breaking down.

Despite the positive benefits of diversity in the Gen Ed classrooms, the diversity in The Community School is one sided since the G&T programs remain majority White. Advantaged parents

want the best of both worlds--- diversity and the “best” education for their children, but in this context the schools that are considered the “best” are also disproportionately White and higher income. Why not create more diverse, high quality schools that could appeal to advantaged parents’ sense of what is the “best” for their child? Thus, the DOE should create more schools that have no G&T program where mixed ability, diverse students come together to learn in an integrated setting.

Critiques of the G&T Policy

Amid this proliferation of G&T services as the answer to keeping White families in the public school system, there is evidence beyond this research that more New Yorkers are questioning the validity of these separate classrooms. For instance, the City Limits School District community newspaper reported that for the 2008 school year, one-fourth of the parents who were offered a G&T seat turned it down for a variety of reasons, including the belief that “gifted programming isn’t the right approach to education... or they will reject G&T for lack of student diversity” (Raschka, 2008, p. 14). Additionally, the article cites a national specialist in gifted education as saying that an, “entirely test driven admissions process will only exacerbate the problem of equity and racial imbalance” since it is very hard to identify lower income, minority children as being “gifted” using tests alone (Raschka, 2008).

The New York Times also ran a piece on G&T programming that criticized the NYC school district, and other urban districts, for using G&T programs to “help prevent White flight from the schools” and that the use of standardized tests for G&T admission “tends to skew the programs toward children from Whiter, and wealthier families” (Baker, 2013). The article also cites a G&T parent who felt that the reason that G&T programs are majority White is not the “result of anyone’s bad intentions.” Instead, this G&T parent argued that it is a “result of people committed to a system that can never work if the objective is diversity” because, like my study also found, White, affluent parents give their children extra advantages to pass the G&T tests, including tutoring for the tests, private preschool education, etc. (Baker, 2013). Thus, unregulated school choice plans that do not engineer for diversity often lead to more segregation by race, class and ability (Michelson, 2008; Bifulco, Ladd and Ross, 2009).

Recently, New York Magazine ran a cover story criticizing the City's G&T policy for testing children so young since IQ at this age is unstable and their scores can change dramatically depending on the type of test used, how comfortable the child is with the tester, and other environmental factors, etc. (Senior, 2010). Additional changes have been made to the types of G&T tests used in the future, tests that the DOE claims would be harder to prepare for, none of which address the narrow criteria being used in selecting students or the racial separation that these programs create within schools that have them.

Proponents of Ability Grouping

On the other side, though, there are many proponents of ability grouping and tracking who advocate for G&T programs and often argue that G&T students might fall behind if they are integrated into the Gen Ed program. Proponents believe there needs to be some kind of ability grouping in urban schools because students come to school with vastly different abilities based on their socio-economic backgrounds and whether or not they went to preschool. The argument goes that by grouping students according to their ability, it is easier to teach them and students feel more comfortable because they are with similar achieving peers.

I would argue that, instead of separating children by "ability," which inevitably results in segregation by race and class in diverse school settings, one strategy that schools could use to reach different types of learners in mixed ability, diverse schools is differentiation. Differentiated learning, which is actually rooted in gifted and special education inclusive models of education, seeks to shape curriculum and learning to the different needs of each student in order to challenge them to their highest potential. According to The Community School's principal, the Gen Ed and G&T teachers are already using "differentiated" learning and tailoring their lessons in order to "challenge each individual learner." In fact, The Community School parents admitted that there is a wide range of ability in both Gen Ed and G&T classes because of test prepping, whether or not students went to preschool, etc. City Limits schools could provide teachers with extra prep time to design lessons and offer professional development on differentiated learning for schools that have phased their G&T programs out.

Studies have also shown that attending a high quality preschool is socially and academically beneficial to children—especially disadvantaged children. Research has also shown that, on average, low-SES children are less prepared to start kindergarten than their high-SES peers (See Campbell et al., 2003; and Jacobson, 2002). Furthermore, Reardon (2003) found that for children that started kindergarten with higher-level skills, the achievement gap between Black and White students got wider as they progressed through school. These findings have important implications for using high-stakes G&T tests on four-year-olds to determine if they are “gifted” or “not gifted,” specifically for those children who attend a high quality, private preschool it bestows on them clear advantages that other children may not receive. Thus, to help combat the disparities in student’s school readiness, the DOE could offer more universal preschools that are free to all families so students come to school better prepared to start kindergarten and there is less variation in student’s ability when they start school. If all students start kindergarten with higher-level skills, this could be one way to narrow the achievement gap as student’s progress through school.

As Mead and Green (2012) write, “Setting aside issues of discriminatory intent, choice patterns that exacerbate racial stratification (and stratification by parental education, wealth, and other factors) remain a very real concern” (p. 2). Therefore, I encourage the DOE to shift its focus away from deregulated, “colorblind” school choice policies that favor advantaged families and consistently lead to greater racial segregation. Instead, they should emphasize racial and social-class integration and cross-cultural understandings to prepare children for a global society and greater equality.

In a diverse, urban school district where a growing number of White, middle class parents are choosing public over private schools for their children’s education is where we can see how parents choices can lead to race and class based inequalities, especially when perceptions of school quality are related to the race and class compositions of the schools. Therefore, one of the DOE’s goals should be to track the enrollment patterns of this demographic and strive to make more equitable schooling options and policies that lead to less and not more segregation between and within schools. The district should make it a priority to identify which schools are over-subscribed and under-subscribed and also which

zoned schools families are leaving, and find a way to mix students around so that higher-income, White families are not concentrated in the “top” schools and the lower-income, families of color are not left behind in the lower performing, “failing” schools. The district can then help principals in the under-subscribed schools to improve their programs and attract more diverse families to their school by changing it to a district-wide school or magnet school with diversity as its goal.

Future Research Goals

Ultimately, I believe that public school officials in New York City and elsewhere could learn from this analysis of how advantaged parents in The Community School made sense of their school choices and how that meaning relates to race within seemingly “colorblind” school choice policies. My findings illustrate the subtle, micro-level mechanisms that create, perpetuate and exacerbate racial segregation and inequality in education. It is not surprising, given the lack of choices that City Limits officials have made available to them that these advantaged parents usually end up making the choice that protects their privilege and thus maintains the segregation and inequality. The question remains, though, that if people are really “colorblind” in our post-civil rights society, why do schools remain so segregated by race and class when parents are given more school choices? If there is not a stigma of inferiority to attending segregated schools, then why are white parents so concerned about sending their children to schools with black students (Singer, 2012)?

My goal moving forward is to continue to uncover the possible contradictions and tensions that emerge when parents make school and neighborhood choices that often contribute to the social reproduction of the system. For instance, in debates over school choice and segregation or tracking and gifted education, we can see the relationship between the struggle for better opportunities for individual students embedded within the larger context of racial and socio-economic inequality. Qualitative research can uncover the contradictions and fractures that emerge within social actors when their values and beliefs do not match with their choice of a segregated school or school program. In fact, I have shown that advantaged parents stated beliefs are contradictory between what they say and what they do. While social science research often tries to ignore or control for these internal contradictions and tensions, I find

them helpful for understanding the limits and possibilities of future efforts to address educational inequality.

In the current post-civil rights era, this research focus is especially relevant since recent trends suggest that more advantaged parents are choosing public schools over private schools for their children's education and they want more diverse school options to choose from, especially in urban areas. Therefore, future research is needed on how parents make sense of their school and neighborhood choices and how that meaning relates to race and class in our increasingly diverse society.

Future research is also needed on the ways parents engage and interact with each other to get certain things done to improve their children's school. This study touches on the ways that advantaged parent's mobilized to oust a principal that they did not like and hire a new principal or to switch the "good" G&T and Gen Ed teachers around since there were more white families choosing the Gen Ed program now. This parent mobilization ties into normative expectations of parent involvement in schools in terms of what is expected of parents to make schools better---from other parents, teachers and school administrators (see Posey-Maddox, 2013). Yet, parent engagement is not uniformly beneficial for all students when advantaged parents are allowed to choose separate G&T programs that advantage their children only, especially when they are the ones who are more involved in the school.

In addition, there are variations in terms of who gets involved and who does not (even within the advantaged parent group) and how that relates to race and class in a diverse school setting. For instance, questions about whose voice is valued when decisions get made, who organizes the group's activity, and who feels comfortable participating in school functions, etc. need to be explored in more depth. This line of research points to the importance of building diverse parent constituencies, or a "collective approach to engagement" that will benefit all children in the school (Cucchiara and Horvat, 2009), foster social equity, and make sure every parent's voice is being heard. This type of analysis could be an important theoretical contribution to the existing literature on parental engagement in schools, as well.

In addition, a good comparative study to this one would be to study a true "community" school with a diverse student body and no G&T program. This type of study could highlight the solution, rather

than the problem of segregation. It could also reveal some of the boundary maintenance strategies that advantaged parent's might use even when they are in a more integrated setting. It is also important to return to The Community School to hear the perspectives of low-income parents of color. This would tell the other side of the story of being in the Gen Ed program within a school that also offers a majority white, G&T program.

It is clear to me that even small amendments to school choice policies could appeal to White parents' intuition about the importance of school-level diversity and work against some of the forces that continue to push the system toward more segregation. I have argued throughout this dissertation that it is because there are two segregated and hierarchical academic tracks within The Community School to choose from in the first place, that advantaged parents feel contradictory between their sense of the place where they belong, their desire for "diversity," and their drive to give their children the "best" education. Therefore, those with the power to make changes within the City Limits School District and The Community School and thousands of school districts across this country with G&T programs must be open to learning from the parents I studied and the missed opportunities for providing better choices for children within an increasingly diverse society. When policies designed to racially balance schools do not exist and parents are left to their own devices to navigate the racialized educational system, advantaged parents strive to get their children into the places that match their relatively privileged position in the larger system and society, even if it contradicts with the value they place on diversity. Therefore, those with the power to make changes within the City Limits School District and thousands of school districts across this country with G&T programs must be open to learning from the parents I studied and the missed opportunities for providing better choices for children within an increasingly diverse society.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol Outline

For all respondents: Introduction, IRB consent form signed, consent form for audio recording signed, give a copy of the project description...

Brief Project Description: My dissertation explores parent's perceptions of the G&T and Gen Ed programs within the NYC school system. I hope to better understand how parents use their background experiences and knowledge of the school system when making school choice decisions, as well as how parents make sense of the two academic programs within their school after they have their children enrolled in the school. The school district and school for this study will be confidential and thus will not be named or identified in my dissertation.

G&T and Gen Ed Parents

I. Introduction

1. Which program and grade level is your child enrolled in? For older grade parents, has your child always attended school here? If no, why did you change schools?
2. Are you satisfied with the educational program here? Why or why not?
3. How would you describe your child's elementary school classroom (G&T versus Gen Ed) to someone who isn't familiar with the schools or programs in this district?

II. Parent's Educational/Occupational Background

1. Tell me about your own educational experiences growing up (including their spouse's experience).
 - Probe: on location, type of school program, demographics, etc.
 - Probe: Was there school choice or just the zoned, neighborhood school?
2. Was there a G&T program at your elementary, middle or high school? If yes, describe the program?
 - Probe: on type of program, how students were identified, demographics, etc.
3. Were you chosen for a G&T program? If yes, how would you describe your experience in a G&T program? If no, how did you feel about not being chosen? For all, describe the students that were chosen.
4. How did your educational experience (or their spouse's experience) influence your school choice decisions for your own child?
5. Describe your college or post-secondary training/education and your current occupation (if applicable) (and their spouse's experiences). How are these experiences related to your educational expectations for your child?
6. How would you define academic or occupational success? What do you think is the most important thing that happened to you (or was missing) in your own childhood, college or occupational experience that has helped you become where you are today?

III. Decisions about school and neighborhood

1. How long have you lived in NYC? Why did you move to NYC? What influenced your decision about which NYC neighborhood to live in?
 - Probe: on housing, proximity to work, subway line, reputation, schools, neighborhood demographics, where friends and co-workers lived, etc.
2. Was the community school district or neighborhood public school a factor when you decided where to live? Did you do any research or hear anything about the elementary schools before you moved?

--Probe: Where did you get your information?

IV. Raising a child in NYC

1. What would you say are the biggest pros and cons of raising a child in NYC?
2. What kinds of things did you do to prepare your child for kindergarten? How often did you do these activities?
 - Probe: For parents whose child took G&T standardized tests, did you do any prepping for the tests for G&T admission?
 - Probe: Did you enroll your child in preschool (which one), take your child to the library, read to your child, museums, art galleries, travel, play groups, art, sports, music lessons, etc.?
3. Did your friends/neighbors do the same kinds of activities with their children?
 - Probe: What would you have done differently if you had to do it again?
4. Do you believe the activities/experiences that you just described prepared your child for Kindergarten and the G&T tests (if applicable)? Why or why not?
 - Probe: What were other parents doing to prepare their children?

VI. School Choice Process

1. Briefly describe your school choice process and how you decided to apply to this particular G&T or Gen Ed program. What would you say was the biggest thing about this school (or program within the school) that influenced your decision?
 - Probe: zoned school, G&T program, proximity to home, school's reputation, test scores, friends sending their children to this school, etc.
2. Did you hear about the G&T or Gen Ed program before you applied? What did you hear and who did you hear it from? What other options did you have? Are you satisfied with your choice? Why or why not?
3. Did your preschool teacher or director recommend that your child (or other children in the preschool) get tested for the gifted programs?
4. Did you feel confident or anxious about getting your child into your top preferences (test scores, sibling priority, etc)? What if you did not get into one of your top school preferences, what would you have done?
 - Probe: Was there competition between parents?

VII. Educational expectations for your child

1. What are your educational expectations/occupational aspirations for your child? Do you have confidence in your child's academic abilities? Do they need extra help in certain areas? Are they naturally good at certain subjects?
2. What kinds of things do you think the G&T/Gen Ed program will provide for your child now and in the future?
 - Probe: How are those advantages different for G&T versus Gen Ed students?

VII. Beliefs about G&T education

1. Why did you choose (or not choose) to get your child tested for G&T? For G&T parents, were you anxious or confident about the standardized test results?
2. How would you define giftedness? Do you feel that the G&T tests adequately measure giftedness? For G&T parents, in what ways do you feel that your child is gifted and talented?

IX. Parent Involvement in School

1. Do you volunteer in your child's preschool/elementary classroom or school—how often and what do you do? If not, why not?
 - Probe: Do you participate in other school activities (PTA, class parent, fundraising activities, etc.)? If so, which ones? How did you get involved?
2. Which parents participate the most in your child's classroom or in the school—and in what ways? How would you describe that group of parents?
3. Do you feel that the G&T and Gen Ed parents are equally represented on the PTA—why or why not? For PTA parents, how do you recruit other parents to help or join the PTA?
 - Probe: Does the principal or teachers try to get more parents involved?
 - Probe: When do PTA meetings occur and how often? What level of commitment is expected?

X. Comparisons between the Gifted and Gen Ed Programs

1. How would you compare your child's classroom to the G&T/Gen Ed classroom across the hallway?
 - Probe: on students (motivation, behavior, achievement), parents, teachers, academics
 - Probe: What is the biggest thing that stands out to you between the two classrooms/programs?
2. Would it be OK if your child was in the other program—why or why not?
 - Probe: Did the student composition in either program play a part in your school choice decision?
3. Can you describe the parents/families in the G&T/Gen Ed program in more detail? How are they the same and/or different?
 - Probe: on parent involvement, where they live, educational background, occupational status, family dynamics, PTA membership, racial/ethnic/SES backgrounds, etc.
4. Are there activities that G&T and Gen Ed students do together during the day? If so, what activities, and how often?
 - Probe: When they are together, do the G&T and Gen Ed students socialize with each other or do they remain separated?
 - Probe: Do they ever see each other after school-- at the playground, play dates or birthday parties?
5. For G&T and Gen Ed parents that have children in the upper grades:
 - How have your perceptions of the G&T and Gen Ed programs changed over the years—if at all?
 - Thinking back, what was your biggest misconception about the G&T/Gen Ed program before your child started school?
 - Did the new principal change anything in regards to the two programs?
 - Are Gen Ed children ever tested for G&T in the older grades if they are doing really well?
 - Has your child ever commented on the “other” students across the hall—in terms of behavior, achievement, race, class, etc.?
 - Do parents or other school personnel ever talk about the racial and economic divisions between the two programs? If so, what has been discussed and have there been any changes made?

XI. G&T Policy

1. Have you read about or heard about any critiques of NYC's G&T policy? Where did you hear about the critiques? Did you agree or disagree with their comments? Why or why not?

2. Some critics of gifted education claim that G&T programs are elitist because they disproportionately enroll White students or are implemented to keep White, higher income parents in the public school system—how would you respond to those comments related to your own experience?
3. What are the advantages or disadvantages of having a G&T program at your school compared to schools in your district that do not have a G&T program? Do you believe that the G&T program benefits the whole school? If so, in what ways?
4. Are you concerned at all that your child is not being exposed to racial, socio-economic or academic diversity in his or her classroom? Why or why not?
5. If you had the chance, what things would you change about the G&T and/or Gen Ed program in terms of the admissions policy, curriculum, etc.?

XII. Demographic questions

- What neighborhood do you live in? What type of housing do you live in? Own or rent?
- List the members of your household.
- What is your marital status?
- Are you a single parent?
- Highest education level and degree (spouse too) [Less than high school, High school diploma, Technical training/2 year college, 4 year college, or Master's +]
- Current Occupation (spouse too)
- How do you identify yourself/spouse/children racially? Ethnically?
- Fluent languages that you speak/your child speaks? Do you speak that language only at home, only with spouse, only with friends or family, at school with other parents?

Are there any questions that I should have asked that I didn't ask? Is there anything else you want to add?

