Black Parents, Vigilance and Public Schools:

Trust, Distrust and the Relationships Between Parents and Schools in New York City

Kathryn B. Hill

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy under the Executive Committee in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2018
ABSTRACT

Black Parents, Vigilance and Public Schools: Trust, Distrust and the Relationships Between Parents and Schools in New York City

Kathryn B. Hill

My dissertation examines the distrust and trust that New York City African-American parents place in schools at a moment when market-based education policies and gentrification are transforming the landscape of public schools in many historically Black urban communities. In my study, I tease apart how the nature of parent trust in local public schools might be different from the nature of trust in the institution of public schooling or faith in public education, as Black parents may expect different things from the local school and the school system. I also explore how trust or distrust in parent-school relationships develops, by treating trusting as a dynamic process, shaped by past socialization and experiences, as well as current experiences with schools. I examine parents’ accounts of critical moments in their relationship with their child’s schools; such as finding and enrolling their children in a new school, impressions of teaching and classroom management and to what extent schools respected their parent involvement. I find that the parent-school relationship develops different for Black parents who send their children to traditional public schools and charter schools, but that in general, the parent perceptions of schools’ lack of care for Black children and lack of respect for Black parents are what drives distrust.

By examining how trust in public schools might develop uniquely for Black Americans, my study develops treatments of trust in education research and theory by challenging the
functionalist and power-neutral assumption that trust in schools is inherently constructive. By centering the perspectives of Black parents to better understand how legacies of institutional racism impede the development of trust in schools, I highlight how these normative assumptions about parent trust in schools often elide the role of socio-cultural exclusion, power asymmetries, discrimination, and a legacy of institutional racism and neglect—across many institutional contexts—that foreground orientations of parents of color toward educators and schools. Indeed, it is often prudent for Black parents to distrust schools and educators in order to protect their children because they have not been trustworthy. In addition, my study also illuminates whether changing urban school systems are deemed legitimate in the eyes of the public, and what kinds of parent-school relationships can foster greater trust.
Table of Contents

List of Tables and Figures ........................................................................................................... vii

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................... viii

Dedication ................................................................................................................................. x

CHAPTER ONE Project Introduction ......................................................................................... 1

Purpose of Study ............................................................................................................................ 3

Dissertation Research Questions ................................................................................................ 4

Black Americans, Trust, and Schools ....................................................................................... 5

Black Americans and Schooling ................................................................................................. 7

Black Americans, New York City, and Schooling .................................................................... 10

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................... 15

CHAPTER TWO Conceptual Framework .................................................................................... 16

Why We Should Examine Trust in Schools ............................................................................... 16

Measuring Trust: A Call for Greater Specificity ....................................................................... 19

Trust in Schools as a Three-Part Relationship ......................................................................... 21

Treating Trusting as a Dynamic Process .................................................................................... 27

Socialization and Disposition to Trust ..................................................................................... 28

Socialization and Trusting Processes and Behavior .................................................................. 31

Characteristics of Trusting Relationships Between Parents and Schools ................................. 35

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................... 39

CHAPTER THREE Research Design, Sample and Methods ....................................................... 40
Research Methods .................................................................................................................. 41

Data Collection ................................................................................................................... 42

  Longitudinal Parent Interviews ......................................................................................... 42

  Parent Recruitment .......................................................................................................... 44

  School Site Field-Work ..................................................................................................... 45

Research Setting .................................................................................................................. 47

Characteristics of Parent Participants ................................................................................ 51

School Site Sampling .......................................................................................................... 55

  PS 970/Central Harlem Elementary School: DOE Neighborhood Public School .......... 55

  PS 1150/North-Central Brooklyn Elementary School: New Gentrifying DOE School .... 57

  Transcend Academy/Eastern Brooklyn: Large Franchise “No Excuses” Network Charter School ................................................................................................................................. 58

Data Analysis ....................................................................................................................... 62

Ethics .................................................................................................................................... 63

Positionality .......................................................................................................................... 64

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 65

Overview of Findings .......................................................................................................... 66

CHAPTER FOUR Finding a School in an Untrustworthy School System: The Beginning of the Parent-School Relationship and Dealing with Distrust ............................................. 67

  Finding a New School as a Moment of Trust .................................................................. 71

  Why is Finding a Good School So Hard? ........................................................................ 73

    It All Depends on Neighborhood ................................................................................ 74

    Drawing Straws for Educational Opportunity ............................................................ 76
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being Chosen by a “No Excuses” Charter School</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Step Above the Regular Schools</em></td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Anticipating Something Good, Feeling at Ease</em></td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to Find a Traditional Neighborhood Public School</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Knowing Who Is Molding My Child</em></td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Knowing the School Community</em></td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Belonging in the School Community</em></td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanding Educational Opportunity for Some</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Haves and the Have Nots</em></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>They Are All Our Children</em></td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE Establishing an Ethic of Care: Teaching, Classroom Management, and What Black Parents (Dis)trust Schools to Do</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding that Children Are Little People Too: Caring for the Students</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Knowing the Children</em></td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nurturing and Protecting the Children</em></td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having High Expectations for Classroom Behavior: Discipline with Love</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Poor Classroom Management and its Consequences</em></td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Good Classroom Management, Dedication, Care and Relational Trust</em></td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Attempting to Standardize a Balance of Discipline and Caring in No Excuses Charter Schools</em></td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Rigor and Cultivating a Love of Learning: Educating Children Well</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tracking Progress in Learning</em></td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER SIX Vigilance as a Form of Cultural Capital: Disrespecting Black Parent Engagement in Different Educational Contexts

Valuing Black Parent Engagement: Vigilance as a Form of Cultural Capital

Having a Presence at the School to Manage Distrust

Being Present to Demonstrate Credibility: How Parents Handle Educators’ Distrust of Them

Monitoring the School: How Parents Handle Their Distrust of Educators

Intervening in the School: Stepping in When Things Go Wrong

Respecting or Disregarding Vigilance: How Schools Structure Parent Engagement

Disregarding Parent Vigilance: Lower-Income DOE Schools Serving Students of Color

Mandating Parent Involvement on the School’s Terms: No Excuses Charter Schools

Marginalizing Black Parent Engagement: Racially and Socioeconomically Diverse DOE Schools

Parent Involvement and the School System

Conclusion

CHAPTER SEVEN Discussion and Conclusion

Research Aims

Findings
Larger Themes and Discussion ........................................................................................................ 225

Urban Policy Trends and Attempting to Earn Parent Trust in the School System ............... 226

The Development of Parent-School Relationships Across Different School Types ........... 230

Larger Implications for Conceptualizing Trust ...................................................................... 235

Implications for Future Research .............................................................................................. 238

References ....................................................................................................................................... 241

Appendix A: Table with Characteristics of Each Parent Participant ........................................... 258

Appendix B: Data Collection for Focus Schools .......................................................................... 262

Appendix C: Interview Protocols ................................................................................................... 263

Parent Interview Protocol: Round 1 ............................................................................................. 263

Background Information—Child and Child’s School ................................................................. 263

Parent Experiences with Their Child’s School ........................................................................... 264

Parent Feelings About the Larger School System and Education ............................................. 265

Concluding Questions ................................................................................................................... 266

Snowball Question ........................................................................................................................ 266

Parent Interview Protocol: Round 2 ............................................................................................. 266

Child’s Transition Between Grades ............................................................................................. 266

Child’s Educational Experiences ................................................................................................. 266

Parent Experiences with the School ............................................................................................ 267

Parent Feelings About the Larger School System and Education ............................................. 268

Looking Forward to the Future ..................................................................................................... 269

Concluding Questions ................................................................................................................... 269

Educator Interview Protocol ......................................................................................................... 269
Background Information.................................................................................................................. 269

School and Family Engagement ....................................................................................................... 270

Parent Perspectives on School-Family Relationship........................................................................ 270

Philosophy of Parent/Community Engagement .................................................................................. 271
List of Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Parent Trust in Schooling as a Three-Part Relationship (“A Trusts B to Do X”) 22

Figure 2: The Process of Parent Trust in Schooling .......................................................... 33

Table 1 Characteristics of Trustworthy Schools and Trusting Relationships Between Parents and Educators .......................................................................................................................... 37

Figure 3: Map of Gentrifying Neighborhoods in New York City, 2014 .......................... 49

Figure 4: Map of Charter School Locations in New York City, 2015-2016 School Year .... 50

Figure 5: Parent/Family Characteristics .............................................................................. 52

Figure 6: School Characteristics .......................................................................................... 53

Figure 7: Child Characteristics .......................................................................................... 54
Acknowledgements

Throughout the course of my graduate studies, I have been fortunate to have a cast of incredible people support and help me develop as a scholar, and words cannot fully express the gratitude I have for them all. First, I would like to sincerely thank my dissertation advisor Dr. Aaron Pallas. His engagement with my ideas, critical feedback and high expectations all helped push and deepen my thinking. The generosity, wisdom, and insight that he consistently provided as a mentor will serve as an example to me for the rest of my academic career. I count myself privileged to have had his support and guidance.

I would also like to thank my dissertation committee members for their thoughtful insights and encouragement of my work: Dr. Carolyn Riehl, Dr. Jeffrey Henig, Dr. Alondra Nelson and Dr. Janelle Scott. All provided instrumental feedback throughout the development of my dissertation, gave me invaluable support as mentors, and served as models as the kind of scholar I hope to someday become. I would also like to thank Dr. Amy Stuart Wells, whose research project provided some of the early inspiration for my project.

I would not have completed this project without the support of amazing colleagues and friends in my graduate school program—including Hester Earle, Jacquelyn Duran, Pavithra Nagarajan, Lauren Fox, Clare Buckley-Flack, Dominic Walker and Vikash Reddy—who were always on hand to workshop ideas, edit and give feedback on drafts, and be a source of support during times of frustration. I would especially like to express my gratitude to Hester Earle and Jacquelyn Duran, as it was our writing group and your encouragement and thoughtful feedback that got me over the finish line.
I am grateful for the support from the Teachers College Department of Education Policy and Social Analysis, the Mellon Interdisciplinary Fellows Program and the National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation in funding my dissertation work.

To the thirty-four parents who were willing to participate in my study and share their stories with me about the experiences they had with their children’s schools—both the challenges they faced and the dreams they had for their children’s futures—thank you. I feel incredibly privileged to have learned so much for you all.

And last, but not least, I am extraordinarily grateful for all of the support and love I have from my family—both in writing this dissertation and in all other areas of my life. I would like to thank my mother, Linda Bassett, and my father, Kenneth Hill, for the unconditional love, support and guidance they have given me through the years. I would like to thank my brother, Kevin Hill, both for his empathy and his advice in how to navigate graduate school. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Leon Frankel, for his patience, unwavering support, and love. Without you all, none of this would be possible.
To my parents, who were always vigilant when it came to my education.
CHAPTER ONE

Project Introduction

The public schools in New York City’s historically African-American communities are in a moment of transformation, undergoing changes that may be consequential for how much trust parents place in their community’s schools and the larger city school system. At the epicenter of market-based school reform efforts designed to spur competition and increase accountability, city policies have altered the landscape of public schools in communities of color by increasing public school choice and by shuttering schools that fail to produce high enough test scores or graduation rates (O’Day, Bitter, & Gomez, 2011). In this context, Large CMO (Charter Management Organization) “No Excuses” network charter schools—sharing a common educational model that emphasizes high academic standards, tough discipline and character development (Golann, 2015; McDermott & Nygreen, 2013; Sondel, 2015; White, 2015)—have proliferated, are oversubscribed, and are often portrayed as the savior of low-income children of color fortunate enough to attend (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Scott, 2011). Moreover, New York City is undergoing demographic change, as upper middle class White professionals increasingly choose to reside in and send their children to schools in formerly lower and working-class Black and Latino neighborhoods (Been et al., 2016; Ehrenhalt, 2012; L. Freeman, 2011).

Some policymakers are optimistic that these parents’ choices can curb the school system’s extreme racial and socioeconomic segregation (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014), and provide increased educational opportunity for low-income students of color (Stillman, 2012). Thus, following market-based logic and coinciding with rising inequality and divestment from public education, city policy increasingly relies on individual parent choice as a lever to improve public
schools in communities of color, with the aim of overcoming a legacy of institutional neglect and making them effective and ultimately more trustworthy.

These changes have been both welcomed and met with resistance from Black parents and communities (Henig & Smikle, 2014; Pappas, 2012). While “No Excuses” charter schools have proliferated in historically Black neighborhoods, and Black students are overrepresented within them (NYCCSC, 2016a), parents and community members have also protested policies such as charter school co-location and school closures (Pappas, 2012), and researchers have expressed doubt about the extent to which the curriculum, pedagogy and discipline policies of “No Excuses” charter schools are culturally responsive to Black children (McDermott & Nygreen, 2013; Sondel, 2015; White, 2015). Moreover, while indigenous Black residents see the potential in the social, political and economic capital that affluent White families bring to gentrifying urban neighborhoods and schools, they are also cynical about the political consequences of demographic change, which diminishes the political and cultural influence they have in their communities (L. Freeman, 2011). Similarly, education research demonstrates that the presence and advocacy of affluent White families in urban schools breeds greater within-school inequality, to the detriment of students of color (Cucchiara, 2013; Posey-Maddox, 2014).

Black New Yorkers' hopes and concerns about the changing school system fit into the legacy of Black Americans grappling with the potential and limitations of public education, and whether it can be entrusted to foster equality, empowerment, upward mobility and liberation (Anderson, 1988; Biondi, 2003; Dougherty, 2004; Stulberg, 2008; Walker, 2009), individual and collective goals that are often in conflict (Labaree, 1997). Thus, it is an opportune moment to study Black parent trust and distrust in New York City public schools. Trust in schools is generally understood as a measure of institutional legitimacy and satisfaction with the school
system (Loveless, 1997) that facilitates cooperative relationships between parents and educators to foster school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Much of the literature that investigates trust in schools is based in colorblind and power-neutral functionalist assumptions that trust between educators and parents is inherently constructive, and that when parents do not trust educators the loss of social capital is detrimental to schools. In such research, the role of societal racism and the perspectives of parents of color remain undertheorized (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

My research highlights that these normative assumptions about parent trust in schools often elide the role of socio-cultural exclusion, power asymmetries, discrimination, and a legacy of institutional racism and neglect—across many institutional contexts—that foreground orientations of parents of color toward educators and schools. Indeed, it is often prudent for Black parents to distrust schools and educators in order to protect their children because they have not been trustworthy. As the city’s policy context increasingly privileges market logic, test-score focused accountability and private goals of education, it is illuminating to examine to what extent New York City Black parents in different school contexts believe that their public schools and the public-school system have earned their trust or distrust to meet both individual and collective ends, and what tradeoffs in whom or what to trust or distrust might be involved.

**Purpose of Study**

My dissertation examines urban Black parent trust and distrust in public schooling, further developing the body of social science research and theory that explores trust as one of the fundamental components of social relations (Coleman, 1990; Gambetta, 1988; Govier, 1997; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Luhmann, 1988), and in particular, as a crucial element of effective schools (C. Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Meier, 2002;
Tschannen-Moran, 2004), by centering the perspectives of Black parents to better understand how legacies of institutional racism impede the development of trust in schools. My project teases apart how the nature of parental trust and distrust in local public schools might be different from institutional trust in public schooling, as Black parents may expect different things from their local school and the school system. Secondly, I explore how public schools earn the trust or distrust of parents, by treating trusting as a dynamic process, shaped by parents’ past socialization and experiences combined with their present engagement with charter and traditional public schools. My study illuminates the conditions under which the changing city school system is deemed legitimate in the eyes of the public, and what kinds of parent-school relationships foster trust or distrust. To investigate these issues, I explore the following questions:

Dissertation Research Questions

1.) How do New York City Black parents explain how they came to trust or distrust public schooling?
   - How might race and class influence how parent trust or distrust toward public schools develops?
   - How do the experiences that parents have with their child’s school influence how trust or distrust toward public schools develops?

2.) How does the nature of New York City’s Black parents’ trust or distrust differ across levels of the schooling system: the local public school, the city public school system or the institution of public education?
   - How does the extent of parental trust or distrust differ across the various levels?
   - Does what parents trust schooling to do differ across the various levels?

3.) How does school context shape the trust or distrust that Black parents place in public schooling?
   - To what extent does trust in public schooling differ for charter school and DOE (Department of Education) public school Black parents?
   - To what extent does Black parent trust in public schooling differ in schools with different racial and socioeconomic demographics?
Black Americans, Trust, and Schools

Social science research has documented the large and durable gap in generalized trust between Black and White Americans (Patterson, 1999; S. S. Smith, 2010; Uslaner, 2002). Even after accounting for social class—a demographic characteristic that is positively correlated with higher levels of generalized trust—Black Americans are still far less likely to report that they can trust “most people.”¹ Given that American society and its institutions were founded with the exclusion and dehumanization of Black people, this distrust among Black Americans is unsurprising, and stems from a long history of institutionalized racism, socio-political marginalization and discrimination (Abramson, 1977; S. S. Smith, 2010; Uslaner, 2002). Black people experience discrimination across a variety of institutional contexts—such as the housing market (Douglas Massey & Lundy, 2001), the job market (Pager, 2003) and the criminal justice system (Loury, 2008; Western, 2006). In light of such experiences, a skeptical orientation toward society is prudent.

However, when it comes to trust in public education in particular, there is some evidence that Black Americans might actually hold more confidence than White Americans (Hochschild, 1995; Klugman & Xu, 2008; Lipset & Schneider, 1983). While the percentage of all Americans who report having “a lot” of confidence in the public-school system has gone down in national polls in recent decades, Black Americans have consistently reported more confidence than White Americans. Interestingly however, at higher levels of income and education, there is virtually no gap in confidence in education between Black and White Americans (Klugman & Xu, 2008).

¹ Data on social trust is usually gathered from large-scale surveys, such as the General Social Survey, which asks the respondents questions like “Generally speaking, do you believe that most people can be trusted?” (See Uslaner, 2012 for a discussion of these survey data.)
Working-class African-Americans report higher levels of confidence in the school system that do middle-class African-Americans (Hochschild, 1995), which is the reverse of the relationships between social class and generalized trust for all Americans regardless of race.

To add further complexity to the nature of trust in public schools, there is a lot of evidence that people might feel differently about their local school than they do about the entire school system. Survey research has documented that Americans tend to rate their local schools more favorably than the system at large, and that parents rate the school that their child attends the most favorably. The most recent Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa polls indicates that 48% of Americans give the schools in the community a grade of A or B, and 68% of parents give the school their oldest child attends an A or B. However, only 24% of Americans give the public schools as a whole an A or B (Richardson & Bucheri, 2016). This trend has held true since the 1980s, when the poll question was first asked (Rose, 2006). Thus, even though national survey data shows a decline in confidence in the public-school system, people still seem to be satisfied with their local schools.

These polling data also show a difference between attitudes toward the local school and the school system when disaggregated by race. Black parents are 13 percentage points less likely to give their local schools an “A” grade than are White and Hispanic parents (Richardson & Bucheri, 2016). A body of qualitative research on Black parents and their interactions with and attitudes toward schools affirms that Black parents often regard their children’s schools—as well as their children’s’ teachers and school officials—with distrust. Researchers who study trust-building in schools often observe that it is very difficult to build trust between Black parents and school officials due to socio-cultural differences and power asymmetries (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Meier, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Studies have indicated that lower-income Black parents in particular tend to approach teachers and school officials with attitudes that are perceived by
educators to be guarded and confrontational (Cooper, 2007; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Annette Lareau & Erin McNamara Horvat, 1999). Given the high likelihood that their children will face poor treatment in schools, an attitude of distrust and vigilance is a way for Black parents to exercise agency in raising their children.

These attitudes of distrust that Black parents are shown as having toward their children’s school seems to be in opposition to the attitude of confidence that Black Americans report having toward the public-school system as a whole. Moreover, it seems that while most Americans have more favorable attitudes toward their local school than toward the school system, the story might be different for Black Americans. Due to the complex nature of the relationships between race and trust in schooling, my dissertation examines the nature of Black parent trust and distrust in schooling to gain insight into how it unfolds.

**Black Americans and Schooling**

An examination of the history of Black Americans reveals the unique meaning education has had for collective and individual mobility and liberation (Anderson, 1988; Stulberg, 2008; Walker, 2000). However, faith in education has always been coupled with the historical legacy of Black students being mistreated and devalued in America’s schools (DuBois, 1935; Dumas, 2014; Woodson, 1933). The disjuncture that research uncovers between African-American confidence in public schooling and a tendency on the part of Black parents to distrust the local school can be explained by this tension between a faith in upward mobility through education and cognizance of the barriers that exist despite schooling (Cole & Omari, 2003; A. L. Harris, 2008).

After Emancipation, Black Americans who had formerly been enslaved in the South understood education as a path to liberation (Anderson, 1988), and Black communities during Reconstruction made great sacrifices to set up public schools for their children in hostile
circumstances (Anderson, 1988; Cole & Omari, 2003; Walker, 1996). It was from the initiative of Black communities that public schooling for Black students in the South was created in the first place (Anderson, 1988) as Black communities supported education through founding new schools, organizing institutional support for current schools, raising funds to try to offset the systemic under-resourcing of Black schools and petitioning and protesting recalcitrant school boards to achieve educational equity (Walker, 2000). Black teachers and principals were important figures in the Black community, and were often seen as role models by students, teaching them how to navigate the segregated world outside of their local communities (Tillman, 2004b; Walker, 1996, 2000). Indeed, Black educators played a central role in organizing the resistance to Jim Crow in many Southern communities and forging national communication networks for civil rights leaders (Walker, 2009). During Freedom Summer, Freedom Schools became an important site where southern Black communities were organized as the grassroots level to fight for voting rights.

Thus, in the face of Jim Crow segregation, Black communities in the South had to draw strength from within to resist oppression and to provide schooling and educational opportunity for Black children. This had important consequences for parent trust in public schools. Scholars of who study the history of Black education argue that in segregated Black communities there were high levels of trust between Black parents and Black educators (Comer, 1986; Edwards, 1993; Fields-Smith, 2005). This can be linked to the concept of social network closure, conceptualized by James Coleman (1988), who argues that closed social networks that are dense, cohesive and interconnected generate commonly understood norms and a web of mutual obligations that foster high levels of trustworthiness. In segregated Black communities, educators and families would see each other in settings outside of school—such as church or the
neighborhood grocery store—and have informal conversations about the progress of students. Since they were from the same community, parents and educators felt obligated to one another and students felt that the norms of high expectations for behavior and performance were being jointly monitored by various the adults in their community (Comer, 1986; Edwards, 1993; Fields-Smith, 2005).

One of the unintended consequences of post-Brown integration was to lessen the control that Black educators had over the education of Black students, especially in the South, as many Black educators were reassigned or fired (Tillman, 2004b). In the urban North, even though Black students were similarly attending segregated schools, there were far fewer Black teachers (Dougherty, 1998; Foster, 1997). Thus, there was greater social distance between urban Black parents and educators, making it more difficult to foster trusting relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Such realities fueled skepticism as to whether White-dominated institutions could attend to the socio-cultural and educational needs of Black students (DuBois, 1935; Woodson, 1933), and many political battles in urban areas centered around attempting to give Black communities greater influence over public education, such as the struggle for community control in 1970s New York City (McCoy, 1970; Podair, 2004; Rogers, 1990).

As the concentration of poverty in urban Black communities increased with the out-migration of both middle class Whites and Blacks (W. J. Wilson, 1987), the social class and racial divisions lower-income Black students and families and largely middle class teachers grew wider in the latter decades of the 20th century. Such social distance generated great barriers between parents and educators (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Noguera, 2001), and in such contexts trust between teachers and parents could not be assumed (Edwards, 1993; Fields-Smith, 2005; Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot, 1981). Teachers sometimes felt that urban Black parents resisted
becoming involved, and concluded that they are apathetic about education (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Or, teachers find Black parents to be overly difficult and confrontational, and impediments to their efforts to educate students (Cooper, 2007; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Annette Lareau & Erin McNamara Horvat, 1999). These perceptions that Black parents do not value education is based deficit-thinking (Valencia, 1997) about Black families and Black culture, and linked to issues of trust. Some research has concluded that Black parents—especially lower-income Black parents—might defer to educators on matters of curriculum and instruction (Lareau, 2000), urban Black parents might trust that teachers are experts on matters of teaching and learning and feel that it is not their place to intervene. However, research has documented that Black parents will become involved—especially when it comes to issues of discipline, safety and the respect and caring of students—and that they will even raise concerns with teachers around curriculum issues (Cooper, 2007; Diamond, 2000). These nuances might explain why educators feel both that Black parents are not “involved enough” or “involved too much” in an overly confrontational manner. Thus, more research is needed to expose what urban Black parents trust and do not trust educators and schools to do and to what extent.

**Black Americans, New York City, and Schooling**

New York City is a particularly interesting place to study urban Black parent trust in schooling, because it epitomizes the tension between faith in education coupled with barriers faced in the schools that many Black Americans have experienced in the urban North. New York City is currently home to the largest African-American population in the United States. The New York City Black population saw enormous growth during the Great Migration, the journey of millions of Black Americans fleeing the Jim Crow South in hopes of better opportunities up North, and out West, an exodus that fundamentally changed the demographic and cultural trajectory of urban
America (Wilkerson, 2010). By 1945, New York City had the largest urban Black population in the world, and between 1940 and 1950 in the post-war Great Migration boom the Black population in New York City grew by 62% (Biondi, 2003).

However, when these Black migrants arrived in New York City, they were unable to escape racism, and faced barriers such as institutionalized discrimination in the housing and job market (Biondi, 2003; Eisenstadt, 2011; Katznelson, 2005; Douglas Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilkerson, 2010). Even though New York City in the post-New Deal era offered greater federal spending on social services and some of the most robust protections for labor unions (J. Freeman, 2001), racial discrimination barred African-Americans from equally sharing in the fruits of these opportunities for the working class (Katznelson, 2005; Quadagno, 1994).

Moreover, post war redlining and urban renewal policies coupled with White flight to suburbia—generally subsidized by federal housing and transportation policy (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2004; Douglas Massey & Denton, 1993)—trapped urban Black Americans in the segregated urban ghetto—a “peculiar institution” similar in its design to chattel slavery and Jim Crow for “defining, confining, and controlling” Black Americans in the urban industrial North (Wacquant, 2008).

In the wake of these numerous barriers to social, political and economic equality in the urban North, schooling became a central site for the struggle for Black equality in New York City, as it did in the nation as a whole (Back, 2003; Biondi, 2003; Ransby, 2011; Weiner, 2009). Indeed, important figures in the national civil rights movement—such as Ella Baker—began by fighting for educational opportunity in New York City (Ransby, 2011). Although state policy in New York had officially forbidden racially segregated public schools since the 1870s, neighborhood segregation coupled with local zoning policy led to de facto racial segregation in
the city school system (Ravitch, 2000). Prompted by advocates such as Dr. Kenneth Clark, the prominent psychologist whose research on the harmful effects of segregation was used in the 1954 *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court ruling, the Public Education Association (PEA) conducted a study in 1955 to assess the effects of segregation in the system. The study concluded that the 51 schools that were 85% or more Black or Puerto Rican were older, less adequately maintained and had higher teacher turnover (Ravitch, 2000).

While school integration was one goal of the movement for Black equality in New York City (Back, 2003; Biondi, 2003; Ransby, 2011), scholars point out that it was often not the most important goal for local grassroots activists, who were more concerned about concrete conditions in the schools (Weiner, 2009). Indeed, as the Black population increased exponentially in the city with the Great Migration, schools in Black communities became severely overcrowded, and parents became frustrated with students having to attend school in shifts (Back, 2003; Ravitch, 2000; Weiner, 2009). Moreover, Black parents and educators also had concerns that the curriculum that was taught to Black students—especially in subjects such as history—was not culturally relevant and contained racist messages (C. Taylor, 2011b). In New York City, there were concerns that there were not enough Black educators in the schools, and that White educators had deficit notions about Black children and their culture (Back, 2003). Thus, in the post-war era, Black educational equality movements focused not just on integration, but with fighting for adequate school facilities, culturally relevant curriculum and the hiring of more Black teachers and principals.

New York City local policy was slow to address these problems of systemic racial inequality in the schools—and proceeded to enact some half-measures such as compensatory education (Ravitch, 2000; Stulberg, 2008). School integration efforts became stalled in the face
of resistance from many working class White communities (C. Taylor, 2011a). By the late 1960s, Black and Hispanic parents were frustrated with the glacial rate of change, including the failure of compensatory programs to improve the quality of education for their students and the reluctance of local school officials to adopt meaningful school desegregation plans (Podair, 2004; Rogers, 1990). These parents and community activists viewed the predominately White educational establishment as unable to meet the needs of their students (McCoy, 1970). With funding from the Ford Foundation, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district was created as a pilot program that granted local control of the neighborhood schools to parents and community leaders. However, conflict escalated between the predominately White-ethnic teaching force and Black and Hispanic parents and community leaders around issues of hiring and firing and curriculum, resulting in a strike that shut down the entire school system (Podair, 2004). The experiment of community control ended with the disbandment of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district and the creation of thirty-two separate community school boards.

One of the legacies of the Ocean-Hill Brownsville community control movement was that it ruptured the progressive African-American and Jewish coalition that had been the bedrock political constituency for New Deal era social policy (Podair, 2004). The distrust between the Black community and the White-ethnic teachers paved the way for an era of conservative fiscal policy, with austerity cuts that disproportionately burdened urban Black communities, culminating in the election of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani (Podair, 2004, 2011). Coupled with his conservative fiscal policy, Giuliani’s implementation of “broken windows policing”—the targeting of arrests for smaller quality of life crimes (J. Wilson & Keling, 1982)—led to critiques that the policies disproportionately targeted Black and Latino communities (Fagan & Davies, 2000; Harcourt, 2005), adding to the larger crisis of the mass incarceration of low-income Black
and Latino men (Loury, 2008). Giuliani’s term represented the nadir of the distrust between the Black community and the New York City government, with record low levels of support from the Black community (Podair, 2011). Currently, distrust of the police remains high in the Black community, especially with the rise of “Stop and Frisk” policies that disproportionately targeted Black men. Such distrust of the city’s law and order policies might spread to distrust of other institutions such as the public schools.

The second important consequence of the Ocean-Hill Brownsville experiment is how it influenced overall public trust in the school system. The way that this experiment was understood to be a “failure” in the dominant historical narrative of community control is linked to public suspicion of a decentralized school system, and support for Bloomberg’s initial move to abolish community school boards and take control of the New York City schools (Traub, 2002). Coupled with the larger trends of declining confidence in the public school system in the late twentieth century—epitomized by the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report—the declining confidence in the New York City school system gave the Bloomberg administration the political support to radically change education policy toward a highly centralized, market-based, standards and accountability regime. In June of 2002, the New York state legislature turned control of the New York City school system over to Mayor Michael Bloomberg, ushering in an era of market-based school reform that has reshaped the school system. Despite the fact that Mayor Bill de Blasio, Bloomberg’s successor, has promised to temper some of the deleterious effects of championing competition and school choice (K. Taylor, 2015c), many of the policies of the Bloomberg era—especially around how parents find schools—remain and have been in effect for over a decade.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented my rationale for examining Black urban parent trust in schooling and discussed some of the contextual factors at play in New York City. Given that the charter school movement and gentrification are transforming New York City public schools and disproportionally impacting traditionally Black neighborhoods, it is important to evaluate the levels of trust and distrust that urban Black parents feel towards different aspects of the public schools at such a critical juncture. However, trust is an extremely complicated concept, and studying it has proven difficult. In the next chapter I will outline my theoretical framework to study Black parents’ trust and distrust in public schooling.
CHAPTER TWO

Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, I present my conceptual framework for studying urban Black parent trust in public schooling. First, I discuss why parent trust in schooling is both difficult and important to study, and offer some ways that we might understand trust as a multi-dimensional and dynamic concept. Then, I discuss how when examining trust in schooling, it is useful to specify the relations of trust under examination—whether we are referring to intimate interpersonal trust in teachers and other school officials, or abstract institutional trust in the public-school system. It is also important to clarify what function(s) parents are trusting schooling to fulfill. How and why urban Black parents trust public schools is most likely quite different across trust in the idea of public education, trust in the city public school system, and trust in their child’s school. Parent trust will also differ based on what public schooling is being entrusted to do.

Next, I discuss how trusting should be treated as dynamic. Trusting is a process, and trust, while future-oriented, is influenced by past experiences and socialization. Trust can be cultivated, maintained or damaged over time. Thus, if we are interested in the development of parent trust, it makes sense to examine how it changes over time. I end the chapter with an examination of schools and trust, and discuss what aspects of the New York City policy context might shape the levels of trust or distrust between educators and Black parents.

Why We Should Examine Trust in Schools

The level of public confidence or trust in the public schools is often treated as an attitudinal proxy for satisfaction or as a measure of how legitimate the public school system is perceived to be (Loveless, 1997). Moreover, trust is not only an attitudinal measure of how people feel about schools; it also is linked to how people behave in relation to schools. Trust is
understood to be both the basis for and outcome of cooperative relationships (Gambetta, 1988; Hardin, 2002; Nooteboom, 2007), and much education research understands trust to be beneficial to schools—as cooperative, trusting relationships within a school community can act as a lubricant that facilitates day to day functioning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). High levels of trust within a social network are considered fundamental in the creation of social capital (Coleman, 1988), and high levels of trust between parents and school officials can foster social capital to facilitate successful school improvement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Finally, trust is a social resource that is not depleted through use (Gambetta, 1988; Hirschman, 1984), and the establishment of trusting relationships between parents and teachers can become the foundation for the further development of trust.

Despite its importance to the processes of schooling, studying trust in schools it has proven complicated. Trust is a multi-dimensional concept, and it is difficult to pin down exactly what trust is. Trusting involves behaviors, attitudes and dispositions—making it a multifaceted concept that is fused into one “unitary social experience” (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Trusting as a behavior involves making a bet about the future based on reasoning drawn from past and present experience, and acting as if a positive outcome is certain (Misztal, 1996; Sztompka, 1999). Trusting as an attitude involves having positive expectations or beliefs that the person or thing you are trusting will act competently or benevolently (Govier, 1997). Trusting as a disposition involves the inclination to be trusting and accept vulnerability (Govier, 1997). Understanding trust as a multi-dimensional concept sheds light on why when trust in schools is measured, it often yields results that are messy and complicated.

As a concept, trust is further complicated because trusting is a dynamic process. When surveys measure trust in schools, they generally treat trust as a static attribute and ask parents to
what extent they trust the schools. However, it might be more appropriate to treat trusting as a process with various stages (Möllering, 2013). Rational choice theorists have argued that the process of trusting is at its core a calculation about risks and benefits (Coleman, 1990; Hardin, 1993). However, others have also pointed out that trusting is not purely born of rational calculation—it ultimately hinges on expectations and hopes that cannot be accounted for by sufficient knowledge or rational calculation alone (Govier, 1997; Khodyakov, 2007; Möllering, 2001). Since the future is unknowable, and there are always good reasons to trust and not to trust, trusting always involves a moment of suspension—or a “leap of faith”—where one decides to proceed as though their hopeful expectations for the future are certain (Frederiksen, 2012; Möllering, 2001). Thus, as Möllering (2001) notes, trust is a process with stages of interpreting, suspending and expecting. The degree to which someone trusts is based on how convinced they are by the reasons to trust, how comfortable they are with the vulnerability involved in taking the “leap of faith” that trust entails, and how positive their expectations for the future are.

The potential damages that can come about from trusting can be greater than the potential benefits, making trusting inextricably linked with taking a risk (Coleman, 1990; Luhmann, 1988). Trusting often involves entrusting something precious to the care of someone else—as when a parent sends their child to school—relying on the expectation that the other party will act benevolently (Govier, 1997; Sztompka, 1999). It is because trusting is risky that it may not always be prudent to trust—trusting involves becoming vulnerable, opening up the possibility for exploitation (Baier, 1986; Govier, 1997). As risk increases, people become less comfortable with vulnerability, making it harder to form relations of trust. Given the power asymmetries that often exist between Black parents—especially lower income Black parents—and school professionals,
and a history of institutional racism and discrimination in our nation’s public schools, risk foregrounds these parent-school relationships, making parent distrust pervasive.

**Measuring Trust: A Call for Greater Specificity**

Due to the fact that trust is such a complex concept, the first step to exposing some of the nuance in parent trust in schools is to clarify which specific relation of trust is under examination. Trust toward institutions—such as the public schools—is generally measured through large-scale surveys. While such survey data are able to document large-scale trends, they mask a lot of the complexity in the dynamics of trusting. Surveys are able to capture the attitudinal dimension of trust through measuring general public satisfaction with or positive expectations toward schooling. However, due to their lack of specificity, such survey questions cannot specify what exactly people mean when they say that they trust schools, and what exactly people trust the schools to do.

Such survey research has documented a decline in public confidence in public education over the past few decades (Hochschild & Scott, 1998; Lipset & Schneider, 1983; Loveless, 1997). In 2012, the percentage of Americans that expressed high levels of confidence in the public-school system was at an all-time low. According to the most recent 2017 Gallup Poll on institutional confidence, only 36% of Americans express “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the school system, while 28% express “very little or no confidence” and 35% expressed only “some” confidence. However, other polling shows that these trends vary by race and class. According to the General Social Survey, Black Americans express higher levels of confidence in the public school system compared to Whites (Klugman & Xu, 2008) and low-income and working class Black Americans express more confidence in the school system than middle-class Black Americans (Hochschild, 1995).
Other survey research that teases out differential attitudes towards schooling by specifying “what” is being trusted has demonstrated that attitudes toward schools can vary depending on what level of schooling in particular is being asked about. People tend to rate their neighborhood public school more favorably than the entire system (Hochschild & Scott, 1998; Loveless, 1997; Richardson & Bucheri, 2016). To add further complexity to the issue of trust and schooling, research has also recognized the distrust that often exists between low-income Black parents and educators at the local school (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Comer, 1988; Cooper, 2007; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Annette Lareau & Erin McNamara Horvat, 1999; Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot, 1981), which seems to be at odds both with the favorable attitudes Americans tend to have about their local public schools and the confidence that Black Americans express toward the larger public education system.

Thus, people might have different attitudes and degrees of trust toward schooling depending on the specific trust relation. Following other theoretical work on trust (Baier, 1986; Hardin, 2002), I argue that it should be understood as a three-part relationship, where “A trusts B to do X.” Then, the relation of trust can be differentiated according to the scope of the specific objects being trusted and entrusted (Frederiksen, 2012; Nooteboom, 2007). Variations in scope, or how narrow and concrete or broad and abstract “B” and “X” are, can lead to differences in the resulting levels of trust (Frederiksen, 2012; Nooteboom, 2007). When the public is asked broadly about their confidence in public schools in national surveys, it is unclearing what specifically “B” and “X” are, as various kinds of trust relations can be at play, ranging from the more concrete and interpersonal to the more abstract and institutional.
The nature of parent trust in public schools can vary by whether it is directed toward the interpersonal or institutional level, and thus it is important to clarify some of these questions. In this section, I will discuss why, with Black parents in particular, we might expect to see differences in the nature of trust toward the local school and school professionals and trust toward the institution of public education. Black parents might trust the different levels of schooling to various degrees, and trust these different levels to do different things. Teasing out the differences in the nature of Black parent trust in public schooling at different levels of abstraction can expose the nuance in Black parent attitudes toward public education.

*Trust in Schools as a Three-Part Relationship*

I therefore treat parent trust, as a three-part relation, where “A trusts B to do X.” (see Figure 1.) The first step to teasing apart the differences between interpersonal and institutional trust in schooling is to specify the “B” in the trusting relation—to clarify what level of schooling is under examination. When parents are asked if they trust schools, do they have the teachers and other school professionals in mind? Or are they thinking in a more abstract sense about the public-school system or public education? Most likely, it is a combination of both of these. However, there are probably differences in how trust is expressed and how it unfolds when it is in reference to people, systems or institutions.

Some scholars have drawn a sharp division between institutional confidence and interpersonal trust, arguing that you cannot say that you trust an institution, you can only say that you have confidence in it or that it is trustworthy (Hardin, 1998; Levi & Stoker, 2000). However, others argue that both interpersonal trust and institutional trust are at the core about trust in people—the only thing that differs is the level of abstraction (Govier, 1997; Sztompka, 1999). With schooling in particular, parent trust involves a mixture of both interpersonal trust in
Note: I designed this diagram after considering what considered trust as a three-part relationship might look like for parent trust in schools. Understanding trust as a three part relationship is a concept embraced by many theorists who study trust (see for examples Baier, 1986; Hardin, 2002).
teachers and administrators—both as people and institutional representatives—and trust in the school as an institution.

When it comes to the relationship between parents and teachers, trust involves a lot of intimacy—for some parents with younger children school is almost seen as an extension of the family (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). However, as the level of schooling becomes more abstract—when it comes to the public-school system or public education—the trust relations become far less intimate. However, interpersonal and institutional trust in schooling are linked—trust at one level (or distrust at one level) might spread to the other level. If a parent’s confidence in the school system is shaken—due to scandal or poor performance indicators—she might begin to be more guarded in her relations with teachers and school administrators. Or if a parent’s trust is betrayed in the local school—if she feels her child is not learning as much as he should or not being properly cared for—then that parent can begin to distrust the notion that schooling can provide greater opportunity.

Clarifying what “B” is can then lead to further clarity about what “X” is. Parents might trust their child’s teacher and the public-school system at large with some things but not others. For example, a White, upper-middle class mother might trust her child’s teacher to care for and respect her child. But say that her child was evaluated and has special education needs. The parent might be skeptical as to whether this caring teacher has the necessary expertise to educate a child with special needs. However, given that this parent has just moved to a wealthy suburb with schools that boast exceptional scores, she might trust that the local school district provides children in her community with an excellent public education. On the other hand, after being exposed to media accounts of the mediocrity plaguing American public education, this same parent might have little faith that public education in general is providing students greater
opportunity and mobility. These hypothetical scenarios can play out in numerous ways, and might partially explain why survey research captures a disjuncture in attitudes toward the local school and the public education system.

With regards to Black parents and trust in public schooling, clarifying what trust relations are under examination can shed light on some of the interesting nuances and complexities hinted at in survey research. Black Americans have a lot of trust in schooling at the more abstract, institutional level. Schooling has always held great value for Black Americans as a means for individual and collective mobility, as well as justice and liberation (Anderson, 1988; Cooper, 2007; A. L. Harris, 2008). In fact, due to a history of institutional racism and discrimination, public schooling—free, universal education available to all—has often been seen as the best route to greater opportunity for the entire community, and has been at the center of social movements for greater justice and equality. Historically and currently, Black parents and communities have had to struggle for the public-school system to serve their children well. All of this might partially explain why Black Americans have more faith in the public education system than White Americans, as so much has been invested in schooling (A. L. Harris, 2008).

However, despite the faith or confidence that Black parents might have in the potential of public schooling, there is a body of literature which suggests that Black parents approach schools with distrust, guarding against the possibility of discrimination and unfair treatment (Cooper, 2007; Diamond & Gomez, 2004). In fact, as Cooper (2007) argues, this guarded stance is a form of culturally-based care that she calls “motherwork”\(^2\)—and part of the way that Black mothers

\(^2\) Cooper builds on Patricia Collins’ (Collins, 1994) theorizing on “motherwork.” As a scholar focusing on the intersection of race and gender in structuring the experiences of women of color, Collins uses the term “motherwork” to capture the fact that mothering for women of color
demonstrate care is to be vigilant and protective of their children in the face of the possibility of discrimination. However, educators often understand positive parent-teachers interactions to be based in assumptions of trust and cooperation, a logic that Black parents—especially lower-income Black parents—often do not operate under (Annette Lareau & Erin McNamara Horvat, 1999). Thus, having a guarded stance as a culturally based child-rearing strategy does not match the expectations for parents that school officials have, and Black parents are labeled as hostile or uncooperative (Cooper, 2007). Though it might be prudent and shrewd for Black parents to approach school officials with guardedness, it may add an additional impediment to the development of trust between parents and schools.

This supposed disconnection between faith and confidence in schooling as an institution, but an orientation of distrust toward teachers and administrators, can be understood as what has been called in the literature the “paradox” of African-American attitudes about the achievement ideology (Downey, Ainsworth, & Qian, 2009; A. L. Harris, 2008; Mickelson, 1990). Mickelson (1990) first coined this phrase in her study of Black adolescents, where she noticed that pro-school attitudes were not necessary matched with high achievement in school. To explain this attitude/achievement paradox, Mickelson argues that a distinction needs to be made between abstract attitudes about education and achievement and concrete attitudes about school. Harris (2008) builds on this distinction between abstract and concrete attitudes by arguing that Black Americans simultaneously place great value on the possibilities of schooling and yet are cognizant of the day to day barriers to upward mobility they face.

involves balancing the needs to survival, identity and empowerment when rearing children. These issues are not necessary at play for women in more privileged social positions.
Such a distinction between abstract and concrete attitudes helps to unpack the culturally based logic that underlies the apparent “paradox” between Black faith in education and distrust toward school professionals. Given the historical importance of public schooling as a route to upward mobility in the Black community, Black parents might place a lot of confidence in public education to provide for social mobility in the abstract. However, they may place less trust in teachers and school officials to always act fairly or in a caring manner toward their children due to a history of discrimination in their day-to-day concrete experiences with schools. As the objects that are being trusted and entrusted become more concrete, perhaps parents are more able to monitor what is happening, prompting them to be vigilant against the chance of betrayal.

Drawing such distinctions also highlights the fact that urban Black parents might trust public school teachers and the public education system to do some things but not others. Given a history of racial discrimination, institutional educational neglect in urban public schools, norms of anti-Black bias on the part of educators and the potential for power asymmetries and social distance between teachers and urban Black parents, it is not a given that Black parents will reflexively trust that teachers will care for their children or respect their socio-cultural needs. However, Lareau (2000) found lower income parents often defer to educators when it comes to issues of technical expertise, trusting them with matters of curriculum and instruction more than higher-income parents do. Nevertheless, given the legacy of unfulfilled promise in efforts to reform urban public-school systems, urban Black parents might have skepticism in the competence of the local school district, despite the faith that Black Americans tend to have in public education.

If we were to hypothetically consider the nature of trust in schooling for a lower-income urban Black mother with a special needs child, the scenario from before might play out
differently. The parent might feel more vulnerable in relation to educators, and not trust that they will always understand the socio-cultural needs of her child and give him the proper care and respect. However, she might defer to the expertise of teachers and trust that they can educate her child well, despite his special needs. Given the history of district schools not adequately serving children like hers, the mixed legacy of district school reform efforts, and the conflicting messages about district student achievement in the media, she might be skeptical about the school district’s ability to educate children in her community well. However, she might share the faith that many Black Americans have in public education providing greater opportunity. Thus, by teasing apart the distinctions between trust in school at the interpersonal and institutional level, we can expose interesting complexities in how schools and public education are perceived by urban Black parents.

**Treating Trusting as a Dynamic Process**

The second way to expose the nuance in of Black parent (dis)trust in public schooling is to treat trust as something that can change over time. A shortcoming of survey research is that it treats trust as static, by asking to what degree people trust something rather than examining how peoples’ trust in something can develop or erode over time. Moreover, the act of trusting itself is also a process that unfolds over time (Khodyakov, 2007; Möllering, 2013), with distinct stages. Trusting involves a process of evaluating present circumstances. However, socialization also bears on how people trust (Frederiksen, 2009), and the very way that these circumstances are assessed is colored by dispositions that grow out of socialization. For example, if one is more prone to be trustful, one is likely to interpret circumstances in a more favorable light. Finally, there is a feedback loop with trusting—the degree to which one trusts or distrusts in a certain
circumstance will bear on how one is disposed to trust in the future—allowing trust to build or erode.

In this section I introduce my conceptual frame for understanding the process of trusting. As opposed to psychological accounts of trust development, which see trust as a personality trait that develops through early experiences with caregivers (Erikson, 1950), I develop a sociological account of trusting, which looks to socialization experiences and social relations as foundational to the formation of a disposition to trust or distrust and to the development or erosion of trust. First, through Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), I conceptualize how socialization bears on the process of trusting—which allows for a greater understanding of why Black Americans might be disposed to distrust the local public school and school officials at the school system, but have greater confidence in public education in the abstract. Then I will discuss how the stages of trusting that Möllering (2001) describes as interpretation, suspension and expectation unfold, and how these are shaped in part by habitus. Finally, I will discuss how parent relations with the school can play a role in either fostering or diminishing Black parent trust in public schooling. I will conclude by arguing that investigating the nature of Black parent trust over time can track how trust might develop over time due to experiences with school

Socialization and Disposition to Trust

Research on institutional trust has tried to determine which is weighted more heavily when people come to trust institutions such as schools—do parents trust public schools because they have a trusting disposition, or do parents trust public schools because they are satisfied after evaluating their performance? Social scientists often ask whether trust in institutions comes about primarily through a trusting disposition acquired through early socialization experiences
based on race, class, gender and other demographic characteristics, or whether trust is based mostly on evaluations of institutional performance and the benefits that these institutions provide (Newton & Norris, 1999).

However, it might be more appropriate to understand trust in institutions, such as schools, as an integration of both of these models. Mishler and Rose (1997) liken trust in institutions to a “lifetime learning model” in which trust or distrust begin to “form early in life and evolve continuously thereafter as early attitudes and beliefs are reinforced or challenged by subsequent experiences (p. 434).” This integrates both the socialization and performance-based theories of institutional trust, and understands trust or distrust in schooling as shaped initially by formative experiences, but as something that can be affirmed or diminished based on experiences with institutions and evaluations of their performance.

However, socialization is not bracketed in the past when it comes to trusting—it continually influences the way that people go about evaluating schools. The degree to which people are predisposed to trust can be thought of as a part of habitus (Misztal, 1996), a mechanism linking socialization to trusting behavior and beliefs through disposition and orientations. According to Bourdieu, habitus is a matrix of “durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1990) among which can be the propensity to trust. Habitus is a “structured-structure,” meaning that it is shaped by a person’s social position—such as race and class—and experiences, but it is also a “structuring-structure” meaning that it shapes how people are oriented to, act in and experience the world (Bourdieu, 1990). However, the operation of habitus is habitual precisely because it works without the actor’s conscious awareness of it (Bourdieu, 1990). It manifests in the way that one finds it natural to conduct oneself, experienced as the taken-for-granted, commonsense logic behind people’s behavior and actions.
Due to socialization shaped by race and class, the habitus of urban Black parents could be “structured” in part by living with a racialized identity, a history of facing racism across institutional contexts, and a legacy of communal cultural knowledge of how to navigate and resist institutional racism. Thus a disposition to distrust institutions—such as schools—on the part of Black Americans can be said to come from socialization (Abramson, 1977; Nunnally, 2012). This story of poor treatment from institutions is consistent across different institutional contexts—such as the health care system (Boulware, Coope, Ratner, LaVeist, & Powe, 2003), legal and criminal justice system (Tyler & Huo, 2002) and agencies of the welfare state (Quadagno, 1994). Some have suggested that there may be a spillover effect, as distrust due to bad experiences with one institution can breed distrust across the other institutions that one comes into contact with (Meyer, Ward, Coveney, & Rogers, 2008). This is an example of how habitus consists of “transposable” orientations and dispositions. Thus, even before Black parents send their first child to school, they might already be prone to distrust institutions, such as schools, and to be skeptical that they have their best interests at heart.

However, Black parent habitus might also be “structured” by the fact that education is so vital for Black Americans in social and political movements for greater equality and emancipation. The long history of Black struggle for greater equality has directly involved the public education system, demonstrating the faith placed in it (Anderson, 1988; A. L. Harris, 2008). An examination of the history of Black Americans reveals the unique meaning education has had for collective and individual mobility, and liberation (Anderson, 1988; Stulberg, 2008; Walker, 2000). Due to these complex socialization influences, a Black habitus includes an inclination to have faith in the aspirational promise of education in the abstract to provide social
mobility, empowerment and liberation while a disposition to distrust educators given a history of poor treatment in schools.

As a flexible concept, the idea of habitus allows us to imagine that people with similar social backgrounds might still have different orientations of trust toward schooling, as people are not over-determined to behave in a specific way due to their race and class (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Lizardo, 2004). Habitus is like a “spring that needs a trigger” and responds according to the specific context at hand (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Habitus can be thought of as “socialized subjectivity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) where socialization intersects with one’s unique and subjective experience of the world. Thinking about habitus in this way allows us to account for the unique experiences that different Black parents have that will bear on their trust or distrust of schooling, and their resulting behavior and engagement with schools, despite some similarities in social position.

Socialization and Trusting Processes and Behavior

As a “structuring-structure,” habitus also “structures” how parents come to trust or distrust. Habitus is therefore also a mechanism through which socialization and past experience influence the process of trusting, through dispositions and orientations. As a temporal process, trusting involves evaluations of the present informed by the past, resulting in imaginings of and hopes for the future (Khodyakov, 2007). Building on processual views of trusting conceptualized by Möllering (2001)—who argues that trusting involves the three stages of interpretation, suspension and expectations—I will discuss how habitus shapes this process as it unfolds over time (see Figure 2.)

Much of the research on how people trust focuses on what Möllering (2001) refers to as the interpretation stage. People are viewed as rational actors who conduct a cost-benefit analysis
to decide if they should trust. However, this process of interpretation is not completely rational. Interpretation is a subjective act, and habitus—and the dispositions and orientations that it carries— influences find to be most important in their interpretation of how much to trust schools. Habitus also orients parents to be more or less inclined to trust through coloring their perception of social reality. A sort of feedback mechanism is at play here—if one is disposed to be more trusting one might be more likely to trust due confirmation bias (Govier, 1997). If a parent is predisposed to trust educators, she might weigh evidence more heavily that confirms that her child’s teacher is trustworthy and discount evidence to the contrary.
Figure 2: The Process of Parent Trust in Schooling

Note: I designed this diagram after considering how parent trust in schools as a process might look. I build on Möllering’s (2001) concept of trust as a process with three stages. I also use Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), and build on other theoretical work understanding trusting as dynamic.
This moment of subjective interpretation is only the first stage of trusting. The second stage deals with one of the most fascinating aspects of trusting—that it involves going forward on insufficient inductive knowledge (Frederiksen, 2012; Govier, 1997; Misztal, 1996; Möllering, 2001). One can never know what the future will hold no matter how much they evaluate the present—there will always be contingency and risk. Drawing on Simmel (1950), theorists have emphasized that trusting involves taking a “leap of faith,” that there is a stage of suspension (Möllering, 2001). The extent to which one trusts is, in part, related to how comfortable one is with taking this leap of faith and being vulnerable. Thus, parents who send their child to school, but remain guarded and suspicious cannot be thought to have high levels of trust.

The final stage of the trusting process is the formation of expectations. The extent to which a parent has favorable or unfavorable expectations about what the school will do, is indicative of her degree of trust. Thus, trust is future oriented, which leads Khodyakov (2007) to highlight the importance of “imaginative anticipation” in trusting. This imaginative anticipation might include either hopes or fears of the future. Whether or not these expectations are disappointed or confirmed then feeds back into one’s disposition to trust or distrust. Thus, the more one distrusts, and has this distrust confirmed, the more one is likely to distrust in the future.

Thus, habitus shapes how parents come to trust or distrust the school district and public education system through orientations and dispositions—which then shape how parents interpret the various reasons they have to trust or distrust the public school, how comfortable they are in the face of vulnerability and risk and how positive or negative their resulting expectations are that they have for schooling. How much parents trust the schools will then shape how they engage with schools—how they behave in relation to their child’s school and the larger public education system. Moreover, even though formative experiences might carry more weight,
habitus can evolve over time, and change according to experience. Thus, if a parent comes to distrust her local school, it can shape her habitus and she might be more disposed to distrust schools. Understanding trust as temporal and shaped by present and past experiences, allows us to see how it can change over time and how the way that parents engage with schools can foster or diminish their trust in schooling.

Characteristics of Trusting Relationships Between Parents and Schools

While socialization and dispositions influence how parents come to evaluate whether a school is trustworthy, how a parent engages with her child’s school and the school system also plays a crucial role in how much parent trusts public schooling. As an institution, the school can both foster trust through encouraging the types of parent-school relationships that build trust, and it can also become an object of institutional trust (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011).

From a survey of the literature on trust in institutions, including schools, it seems that institutions that are trustworthy generally share the following characteristics—they are reliable, competent, respectful and caring (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; M. K. Jennings, 1998; Levi, 1998; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000) (see Table 1). As Bryk and Schneider (2002) note, these characteristics “have a dynamic interplay” among one another, and a serious deficit in one of these characteristics can influence how trusting the overall relationship is (p. 23). How parents perceive their relationship with schools bears on how much parents believe schools demonstrate these characteristics of trustworthiness.

In order to judge whether an institution is trustworthy, people rely on its reputation, appearance and performance or proxies that signal these things (Sztompka, 1999). In the case of public schooling, where the goals are so varied and it is difficult to measure whether they are being met, proxies that signal trustworthiness are especially important (Bryk & Schneider, 2002;
Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). These proxies that signal trustworthiness—such as test scores for performance, or word of mouth for reputation—influence the development of parent trust.

Moreover, schooling involves a lot of intimate relationships, between parents, teachers and students—especially in the younger grades where school can be seen as an extension of the family (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Meier, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Thus, the appearance, performance and reputation of the people who are the face of the institution—such as teachers and principals—become very important as parents engage with schools and interpret how much they trust them.

Parents engage with schools through their relations and interactions with school and school officials, and it is through these relations and interactions that parents will gather evidence to evaluate whether or not to trust the school. These relations are crucial to cultivating trust or distrust. A review of the literature on parents and trust in schools indicates that relations between parents and schools that foster trust are characterized by communication based in mutual respect and shared understanding of children’s needs (K. Adams & Christenson, 2000; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000), availability of evidence that demonstrates school competence (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Meier, 2002), opportunities for parents to be meaningfully involved (Comer, 1986) and the cultivation of an atmosphere of cooperation and shared fate (C. Adams et al., 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

In light of the power asymmetries between urban Black parents and school officials, it might be harder for trust to form, so fostering the types of parent-school interactions that breed parent-school trust becomes especially important (C. Adams et al., 2009; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Meier, 2002). Given that it is prudent for Black parents to approach school with distrust,
how schools receive this orientation of vigilance will be consequential for whether schools can earn parent trust.

*Table 1*

**Characteristics of Trustworthy Schools and Trusting Relationships Between Parents and Educators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Trustworthy Schools</th>
<th>Characteristics of Trusting Relationships between Parents and Educators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reliable</td>
<td>Parents believe that educators are consistent in their practices; parents believe that educators are transparent and communicate clearly with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>Parents believe that they share understandings of educational practices and goals with educators; parents have evidence of successful execution of these practices and that goals are being met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful</td>
<td>Parents believe there are not power imbalances between themselves and educators; parents can negotiate concerns with educators; parents feel that educators value their expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Parents believe that educators have good intentions; parents have evidence that educators understand how to attend to their child’s particular needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The characteristics of trusting relationships between parents and schools are adapted from the components of relational trust in Bryk and Schneider (2002), with a focus on how parents would discern evidence of these different characteristics in their relationship with schools.

How parents engage with the schools is also influenced by the policy context *(see Figure 2)*. In the current New York City context, local policymakers have encouraged parent engagement through choice and discouraged parent engagement through voice (Henig, Orr, Gold, Silander, & Simon, 2011). These different visions of parental participation tap into larger competing visions about the role of public education in our society—whether it can be thought of as primarily a public good or a private good (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Labaree, 1997). New York City parents are increasingly expected to relate to schools as consumers, and to think of public schooling as a private good. Policies encourage parents to monitor school progress through accessing school quality data, and to vote to with their feet by exercising choice if they are dissatisfied with their child's school. Parents are discouraged from engaging with the public
schools as democratic citizens. In New York City, an example of this was Mayor Bloomberg’s elimination of local district school boards, which diminished the policy decision-making power of parents and community members. At the school level, many of the CMO network charter schools do not have functioning PTAs, which is a tendency of these network charter schools in general (Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Whitman, 2008), despite the fact that they are obligated by state law to provide them.

Moreover, the policy context also influences how parents engage with public schools, by influencing the type of public school that Black parents might have their child attend (see Figure 2). New York City policymakers made the ground fertile for the proliferation of charter schools, especially in lower-income, traditionally Black neighborhoods, such as in Harlem and parts of Brooklyn. Black students in particular are overrepresented in city charter schools—although the NYC public school population is 27% Black, the NYC charter school population is 54% Black (NYCCSC, 2016a). Many of these charter schools are run by large, non-profit CMO networks, which tend to have common, “No Excuses” style of educating students—increased instructional time, the deliberate cultivation of a college-going culture and an emphasis on character education, a scripted curriculum focused on raising test scores and a structured approach to student discipline (Golann, 2015; McDermott & Nygreen, 2013; Sondel, 2015). Parents in these schools are generally asked to sign a contract that they will commit to be supportive of the school’s policies, with consequences if they do not follow through. This is one example of how CMO charter schools structure parent-school relations differently than DOE public schools.

Thus, the policy context influences Black parent engagement with city public schools both by shaping how Black parents interact with educators, as well as by altering the institutional context so that Black parents have more opportunity for public school choice and less
opportunity for voice. The nature of the relationships that parents have with school officials and with other educators can either foster or erode trust over the school year. In subsequent chapters, I explore how parent-educator relationships are related to the development and trust and distrust and how this varies across different school types and schools with different student demographic profiles.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have provided a framework for studying Black parent trust in public schooling in New York City. Trust in public schooling is multi-faceted and complex. In order to capture some of the nuance in the nature of urban Black parent trust in public schools, I draw distinctions between the local, district and institutional levels of schooling, and clarify what exactly parents are trusting schools to do. I also treat trusting as a dynamic process—one that is influenced by past socialization and one that unfolds over time. Such an understanding of trust allows me to examine how relations with school officials can foster or diminish parent trust in schooling. Despite the fact that Black parents might be more disposed to approach educators with distrust due to a legacy of discrimination and racism, schools can earn the trust of parents based on how they structure parent engagement, despite power asymmetries and social distance. This process plays out differently across different types of schools. In the next chapter I will present my research design for studying Black parent trust in public schooling in New York City, and how it might vary across different types of schools.
CHAPTER THREE

Research Design, Sample and Methods

In this chapter, I present my research design for studying the trust that New York City Black parents place in public schooling. My project examines parent trust in public schooling at a moment when New York City is attempting to transform its education system through market mechanisms such as school choice and portfolio management, a phenomenon common in many big cities (Henig, Buckley, & Levin, 2010), and when many historically Black neighborhoods in the city are experiencing gentrification and becoming Whiter and more middle class (Ehrenhalt, 2012). My project teases apart how the nature of African-American trust in local public schools might be different from the nature of trust in the institution of schooling or faith in public education as Black parents might expect different things out of the local school and the school system. Secondly, it explores the development of trust in schooling by treating trusting as a dynamic process that is influenced both by past socialization and experiences with the public-school system. Given the unique experiences that Black Americans have had with public schooling historically and currently, my examination of the trust Black parents place in schooling adds greater specificity to how trust in public institutions is understood. Moreover, with its focus on how parent trust intersects with education context, my study elaborates on the mechanisms behind parent trust formation, and sheds light on how urban parents are responding to school reform efforts.

Through this work, I build on and develop theory to more adequately capture the complex and multi-faceted concept of trust in schools. Thus, a larger aim of my project is to investigate how the unique experiences that African-Americans have had with public schooling might extend or possibly reconstruct previous theories of trust in schools and other comparable
institutions. My project, which focuses on understanding Black parents’ subjective logic behind trusting and how that corresponds to their behavior and practices; how parents engage with schools and its relationship with trust formation; and building theory around trust and public schooling, falls under what Burawoy (1998) terms “reflexive science.” The epistemology behind this approach emphasizes an iterative conversation between academic theory and insider knowledge and an intersubjective dialogue between participant and researcher perspectives. The resulting knowledge that research in this paradigm produces is constructed as a result of the interaction between researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Putting the experiences of New York City Black parents in conversation with prior theory about trust and public schools extends prior understandings of trust and public schooling and makes theoretical contributions to the academic literature.

Research Methods

In my research, I used a multi-modal qualitative design—consisting of longitudinal interviews with parents and fieldwork in selected case study school sites—to explore the trust that Black parents of elementary school-aged children in New York City place in public schooling. Since trust is a complex and dynamic concept (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Möllering, 2001; Sztompka, 1999) and schooling is a multi-level institution entrusted with many different purposes (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Labaree, 1997), my design has several advantages over the survey research that is generally used to study trust. Through a hermeneutical approach to investigating trust (Breeman, 2012), my interviews with parents revealed the logic and reasoning behind their trust in schooling. Secondly, through my fieldwork in three selected schools—including observations of parent-school events, interviews with educators and parents, and background research on the history and characteristics of the parents’ schools and their
surrounding communities—I examined how school policies structure interactions with parents and how parents interact with schools, allowing me to construct rich accounts of how the process of parent trust formation unfolds in specific educational contexts (Welter & Alex, 2012).

**Data Collection**

In designing my research strategy, I aimed to collect data with both depth and breadth. The interviews I conducted with 34 parent participants whose children attended 23 different schools over the time of my study provided data with breadth—allowing me to understand the logic and reasoning behind trust in schooling across a range of parents experiencing different school contexts. The fieldwork and background research I conducted in three selected case study schools provided data with depth—allowing me to understand how trust-formation unfolds for parents in specific contexts that typify the schools that Black New York City students attend. Both the interviews and school fieldwork were longitudinal, allowing me to see how trusting unfolds over time. These features of my data collection plan allowed me to capture more of the complexity in the dynamics of trusting.

*Longitudinal Parent Interviews*

I relied on in-depth interviews with parents as my main source of data, given their unique ability to allow people to “clarify and elaborate” on their perspective of the world (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), as means to tap into the logic and reasoning behind the trust that my study’s parent participants place in schooling. I conducted interviews with 33 parent/family participants between February 2014 and November 2015 (see Appendix A). I attempted to interview all 33

---

3 For one family, I held both interviews with both the father and mother, but I count them as one participant.
parent/family participants in my sample twice—once during one school year and then again in the subsequent school year to see how their relationship with their child(ren)’s school developed. I managed to interview 20 of the parents/families twice—for a total of 53 parent interviews. The interviews averaged a little over an hour duration (resulting in approximately 57 hours of parent interview data) and were semi-structured (Bryman, 2006; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998)—I was guided by an interview protocol, but preserved some flexibility in order to allow the unique insights of the parents to unfold.

I drew on surveys used in empirical studies of parents’ trust in schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004) to craft interview questions that dealt with the various things that parents can trust schools to do—such as care for their child, educate students well, show parents respect, and understand the concerns of the community, as well as perceptions of their relationships with educators and whether these contained elements of a trusting relationship—based in reliability, competence, respect and care (see Table 1). In the interviews, I teased apart how this logic and reasoning might be different when parents discuss their attitudes about their local school and the larger school system. I also distinguished between what things parents trust schools to do and not to do at these different levels. Along with illuminating parents’ sense-making, I also explored how parents understand their past experiences with schooling and how they felt that related to their current attitudes about the school system.

The main interview questions in my protocol were open-ended, to get a sense of the parent’s history with schooling, experiences with their child’s school and teacher, and expectations hopes for their child’s education, and attitudes toward the larger school system (see Appendix C, for the parent interview protocols). I used probes when further clarification is needed from the parent interviewee (Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 2012) and posed hypothetical
questions at times to help the parents think through and reflect on overarching issues (Merriam, 1998)—especially when it comes to more abstract discussions about the wider institution and purposes of public schooling.

I conducted all interviews in a location where the parent interviewee felt the most comfortable—the majority of my first-round interviews were held either at a school, the parents’ homes or in locations in their neighborhood—such as public libraries and coffee shops. For the second round of interviews, I gave parents the option to participate over the phone, which roughly half did. I let parents know at the beginning of each interview that the purpose of the project is to get a sense of how Black parents across New York City feel about their relationship with public schools.

I recorded all of the interviews and then had them transcribed, within a couple of weeks of conducting them, enabling the parents’ words to be rendered and analyzed in full (Bryman, 2006). As interviews can often expose emotions that intersect with people’s sense-making (Pugh, 2013), after each interview I wrote field notes in order to capture anything non-verbal that might have happened. I recorded my initial thoughts and impressions and details about the interview setting—which was usually either in the parents’ school or another location in the school neighborhood (Bryman, 2006).

Parent Recruitment

Trust is not only important to my framework but also to the validity of my data—if parents trusted me, they would be more likely to be candid as they describe their experiences. Thus, I avoided associations with school officials and administrators (see Lareau, 2000) by recruiting parent participants through community based organizations, parent advocacy groups and educators with close ties to parents. After I interviewed initial participants, I followed a
snowball recruitment method, anticipating that once I established rapport with a parent it would be easier to establish trust with another parent that they recommended (Lyon, 2012). With this sampling strategy, selection bias is a risk. For example, it is most likely the case that parents who would agree to participate in research are different than those who would not. I attempted to mitigate as much selection bias as possible by recruiting parents from a wide range of targeted sources.

**School Site Field-Work**

Following a case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009), I selected three case study schools in which to conduct additional fieldwork. I purposefully selected the schools to represent school types that were of analytical importance, after I was in the field, and had a sense of the types of schools that New York City Black parents tended send their children to. Comparisons across these school types revealed how theoretically-informed attributes of parents and school context influence the process of trust formation. These types of schools were No Excuses Charter Schools, DOE schools serving predominately Black and Hispanic students, and DOE schools—mostly in gentrifying historically Black neighborhoods—serving a relatively large number of affluent and White students. Each case study school exemplified one of these types, and had at least four parents who had children attending them from my larger sample of parent participants. I combined the data from these case study schools with data from the larger parent sample—in which all parents had a child who attended one of these school types (see  

---

4 In the 2015-2016 school year (the final year I was in the field) NYC DOE schools served a student population that was 15.5% Asian, 27.1% Black/African-American, 40.5% Hispanic, 14.8% White and 76.1% free and reduced-price lunch. However due to extreme racial segregation, White students in the city’s public schools are concentrated in relatively few schools. I classified a school as serving a “relatively larger” proportion of White students if it had a student population that was at least 14% White.
Appendix A)—to draw conclusions about how the school type was related to the development of parent-school relationships.

In addition to parent interviews, I conducted additional fieldwork in the focus schools, borrowing some data collection strategies from ethnographic methods (see Appendix B). Ethnographic methods, as Willis and Trondman (2000) note, involve “direct and sustained contact with agents,” richly documenting the encounter, and representing, in part, the participants’ experiences on their “own terms,” which can “bring surprise” to theoretical formulations. In each case study school, I conducted observations of parent-school events—including Parent Teacher Association meetings, Back-to-School nights, and family and community events organized by the school. I recorded my observations of parent events in field notes, and left space to note both things that I observed as well as my thoughts and impressions of those things (Adler & Adler, 1994). I wrote handwritten notes in the field, or immediately after (usually on the subway ride home), and typed up more thorough notes within a couple of hours of being at the site, ensuring that I recorded fresh and immediate impressions (Luker, 2008). I reviewed my field notes, and adjusted my observational techniques accordingly to ensure that I was capturing relevant observational data.

I also interviewed the principal and/or parent coordinator of these selected schools, to get a sense of school policies around parent engagement (see Appendix C, for educator interview protocol). Each interview lasted a little over an hour, and were semi-structured, like the parent interviews. In addition, I conducted background research on each school and community, collecting relevant news articles, information from school websites, school outcome and demographic data, and any additional information about demographic trends in the neighborhood.
Research Setting

New York City’s remarkable size and geographic diversity allowed me to learn about the experiences of Black parents in a variety of different educational contexts, and to examine how these different contexts bear on the process of trust formation. There were two educational and demographic trends in New York City’s traditionally Black neighborhoods that served as the backdrop to my research. The first is that the city’s population is gentrifying as the cost of housing rises, and many historically Black neighborhoods are becoming Whiter and more affluent (see Figure 3). White affluent families are increasing deciding to send their children to public schools in the neighborhoods in which they reside, inside of moving to the suburbs or sending their children to private schools. This challenges the popular framing of urban schools as only serving Black and Latino students living in racially segregated neighborhoods plagued by concentrated poverty (Posey-Maddox, 2014). Gentrification has been concentrated in Upper Manhattan—including much of Harlem, as well as Northern Brooklyn—including the neighborhoods of Bedford Stuyvesant and Crown Heights. Meanwhile, Eastern Brooklyn has been one of the few areas in New York that has seen an increase in Black population, as people are priced out of other areas in the city.

The second trend is the proliferation of charter schools, concentrated in the city’s traditionally Black neighborhoods (see Figure 4). According to the New York Charter School Center, approximately 45% of kindergarteners in Harlem and 31% of kindergarteners in Central Brooklyn attend charter schools (NYCCSC, 2016b). Black students are also overrepresented in the city’s charter schools—Black students make up 27% of the DOE school population, but 55% of the charter school population (NYCCSC, 2016a). A little less than half of the charter schools are managed by large network charter management organizations (CMOs) (NYCCSC, 2016a),
many of which share a common approach, dubbed “No Excuses” in the academic literature, which includes increased instructional time, the deliberate cultivation of a college-going culture and an emphasis on character education, a scripted curriculum focused on raising test scores and a structured approach to student discipline (Golann, 2015; McDermott & Nygreen, 2013; Sondel, 2015). Given the popularity of “No Excuses” charter schools, and evidence of their success in producing better test score outcomes than district schools (CREDO, 2013), many independent charter schools have felt pressure to adopt their approach, increasing the homogeneity in the city’s charter school sector (White, 2015).
Figure 3: Map of Gentrifying Neighborhoods in New York City, 2014

Note: This map is taken from a NYU Furman Center study, documenting demographic change from 1990-2014, using data from both the US Census and American Community Survey (see Been et al., 2016). In the above map, Harlem and other areas of Northern Manhattan as well as Crown Heights and Bedford Stuyvesant in Northern Brooklyn are identified as gentrifying; while East Brooklyn is identified as non-gentrifying.
Figure 4: Map of Charter School Locations in New York City, 2015-2016 School Year

Note: The two maps above show the location of charter schools in the boroughs of Manhattan and Brooklyn, classified by school level. The majority of charter schools are concentrated in Harlem in Northern Manhattan, and neighborhoods such as Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant in Northern Brooklyn.
Characteristics of Parent Participants

My sample for parent interviews was bounded by purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998), in that all thirty-three of the parent participants I interviewed identified as Black/African-American and had elementary school children in the New York City public school system (see Appendix A, for details on each individual parent participant). Most of the parents resided in Harlem and Brooklyn—including the neighborhoods of Crown Heights, Bedford Stuyvesant, Brownsville and East New York—and varied in socio-economic status—although the majority were working-class. Many of the parents attended New York City public schools for elementary, middle and/or high school (see Figure 5).

The parents sent their elementary school aged children to 37 different schools. The majority of these schools were in Harlem (18) and Brooklyn (11), whereas the other schools were in other parts of the city. Most of the schools were either DOE schools (19) or Large CMO network “No Excuses” charter schools (11). The rest of the parents sent their children to a variety of different school types, including Gifted and Talented programs within DOE schools, small independent charter schools and District 75 schools, which are schools that serve students with disabilities. The majority of these schools served predominately lower-income Black and Hispanic students (25), while most of the rest served racially and socioeconomically diverse student bodies (11) (see Figure 6).

The parents I interviewed had a total of 40 elementary school aged children. The sample of children was evenly split between boys and girls and distributed fairly evenly across elementary school grade levels. The majority of children were in the general education track (29), while several received special education services at school (8) and a few were in gifted and talented programs (3) (see Figure 7).
Figure 5: Parent/Family Characteristics
(n=33 families)

Note: I classified parent socioeconomic status based on information I had about parent educational attainment, occupation, average income of neighborhood and home/apartment ownership status.
Figure 6: School Characteristics
(n=37 schools)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Excuses</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Location</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Demographics</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower Income, Mostly Black and Hispanic students</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomically diverse, Racially diverse</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Income, Mostly White and Asian students</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Socio-economically and racially diverse schools had a student population that was at least 14% White and less than 70% free and reduced priced lunch.
Figure 7: Child Characteristics
(n=40 children)

Notes: Children were classified as being in the special education track if they had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to additional educational services in school. Child grade level is the grade the child was in at the time of the first parent interview.
School Site Sampling

I selected three case study schools in traditionally Black neighborhoods in Harlem and Brooklyn in which to conduct in-depth fieldwork. I selected schools that represented the main types of the schools that New York City Black parents send their children to—No Excuses charter schools, DOE schools serving lower income Black and Hispanic students, and gentrifying schools serving increasing numbers of affluent White students. (see Figure 8, for demographic trends of selected case study schools.)

PS 970/Central Harlem Elementary School: DOE Neighborhood Public School

The first selected case study school is PS 970, Harlem Central Elementary School, serving students in pre-kindergarten through 8th grade. Located in the heart of Harlem, the school has been a longstanding feature of the community. I interviewed four PS 970 parents/families, each of them twice, for a total of eight interviews. I also conducted observations at the school, including a PTA meeting. To get a sense of how the school engages parents, I interviewed the school parent coordinator, Mrs. Watkins. Mrs. Watkins, who is a Black woman, hails from Harlem and sent her children to one of area’s first charter schools. She has been in her role as parent coordinator for more than a decade. (see Appendix B, for details on the data I collected for each school).

Once a struggling school, PS 970 was removed from the Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) list, a list of low-performing schools maintained by the New York State Education Department, in the early 2000s. Parents attributed much the schools’ turnaround to the charismatic leadership of Dr. Franklin, who had retired from being principal a year before I began my research. They spoke about how, as a Black man who lived in Harlem and dedicated himself to the school, Dr. Franklin was able to foster relational trust with parents and the larger
community during his tenure. Due to the school’s relatively high academic performance when compared to other surrounding DOE schools, Dr. Franklin and PS 970 received favorable coverage in the local news.

Recently, South Harlem has experienced rapid gentrification (Been et al., 2016). PS 970 is located on the border of a CSD (Community School District) that contains a portion of South Harlem and much of Manhattan’s predominately White and affluent Upper West Side neighborhood. Affluent parents find this CSD a desirable location to reside, so that they can take advantage of more “affordable” housing options while having easier access, due to school choice policies, to higher-performing, better-resourced schools outside the immediate neighborhood zone. A few of the more affluent Black parents that I interviewed talked about the reluctance that gentrifying families had in enrolling their children in PS 970. According to accounts from these parents, while the preschool in the school is Whiter and more affluent than the student body as a whole, many of these families send their children to private schools or gain admittance to G&T programs once their children are in kindergarten.

Educators at PS 970 have attempted to resist both charter school expansion and the demands of gentrifying parents. The parents I interviewed said that Dr. Franklin had to combat efforts of CMO networks looking to co-locate in the school. Due to its relatively small class size, it became a target for networks looking for “underutilized” school buildings for space. Mrs. Watkins also mentioned that school leaders prepared for pressures from gentrification in advance, deciding how they would respond to it. In my first round of interviews, a few parents mentioned that PS 970 does not offer school tours for prospective kindergarten parents—which many affluent parents expect when exercising school choice. PS 970 also does not have a Gifted and Talented program, which some DOE schools have adopted to attract more affluent families.
PS 1150/North-Central Brooklyn Elementary School: New Gentrifying DOE School

The second selected elementary school is PS 1150/North Brooklyn Elementary School, which is located in a gentrifying neighborhood in north-central Brooklyn and serves students in pre-kindergarten through 5th grade. I interviewed five PS 1150 parents, 2 of them twice, for a total of seven interviews. I also conducted observations at the school, including at a PTA meeting and a family/community event. To get a sense of how the school engages parents, I interviewed Mrs. Bailey. Mrs. Bailey, who is a Black woman, has worked as an educator in the NYC DOE for over twenty years, including as an instructional coach. Her children also attended public schools in the city.

PS 1150’s student body is becoming increasingly racially and socioeconomically diverse as it becomes Whiter and more affluent, due in part larger demographic shifts in northern Brooklyn as a whole (Been et al., 2016). PS 1150 is a relatively new school. It opened in the fall of 2012, a year and a half before I began interviewing parents from the school. PS 1150 was one of two schools in the same school building—the other being a No Excuses charter school—that opened to replace a DOE elementary school that was closed, due to low academic performance, acrimonious relationships between teachers and school administrations and problems with safety. The school’s website touts its inquiry-based curriculum, its emphasis on developing students’ socio-emotional skills, and its arts and dual-language programming.

The Black parents I interviewed from the school described the racially and socioeconomically diverse student body as a strength of the school, and spoke about how the affluent parents have brought greater financial resources with them. This allowed the school’s PTA budget to triple in its first three years, bringing additional amenities to the school such as teacher aides, extra-curricular programming and a new school garden. However, the parents also
spoke about equity concerns, which research has indicated becomes a problem in many urban schools with increasing White and middle-class presence (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Posey-Maddox, 2014). While over half of the student body identifies as Black/African-American, interviews with parents indicate that White students were concentrated in the younger grades, and Black students in the upper grades (many of whom previously attended the school that was closed.)

A major theme that emerged was how PS 1150 attempted to balance the preferences and needs of racially and socio-economically diverse parents. The parents I interviewed spoke about how it was difficult for the principal to gain the trust of Black parents from the old school—many of whom were disillusioned after the old school was closed, and were attracted to the potential of the newly opened charter school. Mrs. Bailey, the principal, talked about how she was blindsided by the demands of affluent White parents as the school was first gaining its footing. The parents I interviewed still had lingering concerns that the school was more focused on programming for the younger grades and neglecting children in the upper grades. In response to these tensions, the school had several meetings for parents, focusing on grappling with issues of race, socioeconomic status and power.

Transcend Academy/Eastern Brooklyn: Large Franchise “No Excuses” Network Charter School

The third school is Transcend Academy, an elementary charter school that is a part of a large CMO network, in a low-income neighborhood in eastern Brooklyn, serving students in kindergarten through 5th grade. I interviewed five Transcend Academy parents, three of them twice, for a total of eight interviews. I also conducted observations at the school, including at a PLC (Parent Leadership Council) meeting and Back-to-School nights. To get a sense of how the school engages parents, I interviewed Mrs. Cole, the school principal. Mrs. Cole, who is a Black
woman and has been an educator for more than a decade, began her career as a Teach for America corps member. She was a teacher and a school dean at her school before becoming principal.

Transcend Academy/Eastern Brooklyn Elementary school is part of a large CMO network that has more than one school in Brooklyn and has been lauded by the media and policymakers as a successful model of the “No Excuses” pedagogy for low-income, minority urban youth. The school website touts its emphasis on hard work, teamwork and achievement. The school is fairly well established, having opened about ten years ago, and many of the elementary school students have siblings in the charter’s middle school in the same neighborhood. Unlike most other parts of the city, the school’s neighborhood has seen a rise in its Black population, as many people have relocated after being priced out of gentrifying neighborhoods in central Brooklyn (Tepper & Durkin, 2012). These areas in Brooklyn have also seen rapid proliferation in charter schools (Anand, 2013).

Parents who send their children to Transcend Academy begin their relationship with the school on a contractual basis. After winning admittance through a lottery, parents attend an orientation meeting at the school where they learn about school’s routines and structured approach in great detail. If parents still wish to enroll their child at the school, they have a “commitment meeting” when they agree to bring their child to school on time and in uniform; to check homework nightly, and to make sure their child reads for twenty minutes; and to attend mandatory parent events—such as Back-to-School nights and workshops. Failure to meet these stipulations leads to punishment for children—either missing a field day or class party, if they in 2nd grade or younger, or receiving detention, if they are older.
The parents I interviewed spoke highly of the school’s emphasis on academic achievement and its aspirational college-going culture. However, they also had concerns about the discipline policy and structured nature of the school pedagogical approach. These concerns became more pressing for parents as children got older. Despite these concerns, the parents I interviewed believed that they had little room to negotiate with educators over school policies.

The principal, Mrs. Cole, was frustrated that the most dissatisfied parents refused to come in and meet with her, and either exited the school, or tried to report her to a higher authority. While unlike many No Excuses charter schools, the school did have a Parent Leadership Council (PLC), but by the time of my second round of parent interviews, Mrs. Cole had disbanded it, due to low parent participation.
Figure 8: Demographic Trends of Selected Case Schools 2011-2016

Note: The 2011-2012 demographic data for PS 1150/North Brooklyn Elementary are those of the closed-down DOE school that it replaced. All numbers are rounded to preserve school confidentiality.
Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the data analysis process can begin, at least informally, as the data are being collected (Hatch, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1984). As Miles and Huberman (1984) note, data analysis involves the steps of “data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification” all of which happen throughout the entire course of conducting research. I began informal data analysis while I was still conducting fieldwork—I read through interview transcripts and my field notes as I went to make adjustments to my protocol and field note taking if necessary. I began to code and write analytical memos—both for each parent participant and each case study school—after I finished the first round of interviews.

This initial data analysis helped me to come up with my ultimate frames for analysis (Hatch, 2002), which were larger categories that I used to conduct my first round of coding (Saldana, 2009). Constructing these analysis frames was not purely an inductive process. I was guided by my theoretical framework which pointed to frames that I should anticipate, but as I reviewed my data, new frames emerged (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). In particular, I discerned instances where parents trusted or distrusted by looking for places where parents perceived or described a presence or lack of characteristics thought to be a part of trusting relationships, as well as where parents described experiencing emotions related to trust and distrust—such as comfort or discomfort, or feeling reassured or worried. I used the computer package NVivo to assist with the coding process, reading through and coding my entire corpus of transcripts, field notes and artifacts. NVivo’s “framework matrices” were helpful in organizing and arranging my data so that I could discover both patterns across all parent participants, within groups of parent
participants with different characteristics (i.e. school type that child attends), as well as within each selected focus school.

I analyzed these different arrangements of the data, searching for emergent patterns and themes, which I used to develop thematic codes. I then wrote memos, drafts and outlines discovering larger theoretical themes and claims about my data (Hatch, 2002; Maxwell, 2005). Throughout this iterative process, I kept an eye out for “disconfirming data” or “categories that seem extraneous to the analytical aim” (Neumann, 2006), a strategy to guard against threats to my data’s validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Maxwell, 1992).

Ethics

There were several ethical considerations in doing this research project. The first was that given the sensitive nature of the topic, I had to ensure confidentiality--that the identities of all my parent participants and their children, as well as the selected focus schools, remained confidential. I gave each parent participant and any other identifying information (about their child, their child’s teacher or their child’s school), as well as each selected focus school a pseudonym that I have used in all displays of the data to preserve participant confidentiality. I ensured that all data stored on my computer, which could be used to link identifying information on parents to my records of what they said and did, were password protected.

Given the fact that I am a researcher from Teachers College, I knew that there could be an inherent power imbalance between the parent participants and myself. I took steps to ensure that that parents did not feel coerced or intimidated into participating in the project—such as being up front about the purpose of the study, asking for clear consent and making it clear that I am an independent researcher and not from their child’s school or the Department of Education. I
also received IRB approval from Teachers College as well as the NYC Department of Education to ensure that my research protected the rights and the welfare of the participants.

I also tried to make sure that I was not just taking information from parents without any reciprocity. I provided small tokens of reciprocity to the parents during the interviews—such as offering to buy them coffee or dinner, or assisting them with another small favor. The parents in my research project were moving me from “ignorance to understanding,” and I felt the need to carefully consider what I would be doing with this understanding that might go beyond the usual ethical consideration of “doing the community no harm” to attempting, in some small way, “to do the community some good” (Walker, 1999). Thinking about reciprocity in a larger sense, I hope that ideas for better collaboration between parents and schools can result from my research findings. I also hope that this study will be useful to parents and inform practitioners and policy makers as they try to foster greater trust between parents and schools.

**Positionality**

These ethical considerations were related to issues of positionality. Since in field research based on observations and interviews the researcher is the instrument for data collection and analysis, it is of particular importance to be aware of researcher positionality. As I am not from New York City and not a parent, on certain key dimensions I was an outsider. However, because I am African-American, have been a teacher in the New York City public schools and so have some familiarity with them, and am a woman (all but two of the parent participants were mothers), I did have certain insider insights that aided me in my data collection and analysis. I strove to remain aware of my position as an outsider and an insider—and how it informed my perspective and the ways in which I interpreted the data that I collected. Understanding my
positionality was a continual process of unpacking and being aware of any biases and assumptions I brought with me to the data analysis.

**Conclusion**

Due to my project’s attention to parent perspectives, its findings can inform practice and policy—by giving educators a better understanding of what fosters trust between parents and schools, and policymakers a better understanding of how school reform is linked to public trust. Moreover, my findings have the potential to elaborate on previous theories of trust—an already flourishing area of academic research in the social sciences, and a growing area of research in education. My project’s multi-modal qualitative design allowed me to capture more of the complexity in the dynamics of trusting than is generally found in survey research. However, there are limitations to my design. As it is focused on gathering rich data from a relatively small number of participants in one urban context, it is not generalizable to a well-defined population. However, by adding clarity and elaboration to the way that institutional trust is treated in the literature, my findings can lead to improvements in survey instruments in public opinion polling that can be used to produce generalizable findings with greater conceptual sophistication. In the next three chapters, I will discuss my findings from my dissertation research.
Overview of Findings

My findings chapters are organized around critical instances that the Black parents I interviewed talked about as being consequential for the trust or distrust they placed toward their child’s school and the New York City school system. These instances included when parents tried to find a new school for their child; moments when parents felt reassured or vulnerable leaving their child in the care of educators once they were attending a school; and instances where parents felt either welcomed or disrespected when they attempted to be involved in their child’s education.

In Chapter Four, I discuss how parents looked for and started their child at a new school, a process that was influenced by the New York City education policy context and the expansion of public school choice. In Chapter Five, I discuss critical instances that parents talked about as inflection points in their relationship with their child’s school—which revolved largely around their evaluations over whether educators cared, were effective classroom managers and held their children to high academic expectations. Finally, in Chapter Six, I discuss how for the parents I interviewed, being engaged with schools was born out of an attitude of vigilance. Whether schools suppressed or respected this orientation toward vigilance was consequential in the development of authentic, relational trust between educators and parents.
CHAPTER FOUR
Finding a School in an Untrustworthy School System: The Beginning of the Parent-School Relationship and Dealing with Distrust

The school system... they’re ridiculous. I just think they need to figure it out. They need to figure out a balance because I feel like people in Long Island or you know private schools they’re getting a better education. So, people who can’t afford it or don’t live in Long Island or whatever because they’re paying the taxes, which is more money, they need to figure out a way to balance out these schools, and maybe we won’t have so many charter schools where people are like killing themselves to get their kids in this school. You know it’s so competitive…. I feel like they really need to figure out a way to balance the city, the private, everything so that everybody’s on the same page and so the parents who can’t afford private schools or can’t get their kid into the charter school don’t feel like... like I really felt guilty sending [my daughter] to the neighborhood school.

I met and talked with Alisha Thompson, an administrative assistant at a University in Manhattan, for the first time in a conference room adjacent her office suite on an early afternoon in February, during the 2013-2014 school year. Alisha’s story about finding a new school for her daughter illustrates how looking for schools is a process that many Black New York City parents find taxing and dispiriting. Finding a school where they are comfortable enough to leave their child, whom they are raising, protecting and cherish, in the care of other adults, who they do not know yet, is especially challenging, given the legacy of urban school systems serving African-American children poorly.

For the parents I interviewed, it is a moment of great vulnerability and risk, and ultimately an act of trust, when they send their children to a new school. How parents like Alisha experienced finding a new school for their child illuminates how, as Möllering (2001) argues, trusting can be understood as a process, with the stages of interpretation, suspension and

\(^5\) Alisha Thompson is a pseudonym, as are all of the names of parents that appear in this dissertation, in an effort to protect the identity of the parents who participated in this research.
expectations (see Figure 2). Even more crucially, how parents experienced finding a school also reveals that trusting is best understood as a continuum, and that in between cases of unambiguous distrust and trust, there is an in-between zone where one could hypothetically not distrust or not yet really trust (Ullmann-Margalit, 2004). For New York City Black parents, the fact that many of their community’s schools face challenges due to a legacy of anti-Black racism and institutional neglect, means that their default stance is, wisely, to distrust schools. For them, the school “choice” process is really about finding a school that they do not unequivocally distrust.

Alisha’s five-year-old daughter, who was in kindergarten, was attending her neighborhood zone elementary school in Queens. The 90-year-old school was a long-standing feature of the community. In the 2013-2014 school year, the school had 500 students, 90% of whom were Black/African American, and 100% of the students were eligible for free and reduced priced lunch. Alisha felt that the school, with its older facilities and lack of extra-curricular opportunities, could not offer her daughter the same caliber of education as some of the charter schools in her neighborhood and the suburban schools in Western Long Island. Looking for alternative became a high stakes process. While Alisha placed great faith in education, and saw it as essential that her daughter attend college to achieve upward mobility, she was aware that the schools serving Black and Latino students often struggled to educate children well. This disposition to distrust schools, while placing faith in the aspirational promise of education is an example of habitus, and it informed the urgency she felt as she was deciding which schools she was comfortable enough to send her daughter to.

Alisha had tried very hard to find other elementary school options for her daughter to no avail, a process that she described as dispiriting and frustrating. She spoke about all of the
options she and her husband considered—including applying to charter school lotteries, and seeing whether there was space in schools outside of her Community School District (CSD), which would have made it almost impossible to coordinate child care for her daughter, given that she lives and works in two different boroughs.

When I asked Aisha about her daughter’s first day at her neighborhood school, the experience was still fresh in her mind, especially since her daughter had transitioned from a small intimate preschool—where the teachers “treated her like their own”—to a bigger, more impersonal public school. It was a nerve-wracking experience, as there were so many unknowns—like who her child’s teacher would be—and as she already had concerns about the facilities and curriculum of the large and impersonal public school. She said:

Oh my God I don’t know who cried more me or her. It was very traumatic for both of us because you know it’s my baby and she was not very…She was excited about going to big girl school but (sigh) it was much bigger than her daycare, her preschool, and just a lot of unknowns…new teacher, new school, there are 500 students as opposed to the 25 total in her preschool. So yeah, I mean at first, she was ok and then when she realized that I was leaving she just bawled. She cried and cried and she wouldn’t go in the classroom and she stood by the door. I figured if I just left… She was fine when I picked her up. We had a rough first couple of weeks. She cried every other day, and they don’t really let you in the school. You can drop them at the door, but then that’s it. You have to go.

The fact that Alisha remembers her daughter’s first day of school as “traumatic” highlights how at the moment she first dropped off her child—a moment that can be thought of as the “suspension” stage of trusting—she experienced vulnerability. This vulnerability was heightened because Alisha felt there were “a lot of unknowns” about the school. She was left feeling a lot of uncertainty about the quality of education her daughter would receive.

As her daughter progressed through her kindergarten year, and she and her daughter became more familiar with the school, Alisha had come to appreciate the no-nonsense, but caring nature of her daughter’s African-American kindergarten veteran teacher. However, she was still
frustrated with the school for not being “forward-thinking,” in comparison to the charter schools in her neighborhood and the schools in suburban Long Island right over the city school district boundary. She explained:

I’m not especially happy with the school for being forward thinking I’ll say that. I feel like other schools, charter schools, other schools in Long Island are more forward moving… the other two schools for her age group are charter schools. The closest two are charter schools, and like I said they’re doing more. They have their own issues. People have issues with them. I feel like [my daughter] would benefit from the strictness of the school. I think that she does better when she knows her parameters. And like I said I feel like they’re doing more. They have a classroom where they have the music class is full of pianos. They have a classroom for computers not where the teacher comes in, and like they go to that classroom. They have their own library at the one particular charter school, and a pretty significant sized library. They’re doing robotics so I feel like they’re just doing more. And maybe it is because they’re getting the big money that they can do these things.

Alisha, like many of the Black New York City parents I talked to, had a lot to say about the charter school “brand.” Charter schools, especially large CMO network No Excuses charter schools, had a reputation amongst parents for providing an education that was a cut above what parents could find in their local zone public school—with greater academic rigor, more stringent discipline, newer facilities, and superior access to extracurricular opportunities. When I asked Alisha whether she thought that her daughter would stay in the neighborhood school next year, she told me that she “hoped not” and that she had already applied to several charter schools. However, when I met with Alisha in March of the next school year, and asked her whether she had been able to move her daughter to a different school, she told me, with exasperation, that her attempts had once again, been unsuccessful. In the wake of these experiences, she had concluded that the charter school lottery process is rigged, that admittance while “supposedly” done by lottery, is actually all about “who you know within those schools.” She explained:

So, one school that is right down the block from my job, from my house, I know kids that come from the Bronx and they’re not supposed to. It’s supposed to be a zoned school
just for [her CSD]. The other school is probably more so the lottery, but still there it’s all about who you know because I was in touch with a lady that says that was gonna try and get her in, so yeah… It annoyed me a lot, especially knowing that these kids are coming from the Bronx, so it’s taking an opportunity away from my kid whose right there. And I’m not the only parent that has that complaint.

Although Alisha told me that she would try again to find another school for her daughter, the process of finding a school had left her with lukewarm expectations going forward. She was worried that her zoned elementary school was not providing the education that her daughter needed, convinced that the school choice process was unfair, and guilty that she was not able to successfully navigate the system. The experience confirmed her skepticism about her child’s school and the New York City school choice process, and had not reassured her that her daughter’s school would be to give her a quality education.

**Finding a New School as a Moment of Trust**

The parents I interviewed talked about their child beginning at a new school as a moment of heightened emotions, inspiring both excitement and fear around what the future will hold for their child. If trust is understood as a process, as Möllering (2001) argues, with the stages of interpretation, suspension and expectations, finding and sending their child to new school is an act that illuminates the trusting process well. The moment when parents drop off their children at a school for the first time is one that perfectly captures the suspension stage of the trusting process. Akin to a “trust fall,” this is a moment when parents are compelled to go forward and accept risk, without knowing what the future will hold. How comfortable or worried the parents feel at this moment is related to the experiences they had as they look for a school, and their habitus—or orientations and dispositions informed by parents’ past experiences with schools—which for Black parents, largely positioned them to have feelings of distrust. How and what the
parents were able to learn about their child’s school before they started shaped how much of this
distrust they were able to overcome to feel somewhat reassured as the school year started.

When the parents I interviewed tried to find a school that they did not categorically
distrust is the interpretation stage of the trusting process—it is where parents gather evidence and try to find a school that they are comfortable enough sending their child. Their interpretation around which schools to trust was shaped by how policy influences the school enrollment process and what evidence parents privilege in this process—whether it be school reputation, social networks, or school quality data. The first days at a new school were also crucial because they set up parents' expectations going forward—and to what extent they approached the school and its educators with guarded caution.

In this chapter, I investigate what factors influence the trust or distrust that Black New York City parents feel in the city’s public schools as they look for and enroll their child in a new public school—a process that parents find precarious, taxing and ultimately disempowering. I find that there are differences in the way that parents come to not distrust DOE schools and No Excuses charter schools, which has consequences for the how a trusting relationship between the parent and the school may develop later. Parents begin their relationships with No Excuses charter schools on a contractual basis, which attempts to dispel some of the distrust that exists between Black parents and schools—especially at the point of suspension during the first couple of days—by minimizing risk and producing mutual understandings about how the school will operate.

Parents find traditional public schools that they do not distrust through social networks which help to allay some of the vulnerability they feel. However, while relationships between Black parents and district schools were already fragile, they are now even harder to form, as the
policy context has weakened bonds between parents and traditional neighborhood public schools. Moreover, due to the racial and socioeconomic segregation in the school system, even Black parents who are able to find a well-resourced school for their child that is in high demand—factors that would generally make a school seem trustworthy—have concerns about whether they will belong in a school community that serves affluent White students. Finally, the process of attempting to find a school leaves parents with grave concerns as to whether increased school choice is actually fulfilling the promise of promoting greater education opportunity for all of the children in their communities.

Why is Finding a Good School So Hard?

Alisha’s story in the beginning of this chapter captures how difficult it was for the Black parents I interviewed to find a new school in New York City for their child that they did not distrust. Rather than choosing a new school, the parents felt they were trying to find a school against many obstacles. In addition, looking for a school was something that parents did with great urgency, as it was a real worry for them that despite their best efforts, their child could end up in a substandard school that did not adequately encourage their academic or socio-emotional development. Looking for a school was an emotional rollercoaster for parents, with the ones who found a suitable option feeling fortunate and relieved, and those who could not—like Alisha—feeling frustrated and dispirited, wondering if there was more they could have done. The difficulty that the parents I interviewed faced in finding a school highlights how the interpretation stage of the trusting process was laden with urgency and risk—which reaffirmed many parents’ dispositions to distrust schools in general.
It All Depends on Neighborhood

The main obstacle that the Black parents I interviewed felt barred them from finding a good school was the fact that school quality—in terms of experienced and adept teachers, resources for classrooms, peers that faced fewer challenges to learning and newer school facilities—all too often varied by neighborhoods that are racially and socioeconomically segregated. The parents I spoke to saw it as a given that school quality was largely determined by neighborhood in New York City. As one Harlem mother, Tanya Perkins, put it,

I am aware that there are two separate school systems. There’s like school[s] for the more privileged kinds of kids, even you know like the public schools… like PS 82 or whatever on 14th Street is not gonna have the same type of students and curriculum as a school in Harlem. So, you know even though they’re both public schools there’s just a difference, and I think that’s kind of obvious.

Due to racialized segregation, concentrated poverty and a history of neglect of and disinvestment in public schools in Black neighborhoods, the parents were aware of the sobering reality that the schools that they lived near faced the most challenges. As Pamela Wilson, a mother of two boys from Eastern Brooklyn put it when talking about the state of public schools in the city,

I think it depends on where you live… like if you live in the White part of Park Slope you’re probably really happy or in the super White part of District 2, which is like a mix of Lower Manhattan you’re probably stoked. The Upper West and East Sides are probably really like thrilled with themselves (laughing). But if you live in Brownsville or East New York or parts of Flatbush and Crown Heights and the Bronx, just the whole Bronx, and really like parts of Queens you’re probably like, “This blows,” or “This is mediocre,” at best.

These challenges schools in their neighborhoods faced included a lack of resources, poor support systems for teachers and children living in poverty—which when combined, maintained public schools mired in obstacles. Parents told stories of some educators trying to serve Black children well, but believed that these structural inequalities rendered them powerless to do much...
good—underscoring the institutional racism embedded in the system (Lopez, 2000; Phillips, 2011) that resulted in a school system that often served Black children poorly. As another Harlem mother, Kenya Harper, put it, even though she was “100% behind public-school education” the “Black schools…schools in our neighborhood suck because they don’t have the resources that they need to really ignite these children’s energies and their knowledge and their passions.” This disposition to distrust public schools can be thought of as a part of Black parents’ habitus, which has been shaped by knowledge of and experiences with struggling urban schools.

Despite the school system’s expansion of public school choice—both through making it easier for parents to apply to attend schools outside of their zone and CSD and making more information available to parents as they evaluate these schools—there are still many constraints placed on how much choice Black New York City parents actually have when looking for a public school. These constraints are especially arduous for lower-income Black parents. New York City remains highly racially and moderately socio-economically segregated by neighborhood, which maps onto the city’s Community School District (CSD) boundaries (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014; Pallas, 2013). Schools that are located in Whiter, more affluent neighborhoods in the city generally have higher test scores, can depend on affluent parents for additional resources through fundraising and political clout and are generally the most racially and socioeconomically diverse, but are usually outside of Black parents’ attendance zone or CSD where they would have priority in the elementary school application process.

Given the dearth of quality school options in the neighborhoods, parents I interviewed were often frustrated by the tradeoffs they had to make in finding a school—among distance, school quality, and a curriculum that fit their child’s needs. As Alisha’s story demonstrates, the parents I interviewed often felt they were trying to manage options that all presented big
downsides—such as a neighborhood zone school that while convenient, was under-resourced and had a low school quality rating—or a No Excuses charter school where admittance was up to chance, and while academic rigorous might be too “structured” for their child—or a better quality school outside of their CSD that even if it had space for their child, made transportation arrangements extremely difficult.

**Drawing Straws for Educational Opportunity**

Proponents of increased public-school choice hoped that allowing parents more options would free low-income parents of color from simply having to settle for their zoned neighborhood school—increasing their empowerment, agency and control through greater educational choices for their children (Pattillo, 2015; Scott, 2011, 2013). However, like other empirical studies of African-American parents and school choice (Pattillo, 2015), I found that parents did not experience choosing (or finding) a new school as empowering—rather they found it to be burdensome and risky endeavor, with no guarantees of success at the end. As one Brooklyn mother, Cynthia Green, put it,

> See I didn’t like the process of looking for a school, and I feel for parents, and I know I’m gonna have to go through it again [when her daughter goes to middle school]. I don’t like that feeling that oh my God I gotta find the right school. I gotta find a school. I’ve gotta find a school. You’ve gotta do all this fucking research. You have to kind of go with your gut or statistics or however you’re gonna go or pay for it or charter or public …And you still get no guarantee on where you choose, ok, because you can still go to the best school and your child fucks up or you just don’t like the school period. I didn’t like the process of putting in applications and waiting and waiting; oh God I hope I get in. I don’t like that. That’s like some TV documentary shit. I didn’t like that. I didn’t like that feeling of the charter being on a lottery.

The parents I spoke to felt a lack of control over the outcome of finding a school. Most saw enrolling their child in a quality school as being overly competitive, and likened it to “applying to college.” As Pattillo (2015) also found in her study of Black parents and school choice in Chicago, many of the parents I spoke with did not feel they were choosing a school, but
that the *schools* were choosing their children. Parents felt fortunate if they were able to find a school they felt good about, and devastated if they were not. This process was emotionally taxing. As Ebony Lewis, a Queens mother who ended up sending her son to a No Excuses charter school in Brooklyn explained,

I really liked…I went to both open houses and I just really liked [a No Excuses Network Charter School]. I liked the principal. I liked everything about it so I was hoping he got into that. I went to the lottery. He didn’t. The lottery was on the same day as [another No Excuses Network Charter School] and then I was all stressed out and I was crying on the way home and whatever. So, at the time I lived in Brooklyn, like not too far away from where these schools are, and then I got a letter in the mail that he got accepted to [the second No Excuses Network Charter School]. So, then I was so excited.

Ebony’s story highlights that finding a school was a high-stakes, emotionally exhausting experience, that left many parents I talked to wondering why finding a good school for their child had to be so hard. While most parents did apply to charter school lotteries, they were aware that these schools served only a portion of children in their communities, and admittance was up to chance. Rhonda Allen, a Harlem mother I spoke to critiqued the risky and high-stakes nature of navigating the school system and looking for a quality school, saying, “Let’s take money that’s given to these charter schools and give the resources to the regular traditional schools, rebuild these traditional schools…to where we don’t have to I guess draw straws to see who goes to jail or whatever.”

**Being Chosen by a “No Excuses” Charter School**

Due to the fact that Black parents in New York City experience finding a school as a high-stakes process, beginning a relationship with a school on a more contractual basis—where both parties enter the relationship with a clear idea of what each side is committing to do—helps dispel some of the distrust that many parents have in city schools. It helped parents to feel some semblance of control, during the first days of schools (or the suspension stage of the trusting
process) when they felt the most vulnerable. Charter schools, which are publically funded, but privately managed; freed from the some of the regulations that district schools have to follow; and operate using some market-based elements, are able to do this. Charter schools have more leeway in hiring and firing staff and over curriculum and pedagogy than DOE public schools, and because they are funded on a per-pupil basis, they must compete for student enrollment by offering unique and attractive educational experiences.

As one effort to make school choice more available to urban parents, city policymakers have encouraged the expansion of the charter school sector. Although much charter school policy is created at the state level, and the New York City Department of Education lost charter-authorizing power in 2010, New York City policy has bred local conditions that are favorable for the expansion of the sector (NYCCSC, 2012). As a result, charter schools have proliferated in New York City—especially in traditionally African-American neighborhoods.

A Step Above the Regular Schools

In the city, charter schools have become the primary option many Black parents consider besides the DOE public schools in their neighborhood, as many “mission-oriented” charter schools (Henig, Holyoke, Brown, & Lacireno-Paquet, 2005) which aim to serve low-income youth strategically locate themselves in urban Black and Latino/a communities. Indeed, charter schools are concentrated in the CSDs in Brooklyn and upper-Manhattan, the areas of the city with the highest Black populations, and Black students are overrepresented in them when compared to their population in the overall city (NYCCSC, 2016a). In fact, in 2016 an estimated one in two kindergarten students in CSD 5, located in Harlem, attended a charter school (NYCCSC, 2016a). Large CMO network franchises (which operate multiple schools in different locations) have been able to successfully create a brand that connotes education of a higher
caliber in an effort to distinguish themselves from DOE public schools—much in the way that elite private schools do. With names like Success Academy, Achievement First, and Knowledge is Power Program, the charter networks aggressively market themselves and recruit parents to apply—through billboards, TV advertisements, mailed flyers, and presentations at daycare centers and community events.

Given the policy focus on standardized test scores as a measure of student achievement, and the fact that large CMO network charter schools have done well in comparison to DOE public schools on these measures (CREDO, 2013), charter schools have touted their superior achievement results. Much of their marketing revolves around portraying their schools as a route for children of color to achieve upward mobility through a rigorous curriculum that will ready them for college and to escape the troubles of their poverty-stricken community. As Monica Hayes, a DOE public school Brooklyn mother told me:

My sister went to [large network EMO charter school] orientation and the first thing they were saying is like, “We’re here to help you keep your child out of jail.” (Laughs) I was like, “What?” I wasn’t there but I would have been like…I was like, “How y’all sit down and accept what they’re telling you?” And then they have this misconception that this is a private school so, “I’m gonna get my kids in this private school.” You know what I mean?

The popularity of these schools and the visibility of their brand make it so that they are known to everyone in New York City—but especially to Black parents who live in traditionally Black neighborhoods. If you walk down 125th in Harlem in the late afternoon on a school day, you will see scores of Black and Hispanic children—wearing slacks, brightly-colored polo shirts and ties to demonstrate their affiliation with the various charter networks—huddled together in groups, talking excitedly as they head home. As Michelle Dixon, a Harlem grandmother, whose son was really hoping his child could attend a network charter school, put it, there is a lot of “hype” about these schools in the community.
There was a common understanding among parents I interviewed that “charter school” was synonymous with a “No Excuses” charter school, due in part to the branding, marketing and reputation of these large network charter organizations. In New York City, the charter school sector is characterized by increasing homogeneity in school mission, curriculum and pedagogy (White, 2015). Charter schools were originally planned to be “factories” of innovation—and indeed, many early urban charter schools were community-based and experimented with a variety of pedagogies and curricula to serve low-income youth of color. However, market pressures from the proliferation of large network CMO “No Excuses” charter schools (Miron, Urschel, Aguilar, Mayra, & Dailey, 2012) are causing most of the “mission-oriented” urban charter schools in New York City to adopt a similar approach (White, 2015)—with an emphasis on high academic standards, tough discipline and character development (Golann, 2015; McDermott & Nygreen, 2013; Sondel, 2015).

Thus, all of the parents I interviewed knew about the reputation of No Excuses charter schools. Much like Alisha did with her daughter’s school in Queens, many parents compared their zoned public school to the No Excuses charter schools, which were, at times, co-located in the same buildings. There was a sense that these charter schools had superior resources—that their students enjoyed newer facilities and other amenities. Most parents believed that the schools were academically rigorous and that their students did better on standardized tests, and the parents who decided to apply to the charter school lotteries did so because of the schools’ academic reputations. As Tanya Perkins, whose son was attending a No Excuses charter school in Harlem, put it:

Yep because charter schools are such a big difference, and charter schools are I won’t say better, but they’re where you want your child to be. If you can’t afford a private school and a lot of times private school isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be, so if you just want something a step above public schools then charter schools are… It’s tons of parents now
who are trying to get their kids into charter schools just from word of mouth from other parents whose kids go to charter schools and they just talk about how good it is. So, of course you’re gonna want your child to try and get as best an education as well.

While the No Excuses pedagogical style was attractive to some of the Black parents I talked to, other parents had concerns with the punitive discipline, test score focus and lack of cultural relevance in these schools—critiques of these schools that are also found in the academic literature (Golann, 2015; Sondel, 2015; White, 2015). Parent hesitations, a sign of distrust, about whether to apply to a No Excuses charter school lottery usually centered on whether this academic rigor was worth the discipline policies in the schools, often even leading to disagreement between a child’s parents or a child’s parents and grandparents. What is notable here is that for all parents, charter schools—with their upsides and downsides—were a known quantity, which reduced uncertainty when they were considering applying.

*Anticipating Something Good, Feeling at Ease*

Due in part to successful branding, marketing and recruitment, as well as their reputation for academic excellence, New York City charter schools have become very popular. Most are oversubscribed and must admit students through a lottery, giving priority to students living within the school’s Community School District (CSD) and who have siblings already attending the school. Thus, most parents have to rely on chance to gain admission to these schools, limiting how much choice is really a viable option. Many parents do not get a coveted seat for their child, as was the case with Alisha Thompson. The parents who are lucky enough to have gained admission, however, feel that they had “won” something. As Ebony Lewis, the Brooklyn mother who experienced a range of emotions as she waited to see whether her son would be accepted into a charter school put it, “even though the lottery is random,” parents end up feeling “like oh my God only the chosen get in.” The charter school parents that I interviewed all talked about the
moment that they found out about their child’s acceptance as auspicious event. As Tanya Perkins explained to me:

They sent me something in the mail to attend open house I told my daughter, and I was like, “We’ll just go and just see what they’re saying.” I went and I think it was about two hours long or something…but the whole time they were talking, “I was like tell me more, tell me more.” I just loved the school, and at the end they were like, “You know if you’d like to apply then do so.” So, we applied and maybe, oh gosh like four or five months later they called and said that she had been accepted. I remember we were screaming like it was the admissions office of Yale or something, like, “She made it!” We were excited. We were happy that she made it in.

After gaining admittance, charter school parents are generally invited to attend an orientation where they learn more details about the policies and procedures of the school, and meet the teachers and school leaders. After that, parents are usually asked to sign a contract committing to support the school’s efforts to educate their child at home. The contract makes explicit what the school will do for students and what parents will do for the school. Sheryl Bradley, a Harlem charter school parent, described it as follows:

It’s a marriage. That’s what they call it. When we go to orientation [Founder of large CMO charter school network] tells you that this is a marriage between you and [them] and if you’re not gonna put in your 50% [they] will divorce you pretty much. So, the contract pretty much stipulates all the rules pertaining to [the charter school]. You’re gonna make sure that your child is there every day that they’re able to be there and you’re gonna make sure your kid is there on time. You’re gonna make sure you check homework, you’re not gonna falsify reading logs. You’re gonna make sure your kid is reading.

When I interviewed Mrs. Cole, the principal of a Transcend Academy Elementary School/Eastern Brooklyn, a network charter elementary school in eastern Brooklyn, during the

______________________________

6 Mrs. Cole is a pseudonym, as are all of the names of educators that appear in dissertation, in an effort to protect the identity of the educators who participated in this research.

7 Transcend Academy Elementary School is one of the case study schools in which I conducted observations and interviewed a school leader. See Chapter Three for a detailed description of the school setting.
winter of the 2015-2016 school year, she told me that she did not use the term contract, and preferred to refer to it as “commitments” that the parents “are making to the school,” explaining that they are not “binding.” She emphasized that if a family struggles with the commitments once the child starts at the school, she and the staff do “everything possible to help [them] stay at the school,” and that they never suggest to a family that they should withdraw their children. She explained the orientation and commitment process at her school, which was in its tenth year and had a student body that was 83% Black/African-American, and of whom 85% qualified for free and reduced priced lunch, like this:

We have an orientation. When we enroll new students, their families have to come to orientation, and that’s really for me to give them the broad overview of what they should expect when they enroll their child in our school. After that orientation if they like what they hear…we do have some families who don’t like what they hear and they don’t sign up for a commitment meeting…but if they like what they hear they sign up for a commitment meeting. During that meeting they meet with a teacher, the teacher interviews them, finds out about their child’s strengths and the parents’ goals for the child. At the end of that commitment meeting the teacher gives them this list of commitments that we do ask our families to make just around attendance and supporting their scholar at home with their homework and that type of thing.

Thus, despite the fact that Transcend Academy softens the contractual nature of the relationship, there is still an effort to make the terms of the relationship between educators and parents explicit before enrollment. The parents I interviewed whose children attended Mrs. Cole’s school described these standardized orientation and enrollment activities that their school had in place as making them feel reassured about the setting, and that their child was welcome and cared for by competent hands on the first day of school. Being allowed to see how the classrooms are set up, meeting their child’s teacher, learning in clear detail about school policies, procedures and rituals, all made the setting familiar once school actually began. Keisha Moore, whose daughter had to begin 1st grade at the school a week after the school year started, remembers how Transcend Academy’s orientation gave her and her daughter peace of mind.
Her first day here was…I remember it. I sat in the back of the classroom with her. She sat in the classroom. I sat in the back of the classroom. They already had a seat set up for her with her name on the back, her little…they have little book baggies on the back. It had her books. She had everything set up for her already. She just came in and jumped right in and sat down.

Due to the fact that they “won” a coveted spot in an oversubscribed, popular No Excuses charter school and were given a very clear idea of what to expect, the No Excuses charter school parents I interviewed described feeling excited at the beginning of the school year, and anticipating that they were going to have a good experience at the school. As Anita Johnson, a Brooklyn mother whose twin son and daughter attend Transcend Academy put it:

I guess like when you’re looking for something good and you’re anticipating something good, so I think that they lived up it…First you have to have a one on one and you sit and you have to do this parent contract, so I guess like everything that they explained to us that first meeting when we got to school the first day we were a little at ease because we knew…you know we knew what to expect of it.

Since finding a school was burdened with so much risk and uncertainty, the charter school parents I interviewed felt that having the “terms” of their relationship with their new school made explicit put their minds at ease and gave them a much-needed sense of control at the start of the school year. With that foundation, the parents and school have a shared understanding of what the education children get will look like, and are reassured by the school’s reliability at the start of the school year, setting up hopeful expectations for how the school year unfold.

**Trying to Find a Traditional Neighborhood Public School**

New York City education policies have also encouraged greater public-school choice by changing the way that parents enroll in DOE public elementary schools. In 2009, the process to enroll in an elementary school, while still managed by New York City’s 32 Community School Districts (CSDs), was standardized through a common application (Corcoran & Levin, 2011). In 2013, the DOE launched Kindergarten Connect, streamlining the process even further, such that
parents can now use an online tool to apply to schools. In the application process—which can be filled out online or at one of the Family Welcome Centers throughout the city—parents rank elementary schools they wish to send their child to, and parents are supposed to go through this application process even if they just want to send their child to the zoned school down the block. In my interviews with parents, I found that social networks and personal relationships influence which traditional public-school parents are willing to consider. These personal connections can reassure parents to send their child to a DOE public school where they are told quality teaching and instruction is happening, things which might not be reflected in published school quality reports.

Knowing Who Is Molding My Child

In the elementary application process, students who reside within a school’s attendance zone are given priority for enrollment, but parents can also apply to schools outside of their zone, and indeed outside of their CSD—with the hope that the school they want has extra spots. A couple of the city’s CSDs—CSD 1, in lower Manhattan, CSD 23, in the Ocean-Hill/Brownsville section of Brooklyn, and CSD 7, in the South Bronx—have done away with school attendance zones entirely to encourage choice. Parents who send their child to a DOE elementary school usually rank schools in their application without much firsthand knowledge of them, generating a lot of uncertainty as parents decide which schools they do not distrust with their children (or the interpretation stage of the trusting process). As Tanisha Young, a Harlem mother put it, when kindergarten registration used to happen in person at the school, it was more “personal,” and “then you got to see the school and everything and now it’s just a paper.” Camika Harris, another Harlem mother, ended up transferring her child out of his zoned public elementary school due to
persistent problems with bullying. She was disappointed by how impersonal the experience of going to the Family Welcome Center on 125th street to find a new school was:

I asked them when I went to choose the school if I could go to each school and check it out. They don’t give you that option in New York City. You kinda just have to pick without getting a feel for the school, getting to meet anybody and see how they function, which I think is disgusting. When you put your child into daycare, when they’re first starting, you’re allowed to go into that daycare center. You bring your child. Your child interacts with the children and with the staff. You see how they work during the day. Are you comfortable leaving this little person with these people? I understand elementary school, they’re older and they want to feel more mature. I’m very old school. You don’t have to feel that mature yet. I’m responsible for you. You don’t know how to make those decisions. I need to be able to see what’s going on. I need to be able to speak to who’s involved. I need to know who is going to be molding you all day.

As the school choice literature demonstrates, social networks and access to information play a crucial role in which schools parents even know to consider, a process that disadvantages less educated, well-connected, and affluent parents (Ball, 2003; Bell, 2009a; Villavicencio, 2013). Moreover, if a parent is able to get a spot in a better-resourced school outside of her CSD, she still might struggle with finding viable transportation options—a limit to unfettered school choice common in other urban districts (Bell, 2009b). In New York City, it is rare for the schools to provide “yellow bus” transportation, and instead the system provides Metrocards for students to use the public transportation system. Given safety concerns, if the school is not nearby, young children usually travel with a parent or older sibling to school on the city bus or subway. This places limits on how far the school can be located from home or the parents’ place of work—as most parents do not feel comfortable with their children traveling to school themselves or attending a school far away from where they are. Thus, it was parents with the most advantageous social networks for getting information about various schools who were able to access schools that were viable options outside of their zone, making them feel like they had
more control and agency to when considering their options in an effort to find a school that they were comfortable enough to send their child to.

One such parent was Deidra Brown. I met her in the main branch of the Brooklyn public library in June of the 2013-2014 school year. Her youngest son was finishing up the 4th grade. When I scheduled our interview over the phone, Deidra had asked if I would participate in a study she was doing for her fieldwork to finish up a Master’s in Education. I agreed, happy that I could reciprocate in some small way. Deidra’s background as an educator—especially her experiences working in a city public school and her professional social networks—aided her in finding a school for her son that she was comfortable with. She ended up putting both of her sons in the public school in North/Central Brooklyn that she student-taught in, because she felt that the school had good teachers and while outside of her attendance zone, was still convenient for home and work. She explained:

I thought it was a good school. I thought it was… I mean I was in the classroom student teaching with some great teachers. I think that’s what really attracted me was the teachers. There was one teacher especially that was amazing. I’m like I have to put my kids here, not really knowing, not realizing they wouldn’t have that teacher. Like, duh right?

However, Deidra acknowledged that over time, after she was no longer working there, the school, which served a student population that was 63% Black/African American and 99% free or reduced priced lunch, began to have major problems, becoming “a disaster.” In fact, due to safety issues, low progress report scores and acrimony between the school staff and principal, the school was slated for closure. Deidra was opposed to the closure—thinking that the school should get more support instead of being closed—but despite much protest from parents like her and other community members, the school’s fate was sealed. In the 2011-2012 school year, the
school began to phase out, and no longer offered 1st through 3rd grade. Deidra suddenly had to find another school for her youngest son.

Two new schools opened up in the building of the phasing out school, and gave admissions priority to the students from the closing school that no longer had a place to go. One was a No Excuses Charter School, and the other was another DOE public school, PS 1150/North Brooklyn Elementary School, with a dual language program. Mrs. Bailey, the new principal of PS 1150, knew that it would be an uphill battle to recruit and convince parents from a school community that had been torn apart to give her new school a chance. She explained:

You’ve got a lot to build up and make up because as a community people are already feeling that the system has not supported them, they didn’t get the help they needed. This was the community that was basically pulled apart. Teachers were relegated to all different kinds of places. Some of them became itinerant after that you know if they weren’t able to find something else. The principal was removed. It’s a very hurtful, emotional kind of thing, so coming into those circumstances I had a lot of ground to make up.

Unlike charter schools which work hard to market their brand, and give parents extensive information about what the inside of their schools are like, DOE public schools are unable to have such standardized orientation processes, due to limited staff resources, and regulations around what they can do before the school year starts. Mrs. Bailey felt intimidated by the recruitment efforts of the charter school, and felt that she was not prepared to compete with them for parents:

Opening up at the same time as the charter school, the charter school is a machine. Their recruitment efforts look like a presidential campaign compared to…which is me (laughing). They had a whole operations department and one day I remember…They’re very serious about it. I remember one day we shared actually a space for recruitment. Because there was so much room in this building they were kind enough to give us…the

---

8 PS 1150/North Brooklyn Elementary School is one of the case study schools in which I conducted observations and interviewed a school leader. See Chapter Three for a detailed description of the school setting.
previous principal was kind enough to let us have a place to...you know a home base in the building. We shared this room, and one day they had a...they must have hired people to go door to door distributing. It was so intimidating, so intimidating and overwhelming. They had all...their colors are yellow, they had all these nice bright yellow tote bags that they had filled with all of their swag and they were going all over the place distributing and their mailing lists were extensive, you know and here it was it was just me.

Mrs. Bailey decided that to compete with the charter network in recruiting parents and to rebuild trust among parents that had lost their school, she would have to go to extraordinary lengths in her recruitment efforts. Although she could not show parents how her school would operate before the year started, she decided to personally interview each of the 150 families that decided to register. She was able to do this for the first two years of her school, but then had to abandon the effort because it became too time intensive. She explained:

I went door to door in the neighborhood, you know knocked on businesses and left information brochures, pamphlets. I think one of the most important things I did was meet one on one with any parent that was registering. So, I have to say from day one I knew my families well or at least they felt they had access to me very early on. That went a really long way in building good will. I met with every single family.

Deidra’s decision where to send her son to school illuminates the interpretation stage of the trusting process, as she decided on which school she was more comfortable with, the newly opened charter school or Mrs. Bailey’s new school. Her son was admitted to the charter school, but she ultimately decided to send him to PS 1150 after she met with Mrs. Bailey. She told me:

I met Mrs. Bailey, her philosophies and what she was talking about I’m like, “Ok if this really happens,” because people talk, “if this is really what she wants to do I am all in. I am with it. I am for it.” She was very welcoming and she was very welcoming to me and my son. I liked the fact that she interviewed us first even though he was going there... even though he was already accepted into the school she still sat down and talked about his interests, and I thought that was important because I never had that at [the old school]. Nobody asked me, “What does he like to do?”

Deidra’s story about originally finding a school through her social networks, and Mrs. Bailey’s efforts to establish a connection with parents before the year starts, both demonstrate
how parents are reassured about DOE schools through relationships and social networks. However, these examples were not the norm, as most parents did not have the kind of advantageous social networks that Deidra enjoyed, and most school leaders were unable to devote staff time and resources to interviewing all incoming parents as Mrs. Bailey did.

**Knowing the School Community**

In my interviews, many of the parents described not feeling comfortable sending their child to their zoned neighborhood school. When they explained why, they first discussed a gut feeling of distrust they had when walking by it. Often times, this judgment was about the way the school facilities looked or the behavior of the children they saw in front of it. When I asked Deidra about whether she considered sending her son to her zoned neighborhood public school after his school was closed, she shook her head emphatically. She explained:

> I live in [a neighborhood in Eastern Brooklyn]. So, when I researched the school that’s near him I was like…first of all I visited the school, and I didn’t get to really go inside but just the outside was like, “No.” It looked like a prison. It was…the paint was like prison paint. It had bars and gates and I was like, “No.” Even my son drove by and he was like, “Is that a jail or school?” It looked too much like a prison. I just…I couldn’t…I couldn’t see myself sending my son there. Then when I did research about it online the parents had negative reviews. The scores weren’t great. So, I was like, “I couldn’t.” I was gonna transfer my son. I wanted to put him somewhere closer since [his closed school] was closing and then I couldn’t. It’s horrible.

Like Deidra, parents would oftentimes bring up the school quality “grade” that their zone school had received, which served as a justification of that gut negative reaction. Along with the expansion of public school choice, all New York City schools have received a widely publicized school quality rating, which were listed in the borough-by-borough kindergarten directories for parents to use as they decide and apply. During the Bloomberg administration, school quality was denoted by a grade of A through F—a measure based largely on student test scores and, to a limited extent, surveys that parents and teachers took about the school environment. Given that
the schools with the lowest grades were concentrated in community districts with the largest Black and Latino/a populations and with the most Black and Latino/a students (Meade, Gaytan, Fergus, & Noguera, 2009), most of the parents lived near zoned public schools with low school quality grades. It might be the case that school quality measures had the effect of even further de-legitimizing neighborhood public schools in parents’ eyes.

In order to overcome this feeling of distrust toward zoned schools and the children in the community who attended them, the parents I interviewed usually had to have a personal experience with the school, or a personal connection to somebody they trusted who could vouch for the school. This could be a family member who worked within the NYC school system, or a friend or family member who had either gone to the school or sent their child there. In some cases, the parent herself had attended the school as a child, and still kept in touch with the educators there. Latasha Edwards opted to send her child to PS 970/Central Harlem Elementary School, her zoned neighborhood public school in Harlem, which was 58% Black/African-American and 73% free or reduced-price lunch. She explained it was not just the convenience of the school that made her comfortable with it; rather, it was the fact that the school had been in the community and so many of her family members had gone to the school.

Ok my father…my stepfather and his siblings all went to PS 970 because they grew up in the house that we live in now. My brothers all went to PS 970 and it was right there. And I know that I need their help because I go to school and I work so it’s hard for me to sometimes drop her off to school and sometimes for me to pick her up. So, it’s convenient for everybody to go over there and it wasn’t a bad school so that’s why I chose PS 970.

__________________________

9 PS 970/Central Harlem Elementary School is one of the case study schools in which I conducted observations and interviewed a school leader. See Chapter Three for a detailed description of the school setting.
When I met with Latasha again in the fall of the 2015-2016 school year she had just gone through major surgery. She told me because of her health problems and struggling to try to balance finishing up her degree at a local community college and being a single-mother, she could not be there to drop off her daughter during first couple of weeks of 1st grade. However, she was reassured by being familiar with the school and the surrounding community. She explained:

Yeah because even when it comes to the janitors, the crossing guard, the school safety, you know they know your kid. They know what your kid is around. They know who…like oh you know I don’t see nobody picking up her kid today, let me pull her kid to the side…You know the crossing guard she’s been crossing her in the morning for me because I can’t really make it to get out the house. They know what’s going on with you so they’re sensitive to that fact that…you know they know to expect that there may be a change in emotions or a change in attitude in your child and they help you a little bit more. They know you need that little bit of extra help.

Latasha’s account highlights a sense of community-based, relational trust that can exist among parents in schools. However, in the current policy context in New York City, this type of trust is difficult to come by, as public-school choice, charter school expansion and school closures have weakened the already tenuous bonds among schools, families and communities. Moreover, New York City is undergoing demographic change, as upper middle class White professionals increasingly choose to reside in and consider sending their children to schools in formerly lower and working class Black and Latino neighborhoods (Ehrenhalt, 2012; L. Freeman, 2011). This puts pressure on neighborhood schools to compete for affluent families—who may otherwise send their children to private schools—by doing things like creating gifted and talented or dual-language programs to give their school extra cachet.

PS970, which is in a CSD that combines a portion of South Harlem with the affluent Upper West Side neighborhood, faced some of this destabilizing pressure. Rhonda Allen, the school PTA president and mother of a kindergarten boy, had heard from other parents that the
school’s old principal, Dr. Franklin, had to guard the school against efforts from a large network charter school franchise trying to co-locate in the school building in previous years. The franchise representatives were allegedly trying to scout out the school classrooms to see if they could make the claim that the space was being underutilized, especially given that PS 970 had tried to have smaller class sizes for the younger grades. She said,

People were telling me the stories of what happened where people from the [large network charter school franchise] would come in as parents who are interested in the program but what they were doing was just scouting for space...I remember when he had found out, Dr. Franklin had found out that somebody was coming in and posing as an interested parent he shut it down so quickly. Like people had to come with IDs. He had to Google them to see if they were administrators. He was really...like, “You are not gonna come in here and try to take over our school,” and set the tone of...there was a tone created of intolerance. We’re not that weak. You can take over a weak school, but we’ve never been that vulnerable.

When I interviewed the PS970 parent coordinator, Mrs. Watkins, she talked about how the school had also resisted pressure to create a Gifted and Talented program—pressure that largely came from the more affluent parents who were gentrifying the South Harlem neighborhood. She told me, “we believe that every student is gifted and talented in their own way if you give them the right resources and the right...they will be the same. That’s pretty much our motto.” The school, at least for a time, refused to give school tours to prospective parents, something that more affluent parents generally expected schools to offer when they chose a school for their child to attend. Noel Carter, a South Harlem mother who ended up sending her daughter to a school with a Gifted and Talented Program in the Upper West Side, told me that this was a point of frustration for her, and was one of the reasons she decided not to send her daughter there. She told me,

__________________________

10 When I interviewed Mrs. Watkins in November 2015, she told me that the school was now giving tours to prospective parents for pre-k, kindergarten and the beginning of middle school.
PS 970 has] a very kind of like take it or leave it, my way or the highway kind of attitude largely in response to the gentrification that’s happened in this neighborhood. It’s like an African American school and either you come here as it is or like we’re not interested in necessarily being critiqued or told what to do. So, I’m sort of sympathetic to that from a political perspective and from a…like if I was a professional I’d be like, “That’s right, I’m an educator, I know what I’m doing.” So, I kind of got that, but as a parent who is actually just trying to make the best decision for my kid it was not about critiquing, it was more like is this a good fit for my particular child, which I realize is like a privilege that other parents don’t always have. It was complicated but I was definitely mad mostly because I felt like I could not send her to a school that I couldn’t visit in good conscience, which meant that I felt like I couldn’t send her to her neighborhood school.

Belonging in the School Community

While Latasha felt a sense of belonging in her daughter’s school community due to a long history with it, Black parents who send their children to racially and socioeconomically diverse schools—especially those with a significant portion of affluent White students—have a more complicated experience when it comes to feeling like they belong. Noel was one of five Black parents that I interviewed whose children attended schools with student bodies that were over 30% White and Asian, and one of the six parents I interviewed whose children attended schools where fewer than 60% of students received free or reduced priced lunch, the cut-off point for a school to be considered a Title I school.11 Three of these parents, including Noel, lived in South Harlem, and due to the fact that their CSD also included the Upper West Side, they were able to send their children to schools in the affluent neighborhood that had Gifted and Talented programs. In doing this, they are following a trend where many of the city’s more affluent families who do not send their children to private schools, opt for gifted and talented schools—

11 To qualify for Title I funding, directed at supporting students living in poverty, a New York City public school must have at least 60% of its student body eligible for free and/or reduced-price lunch.
which are often critiqued for created an additional layer of socio-economic and racial segregation in the city’s schools (Roda, 2015; Roda & Wells, 2013).

The school that the South Harlem parents were zoned for was PS 970, the same school that Latasha Edwards had felt comfortable with due to its history with her family and the community. However, this group of parents was uneasy with the school, illuminating how habitus—which includes a sense of where one feels they belong—is not only shaped by having a racialized identity but also by social class. They acknowledged that the school had “come a long way” and that it was “the top non-charter public school in Harlem,” but they were still concerned that it did not compare well to private schools or public schools on the Upper West Side. Claudette Peters, a South Harlem mother, sent her oldest son to preschool at PS 970, but then decided to search for other options for his kindergarten. Due to her relative affluence, she also explored private school options. She explained that “like most New York city parents,” she knows that she and her husband went through the “entire process” in searching for a school, even looking into private schools. She explained:

We did the private school route. We looked at charter schools and we had him tested for the gifted and talented. And with the private school route we didn’t fare as well as we hoped. We did…you know he got into two schools, no actually three schools, one we weren’t offered financial aid and at $35,000 with two kids it was just unaffordable. The other school that he got accepted to, we were offered aid but it wasn’t enough, and the school that made it affordable, once he did well on the G and T we just didn’t think that that school was worth it because we do not think that all privates are created the same. So, once we had our options we evaluated them and we made the decision based on several factors that were important to our family.

Claudette and her husband, Frank, acknowledged that their relative affluence enabled them to approach the school choice process with more agency and opportunities. Their social networks included a racially diverse group of affluent, well-educated parents, allowing them access to valuable information about various educational options. Even if they could not afford
to pay onerous college-level tuition rates towards a private elementary and secondary school education, they would have been able to afford private school with some financial aid. Finally, they were well aware that admittance to the G&T program was linked not so much to innate intelligence, but to socioeconomic status and parents’ ability to prep their three or four-year-old children for the test. As Frank explained, calling G&T children the “prepped and dedicated,” he and his wife prepped their son, like most people they know, but they had the resources to afford the tutoring and expensive test preparation books to do it.

The New York City gifted and talented test has come increased scrutiny—both because it relies on a uniform cut off on two standardized tests taken when students are just four years old, and because it advantages wealthier parents. Interestingly, the New York City DOE amended the Gifted and Talented criteria in 2006, in response to complaints that non-standardized criteria allowed parents with political and economic clout to gain spots in these highly coveted programs in an effort to make it more fair (Gootman & Gebeloff, 2008). Placing so much emphasis on one standardized test has raised its stakes for parents—making it akin to a college entrance exam. In order to gain admittance to the most coveted “citywide” G&T programs, a child must score in the 99th percentile on the exams, and to gain admittance to a “district” G&T program a child must score in the 90th percentile. However, the number of seats in the citywide programs is less than the number of students scoring in the 99th percentile, and in the districts with White, more affluent parents—like District 3—even more students tend to score at this level, and so getting a seat is not guaranteed. Much like with the charter school admissions process, getting the G&T placement letter is a momentous occasion for parents who feel that they have “won” if they are given a spot in their desired program, and that they have “lost” if they do not. As Claudette explained,
You rank the schools that you would like to go to. So [my son] had qualified for a citywide gifted and talented program so we ranked those two first and then we ranked the district one. He got a 99 on the test and all the 99s go into a lottery and then you get placed. Well we were not fortunate enough to be placed in a citywide G and T so we got placed in our first choice [for the district.] So that letter, the placement letter, I got on Friday and then I was very disappointed because we were hoping to get the citywide.

When I first met with them in the spring of the 2013-2014 school year, Claudette and Frank were hopeful that her younger son, who was currently in preschool at PS 970, would do well enough on the Gifted and Talented admissions test to go to the same school as her other son. Due to a policy, which gives preferential treatment to siblings of students already in a G&T program so long as they meet 90th percentile criteria, she felt that he had a good shot. However, when I met with her again the following year, she told me in hushed tones that her other son “hadn’t made it…he missed the cut off by one percentile…he got an 89 and needed a 90.” Claudette and Frank had decided to keep their younger son at PS 970 for the time being, and were encouraged that his kindergarten teacher was “fantastic” which “makes a difference.” However, their son had taken the test again, and they were waiting anxiously to find out what his scores were.

When I asked Claudette during our first interview to elaborate on why she did not just send her older son to PS 970 for kindergarten, she explained that one of the main reasons was that he would among “a group of his peers” and that they would be a part of a school community with “like-minded parents” at the G&T school. While she said that PS 970 was “on the rise,” it was not yet there in terms of resources, which she linked to the community of parents. She compared her the fundraising power of her son’s G&T school to PS 970, noting that at her son’s school they ask the wealthier parents to contribute $2,000 a year—money that goes toward funding a chess program and assistant teachers in the classroom—while PS 970 only asked for
$50 from each family.\textsuperscript{12} She recognized that an affluent parent base was a boon to a school both financially and politically. However, she was put off when she tried to give some fundraising suggestions to the educators at PS 970, feeling she got a lot of resistance. She said,

But they were also just things that when we were looking at schools, like things that I said you know well gee when I went to [the G&T school] and I saw what they were doing and I came back to PS 970 and said this is fabulous because… I was very torn. I wasn’t immediately just going to jump to [the G&T school]. I would have loved to have stayed. And I said, “Oh my God these are such wonderful things they’re doing,” and there was just a lot of push back and just saying that, “You know what, well our parents aren’t there. Our parents don’t have…you know not all our parents have computers.” And it wasn’t like I was saying make these resources…it was one or the other, but we have parents in the neighborhood that do have computers and may want to have certain things and it just was not…the resources weren’t there, and there was a lot of push back. I felt that there was a lot of resistance to change, and that’s why ultimately, we decided to go to [G&T school].

However, Claudette’s assumption that her family would be among peers with the parents and students of her son’s G&T talented program was belied by her experiences as her son started the school year. She went to the school’s open house, and while she was disappointed that he had not gotten a spot in any of the citywide G&T programs, she was reassured by what she heard at the meeting, and figured “it wouldn’t be so bad.” She was a bit concerned that “there wasn’t a lot of diversity” among the parents meeting, but she figured that it was because the acceptance letters just went out and that maybe a lot of the parents were unaware that it was scheduled. However, on the first day she was “shocked” to find that her son was the only Black child in his class, especially as she said in disbelief, “in New York City.” She elaborated on her concerns about this explaining,

\textsuperscript{12} During an observation of a PS 970 Parent Teacher Association meeting and from interviews with the PS 970 PTA president, I learned that this parent donation was something that had been recently implemented, and was still seen as controversial by some parents.
I’m just you know…that perhaps he would have a feeling of isolation, not being able to relate, so those kinds of things, that the teachers may not be able to cater to his individual needs as a Black child. So those were some of my concerns.

The school in which Claudette’s son’s G&T program is housed has a student body that is 59% White, 20% Asian, 21% Hispanic and only 6% Black, and only 20% of its students qualify for free and reduced priced lunch, making it ineligible for Title I funding. Given that gifted and talented programs tend to be even Whiter and more affluent than the city public schools, we can probably assume that the student body of the program is even wealthier and less diverse than the overall school. New York City’s gifted and talented programs have come under fire for adding an additional layer of segregation on top of the already endemic inequality of the city’s school system. For example, in the 2014-2015 school year, over 70% of the students in the city’s G&T program were White or Asian, while only 30% of the students in the rest of the public schools are White or Asian.\textsuperscript{13}

Claudette and Frank felt that it was up to them to make sure that their son maintained links with their diverse community in Harlem and with his Black cultural background. They make an effort to ensure that her son maintains ties with friends from the community and PS 970, by arranging play dates. Claudette spoke about inviting an African-American educator friend to come to her son’s class and do a presentation during Black History Month, and noted that she was thrilled when her son had decided to do a biographical report on an important African-American historical figure. Frank left the room during our interview, to show me a collection of graphic novels by a Black author that feature Black superheroes, as an example of one of the

\textsuperscript{13} These statistics come from an analysis of DOE data done by DNAinfo for this article https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20150929/upper-west-side/map-see-how-racial-segregation-persists-at-gifted-talented-programs.
ways that they try to make sure that their son can see people like him as role models. However, both Frank and Claudette worry that these efforts to nurture their son’s self-esteem and pride in their cultural identity might not be enough as he got older. Looking forward to high school, Frank was dead set against sending their son to a New York City specialized high school, where he feared that he might be the “only one.”

**Expanding Educational Opportunity for Some**

Regardless of how well they fared in finding a school for their children, the Black parents I interviewed believed that the process of finding schools was overly competitive, as “good” options were scarce, and that this struggle resulted in winners and losers. Both network charter and traditional public-school parents were concerned that the school choice environment was promoting more stratification between families and children from the same communities. Even parents who were fortunate to find a school they did not distrust still did not trust the school system overall to serve Black children well. This highlights that the trust parents place in schools varies across different levels of the school system, and is based on what aspects parents expect schooling to fulfill—especially when considering goals that are individual versus collective. Charter school parents still felt a stake in the larger public-school system, which was personal and urgent. They witnessed how school choice policy has played out on the ground, and felt it was expanding opportunities for some—but not all—of their children.

*The Haves and the Have Nots*

The discussion about school choice adding inequality between children in their communities that the parents were having largely centered on charter school expansion, due in part to their ubiquitous presence in Black neighborhoods. They worried that charter school children might feel like they are “special” or “better than” the other children in the DOE public
schools even though all of the students were from the same communities. The parents (with a few exceptions) felt that the charter schools had more resources to draw from than public schools, which often receive support from private foundations, despite the fact that they receive a comparable amount of public funding (Y. Smith, 2015). Many parents felt that the charter schools “took” resources from the DOE public schools. They felt that all schools should be improved, and that children in public schools also deserved a good education. As Gloria Henderson, a Harlem charter school mother, put it,

Ok here’s my thought. I would like to see the charter school level of education and curriculum across the board in public schools. I think that’s what we should have for all of our children, and the fact that it’s public and it’s a charter school means it’s attainable. What’s the difference? The charter schools are able to pay a little bit more money for their teachers, right? They may have a little bit more money in their budgets so they’re able to have more teachers so that’s how you can get the two to three teachers in a classroom. There is a discussion and argument over whether or not they should pay rent in New York City for being in the buildings, but I think we are running a risk of being segregated of segregating our children’s academics based on the haves and the have nots.

The concerns parents had focused on the practice of charter school co-location in particular. As one of the city policies that has made local conditions favorable for the expansion of the charter school sector, charter schools have been able to use space within district schools without paying an occupancy fee, drastically reducing the start-up and operation costs for charter schools, especially given the city’s high-priced real estate. As a result, roughly 60% of charter schools are co-located in city buildings alongside non-charter DOE public schools (NYCCSC, 2016a). Parents believed that school buildings where some floors were reserved for the DOE public school and others for the charter school put disparities in resources and facilities in sharp relief and at times, took away from what the DOE public school children had. Even parents whose children were admitted to reputable and popular charter schools expressed concerns about charter school co-location. As Mya Parker, another Harlem charter school mother told me,
I hate them with a passion, [large CMO charter school network—other than her own]. I feel like they’re like a bug, like they just weasel their way in there and then they try to take over. That’s what’s happened at my son’s old elementary school. They’re there and they take up one and a half floors. There’s another school on the very top, a District 75\textsuperscript{14} school, which is a special needs school. They’re a very tiny school. They only have half a floor. You have half of it already! And then there’s the one my son was at and they have the other three floors and they’re trying to find ways to get the District 75 schools to be out of the building. It’s like how much space do you really need? I understand that you want to continue to grow, but I feel like you need to get a building…

Like Mya, the parents I talked to were concerned that network charter schools were not helping to expand educational opportunity for the most vulnerable students—such as those with special needs. This underscores a potential problem associated with a relationship between parents and families that begins contractually—parents and students struggle to meet the requirements of the school—which is a public institution charged with providing a public good. It is an example of a public good having to be “earned” by people, and becoming “conditional” on whether people can “exchange something of value” (Somers & Wright, 2008). In the case of education, this highlights how competition amongst schools to produce high test scores creates incentives for schools to enroll the students who are more likely to do well on standardized exams (J. Jennings, 2010)—such as students who face fewer academic and behavioral challenges.

Following this critique, city charter schools have undergone scrutiny as to whether they are serving comparable numbers of special needs students as the district schools (K. Taylor, 2015a; Winters, 2013). As Darius Wright, a Harlem father and a supporter of No Excuses network charter schools, whose daughter attended one acknowledged, “you know [the founder of a No Excuses Charter School Network] is honest that they don’t have a lot of services for special

\textsuperscript{14} District 75 schools are NYC public schools that are specially designed to educate students with disabilities.
needs kids, and I don’t think that’s…that’s not a secret at all. [The founder] says it during orientation if they still do it the way they used to do it.”

This perception that charter schools might not be the place for children who have special need led some parents of special needs children to feel like they should not even try to apply. Mrs. Davis, a Harlem grandmother, who is the primary guardian of her special needs granddaughter said to me, “she heard that the schools will accept” students with special needs from the lottery, but if they cannot adapt to the structured environment, “they end up kicking them right back out.” Mrs. Mullins, another Harlem grandmother I spoke to drove this point home. Her granddaughter, who was completing the 3rd grade, had been held back twice due to her learning disability. Mrs. Mullins, feeling that her daughter had “dropped the ball” in making sure that she was getting was she needed in school, took charge getting her Individualized Education Plan (IEP) sorted out and finding a new school for her. She described her disappointment in feeling like a charter school could not meet her granddaughter’s needs,

Well over just this past summer, and she would have had the opportunity to go to a charter school…and they were gonna accept her but when I went there…it’s really bright and bubbly and beautiful. They were fixing it up and everything and it was basically like a new charter school, but the thing was it would have been the same thing; two teachers with 24 kids…Yeah and there was a lot of schools like that in the neighborhood, schools that I just went and checked out, where I asked about special ed programs and they didn’t have it. Even big-name schools they only had where…well we can pull them out, we can pull them out the classroom, and that’s not what I want. You know they’re just looking at they want the numbers, they want those kids in there, they want those kids where ok we’re just [sending] them in the classroom and we’re gonna make scholars out of them. (Laughs) Everybody can be a scholar but they might just need a smaller setting.

Like Mrs. Mullins, most parents felt that the increased choice and competition in the school system was dividing children into the fortunate and unfortunate. Both charter school and DOE public school parents expressed concerns that the way charter school admissions played out was creating
an additional layer of segregation and inequality of opportunity between students of color from the same communities.

*_They Are All Our Children_*

Even though the parents acknowledged that it was a problem that network charter schools served only some children, there was a lot of disagreement about whether increased public-school choice in general, and charter school expansion in particular, was the best way to expand educational opportunity for children in their communities. This is consistent with a larger debate around school choice and inequality happening in New York City—even privileged White parents, whose children are most advantaged in choosing schools, feel conflicted about how unregulated school choice policy is doing nothing to alleviate socio-economic and racial segregation in the city school system (Roda & Wells, 2013). However, for the Black parents I spoke to, the contours of the debate around school choice were more urgent and concrete—for them, it was not an abstract deliberation about the benefits of greater social justice and education opportunity for other people’s children, but rather it was framed around the immediate need for ensuring that there were more quality schools for *their* children. This is evidence of both the “communal” and “active” nature of Black politics that Dawson (2003) identifies, which was evident in the way that the charter school parents talked about the debate around network charter school expansion. Darius, the Harlem father who was the most vocal proponent of network charter schools that I spoke to, was adamant:

> The charters are not responsible for the failures of traditional public schools. The colocations are not responsible for the fact that those schools co-located with suck. That’s not [a large EMO network]’s fault, and this nonsense about oh you know these charter schools have great facilities that they’ve fixed up with their own privately raised money, and the public schools…well damn it then get the money to fix the public schools for Christ sake. Don’t beat up on…because some kids have a decent place to go use the bathroom that is not sin, I’m sorry…That’s ridiculous. Because some schools are doing a better job than others it’s ridiculous to attack them. I don’t care what your political
situation is, that’s crazy. Those are children in our schools, and they’re all our kids, period. Those of us in the charters care just as much about kids in traditional schools as we do about kids in charters. It’s ridiculous. I mean the real crime and real question is why the hell are the traditional public schools so damn bad in poor neighborhoods where there are Black and brown children going to them? That’s the real question.

For the parents I spoke to, network charter schools, while distinct from DOE public schools, were still understood to be part of the urban public-school system. Some of the network charter school parents I spoke to saw their schools playing a role in sharing best practices with the district schools they were co-located with. They felt that there should be more collaboration between the charter and district schools than was reflected in the contentious political debate. Keisha Moore, whose daughter attended Transcend Academy, noted:

I think the negativity comes a lot from the top. I say the top as far as the policy makers and like the mayor and all these folks that fight on the top, because at the end of the day I’m personally more concerned for education for every child. I don’t care if your child’s in public school or charter school or whatever school, I would like to see them receive the best education they can. Yes, I chose charter school for my child because I felt like that was the place where my child would receive the best education, but I’m concerned about every child getting it. I don’t think just because my child is here…I have found members…and I always say, I just said it recently to someone, I said my child is gonna one day be in the world. She’s gonna have friends that are from public school, she’s gonna have friends that are from private school and from different charter schools so I want to make sure that all the people she interacts with are well educated and are well rounded children. If I think about her alone I’m already giving her a disservice. I’m already giving her a disservice if I think about her alone because she’s not gonna be in the world by herself.

As the mother’s quote highlights, parents felt that they did not only have a stake in education of their individual child. Parents felt they had a stake in all of the schools in their communities, and that they were tasked with fulfilling public ends, which impacted everyone (Labaree, 2000)—such as increasing human capital, political competence, educational opportunity for the youth, as well as greater empowerment for their communities. Parents knew that their children would be around children who went to district public schools. They had family and close friends with children in district schools and family members who worked in district
schools. Parents had children who over the course of their education would attend both public and charter schools, and at times had one child in DOE public school and one in charter school at the same time. Some parents lamented the fact that their child was given a special opportunity, while other children—at times that child’s sibling, or family members or children of close friends—were not. Sheryl Bradley, a Harlem network charter mothers I spoke to talked described how “bad” it felt to go to contentious public meetings about school closures and colocations. She told me that keenly “she understood” the pain and students’ parents felt over “losing space in their schools” or “losing their entire buildings” because her other daughter was in a public school and her charter school daughter used to attend the zoned local school. She was concerned that it became a situation where “we were at each other’s necks” over space and resources.

Anita Johnson, another parent at with a son and daughter at Transcend Academy in Brooklyn, echoed this concern that the contentious school choice environment was creating divisions between community members, and worried that it might dampen collective efforts to improve all schools in the community. Anita did not feel comfortable putting her children in her zone school due to the “terrible” stories she had heard about it, and the fact that it received an F grade on the school quality report. However, she still lamented that people like her felt too much risk in staying and trying to “fix” local schools and, that they always had to “run.” She elaborated on what she meant by saying,

We always have to run away from the problems or trying to find a school that is better in a different district around different people. I’d love to stay within my community but it seems like you know nothing ever happens, and instead of you know the community coming together and fixing it we run away. That’s what I mean. You know just because he doesn’t attend the school I still...you know I look online and I still look at the different grades in schools and it bothers me that it’s an F school because you have other students that...it’s not only about my kids, but there’s other children there, and plus
my...you know my brother and my sister and my mom, they all work in traditional public schools so I see what goes on. I see the difference so it bothers me.

The parents I spoke to highlighted the fact that even if they did not send their child to a neighborhood public school, parents still felt tied to their fate. These parents had concerns that the larger school system was not adequately educating the children that would be a part of their children lives and grow to be citizens in their communities (Cooper, 2005; Pattillo, 2015). Parents felt that the expansion of public school choice had not fulfilled the promise of reinvigorating a troubled public-school system to be more responsive to parents and communities, so that it could serve all of their children well.

Conclusion

New York City education policies relying on market mechanisms and accountability are not only influencing the ways that Black parents find schools, they are influencing how Black parents and schools forge initial relationships which has consequences for whether a trusting relationship between parents and schools will develop. Due to the destabilizing pressures of school choice, school closures, and gentrification, it is more challenging for Black families and schools to generate relational trust—as was the case with PS 1150, a brand-new school—and to maintain relational trust—as was the case with PS 970, a longstanding neighborhood school dealing with external pressures to change. Given the history of distrust between Black families and educators, the way that network charter schools begin parent-school relationships contractually has benefits in generating initial trust. Contractual relationships between parents and schools make expectations explicit up front, and parents know what to expect from educators, which is reassuring as the school year begins, as it was for Transcend Academy parents.
However, the fact that such contractual relationships are conditional has consequences for the trust African-American parents place in the school system. Rather than feeling empowered by the ability to “vote with their feet” if schools do not meet their expectations, the parents I spoke to felt that trying to find new schools, in a system with a dearth of quality options, was risky, high-stakes and taxing. Moreover, in contractual relationships between parents and schools, families and students also have to meet the requirements of schools, and the most vulnerable children—such as special needs students—struggle to do so. This leaves Black parents with grave concerns as to whether increased public-school choice is actually fulfilling the promise of promoting greater education opportunity for all of the children in their communities.

Even though beginning the parent-school relationship on a contractual relationship might make parents feel more comfortable as their child starts at a new school, it cannot determine how trusting or distrusting the relationship will become as it evolves. Parents only form their first impressions around whether schools are reliable, competent, respectful and caring at this point. In the next chapter, I will discuss experiences of the parents I interview that highlight aspects that are the most consequential for trust between Black families and schools as the relationship continues to develop.
Establishing an Ethic of Care: Teaching, Classroom Management, and What Black Parents (Dis)trust Schools to Do

I mean to me education is everything, especially like for my sons. It’s hard for Black men…Before a high school diploma was necessary, a lot of times now that means nothing, you have to have a college degree. I’m like, “Just go to school, get your degree and you can be whatever you want.” I don’t care if you’re a janitor as long as you have that degree hanging on your wall and you can say, “I did it and I have that education…” You know knowledge is power and just to be able to say, “Oh I have this and I know this,” and just to have the knowledge of what is and what isn’t or what should and shouldn’t be that only you can get from a college experience. I just want them to be able to have that.

-Tanya Perkins, on the promise of education and a college degree

I don’t think they put the same time and effort into those schools that they consider as like failing. I don’t think they really put the energy into trying to make it better. I think they just like…a lot of teachers probably feel like I’m just gonna go and get my check and I’m gonna teach them the basics and that’s gonna be that. I don’t feel like there’s any above and beyond or you know anything extra to try and help them get over the hump.

-Tanya Perkins, on the lack of care for children in the school system

Just the way [her child’s teachers] talk to [the children] and you know just hugs, and they know their names even if it’s not their student. So, it’s kind of like, almost like family, like your auntie or uncle that you haven’t seen in a while…If he’s not feeling well and they call me to let me know you can hear the concern in their voice that they want to make sure that he’s at his best.

-Tanya Perkins, on the caring environment in her son’s school

As these three quotes from Tanya Perkins, a Harlem No Excuses charter school mother illustrate, the trust that the parents I interviewed placed in education differed when thinking about it in an abstract as opposed to a concrete sense. Parents had faith in education in an abstract sense and discussed it with aspirational language. They believed that education not only was a route to upward mobility, but that it also led to empowerment in a society with unique impediments for Black people—education had the potential to give their children the tools to
face adversity, to be independent and to think critically about the world around them. However, the faith parents placed in education in the abstract often clashed with the concrete negative experiences they had with schools—which is a common theme documented in education research (Cole & Omari, 2003; Diamond, 2000; A. L. Harris, 2008). For the parents I interviewed, racism—manifested both in the institutional neglect of the schools their children attended and the common norms of anti-Black bias held by educators that taught their children—foregrounded both their impressions of the school system and many of the experiences with their child’s school. The gulf between the aspirational importance placed on education and the realities of negative treatment in schools was a breeding ground for parent distrust. However, in spite of all of the reasons to distrust schools, parents did come to trust educators with different aspects of their child’s education and that educators had the best interests at heart.

In this chapter, I investigate the extent to which the parents I interviewed trusted and distrusted their child’s school and the school system across different dimensions. Treating trusting as a three-part relationship, where A trusts B to do X (Baier, 1986; Hardin, 2002), allowed me to pinpoint what things the parents I interviewed trusted and distrusted public schools to do. As their children progressed through school, there were critical instances that either developed or diminished the level of trust that parents had in their child’s school—or that moved parents on the continuum of trusting toward authentic, relational trust with their child’s school’s educators, or toward distrust—which in extreme cases compelled parents to end their relationship with their child’s school, despite how difficult it would be to find another one.

The aspects of schooling that parents found the most consequential in the trust they placed in schools was linked to Black parent habitus, which includes a disposition to distrust schools and educators while being inclined to place an aspirational faith in education. These
experiences generally revolved around classroom management and learning. Differences in how parents came to trust educators in classroom management and student learning reveal the role that claims to expertise plays in trust between parents and educators. Parents believed that they could claim expertise in managing the behavior of their children, and so trust in this area was based on whether educators shared or could negotiate understandings about the discipline styles that parents judged appropriate for their children. When it came to learning, parents deferred to the expertise of educators, and trust in this area was based on whether educators could provide evidence of academic progress, and whether their idea of academic rigor met the aspirational goals that parents believed education had the potential to fulfill.

For both of these areas—classroom management and learning—whether and how educators cared for students was fundamental to how much parents trusted them, highlighting how caring is a fundamental feature of trusting relationships between parents and schools (see Table 1). This notion of caring took on a culturally specific meaning for Black parents that is reflected in the literature on Black “womanist” caring—it involved the nurturance of children while also being dedicated to holding students to high expectations, and stemmed from an understanding of the political responsibility of Black youth (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Cooper, 2009; Foster, 1997; Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Watson, 2014; Knight, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009). This culturally specific caring resonates with Black parents, in part, because of a habitus that includes a faith in education as a means for upward mobility and collective and individual uplift.

While school leaders, regardless of school type, could play a vital role in establishing a school culture imbued with this culturally-based ethic of care to earn the trust of parents (Brown, 2005; Riehl, 2000; Tillman, 2004a), there were differences in how it was executed in DOE and
No Excuses charter schools. In DOE schools, there was a wide variation in how successfully teachers and school leaders were able to demonstrate this kind of caring and earn the trust of parents. The risks parents associated with their child having a weak teacher could undermine the relational trust that other educators might have built with parents. No Excuses charter schools minimized these risks, by attempting to standardize school routines, polices, and teacher pedagogical styles that bore a tenuous resemblance to this culturally-based ethic of care. However, standardization had the potential to impede the development of relational trust, as there was little room for either parents or educators to negotiate and develop shared understandings and deepen a commitment to culturally-relevant caring for students that resonated with parents.

**Understanding that Children Are Little People Too: Caring for the Students**

Children thrive when you interact with them a certain way, when you talk to them, when you show them you’re a little person, your feelings matter, you deserve respect. What is your opinion? It’s valued. But adults so often forget that just because they’re little does not mean that they don’t feel what we feel, even if they can’t express themselves the way we can. That’s what I look for in any school.

Camika Harris, a Harlem mother, demonstrates that the parents I interviewed saw how a school cared for its students as fundamental in determining its trustworthiness. They believed that educators who did not care enough for students could not be depended on to do the hard work of educating children well. Parents looked for evidence that educators knew the students as individuals, that they were attentive, nurturing and kept them safe, and that they were empathetic to what children were experiencing outside of the classroom and how that might impact their behavior and academic progress. They looked for signs that teachers were dedicated and passionate, and that administrators were creating a caring school community. Signs that
educators were uncaring triggered parent distrust, to the extent that parents would try and find a new school for their child.

Camika’s negative experience with her son’s school highlights this theme of care and trust in schools. When I met with Camika for our interview in March of the 2014-2015 school year, she talked about her extreme frustration with how her 5th grade son, Darius, was treated in his Harlem DOE neighborhood zone school, which served a student population that was 17% Black/African-American, 78% Hispanic and 88% free or reduced priced lunch. Camika, who enrolled in a local college as a psychology major but did not finish her degree, and is now a freelance hairdresser, told me about her son’s school history, which was “rocky” due to her chronic illness and financial insecurity. After getting evicted from their apartment in the Bronx when her son was in 1st grade, she and her two children were in the city shelter system, and her son had to change schools. Then, the family moved to Delaware County, where the cost of living was more affordable. However, after two years, Camika had to make a sudden move to Harlem, a couple of months into the school year, to care for her ailing mother. Back in New York City, Camika struggled to enroll her son in the zoned neighborhood school, due to difficulty proving that her mother’s residence was her legal address.

When her son was finally enrolled in the school, Camika wanted to meet with the principal to explain her son’s unusual situation. It was the fourth school he had attended since kindergarten, and she thought he might need some extra help getting settled academically and socially. She was not able to get a meeting. Meanwhile her son, who Camika characterized as

________________________

15Darius is a pseudonym, as are all of the names of children that appear in this chapter, in an effort to protect their identity and the identity of the parents who participated in this research.
precocious and at times “having trouble associating with children his own age,” began to be bullied by other students. She described the abuse her son faced not just as “regular bullying—you know calling names and pushing and stuff” but as putting him in “physical danger every day,” where he was repeatedly being jumped by several older students.

While she never got her meeting with the principal, she was able to meet with the school dean and vice principal about the bullying. However, Camika told me, the school leaders told her it was against DOE regulations to suspend any of the students were beating up her son, and put some of the blame on him for misbehaving in class. Camika was outraged by this response, explaining to me,

Any time you blame a student getting beaten up on misbehavior you’re an idiot. On top of it you’re telling me [you] don’t understand what happened. Everything was fine at first, but now Darius won’t sit in his chair. Darius’s not doing homework. Darius’s misbehaving. Look at the dynamics. He went from being ok to being physically assaulted on a daily basis!

These incidents communicated to Camika that educators at the school did not care about her son, Darius—both his physical safety and his unique experiences and personality that affected his performance and behavior in the classroom. It cemented her distrust in the school, and she realized that she needed to transfer her son into a different school. Camika was ultimately able to get a safety transfer16 for her son, but she mourned the damage that had been done to him by the time spent at a school that completely neglected his needs.

When Camika recalled her own educational experiences as a public-school student in Harlem, attending the same school as her son, she remembered that the teachers and

16 If parents feel their child is unsafe at their DOE school they can request a safety transfer, which can either be initiated by the school, or by the parent, through visiting a Family Welcome Center and submitting the required documentation—such as a police report.
administrators cared more for the students. She said that it was a “crazy time” back in the 1980s with the “whole crack epidemic,” but that “school did not fall apart” because the principal “knew she was there for the students.” She was upset that there was not the same dedication toward children at the school now. As Camika put it, she did not think the school was “responsible for raising [her] child,” but when he is in “your care you are supposed to give [him] something.” Camika said that ultimately, the root of the problem with her son’s school was that her son was “surrounded by a bunch of children who do not get the love and affection that they need.”

Educational research has argued that caring for students is a fundamental feature of successful schools (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Noddings, 2013, 2015; Valenzuela, 1999). For Black parents, concern over whether their child is cared for in school takes on unique significance in a society where their habitus—including a disposition to be on guard when dealing with educators—is shaped by an awareness of endemic anti-Black racism, and the reality that Black children are often treated poorly in educational settings. The parents I interviewed felt that when educators cared for their children as individuals, it meant that they did not treat them as a type but as an individual (Noddings, 2013), which freed them from some of the bias and deficit thinking that often place limits on educator expectations for Black students (Cooper, 2003; Valencia, 1997). For parents, caring educators understood the challenges that their children faced and were dedicated to education as a means to nurture and cultivate student’s abilities and prepare them to fight for success a racist society. The combination of nurturance, high expectations and understanding of the political responsibilities associated with educating Black youth is an ethic of care that education research literature links to successful Black—and often female—educators (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Foster, 1997; Jackson et al., 2014; Knight, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009). This ethic of care can also be thought of as a form of community
cultural capital, stemming from a disposition to guard and protect children against racism, a communal knowledge of how best to educate and nurture students to be resilient against racial oppression. While parents believed that these traits are not exclusive to Black educators, they did feel that Black educators—especially those from the communities in which they taught—better understood how to demonstrate this kind of care for their children. In the following two sections I will discuss the signs parents look for in determining whether educators at their child’s school cared.

Knowing the Children

A common theme that I heard from parents, when describing a school as caring, was that the students were known by name, which was one way that schools demonstrated that they cared for students as individuals—which is highlighted in this chapter’s opening quote from Tanya Perkins. Parents were reassured when they saw that educators in the building, who might not even necessarily be their child’s teacher, seemed to know and recognize each child. When educators had routines like greeting each child in the morning and asking them how they were doing, it sent a message that the school was a community that cares about students as people. When Tanisha Young, a Harlem DOE mother, described her oldest daughter’s school’s warm environment, she cited how all educators “know [her] daughter by name,” from the principal to the school safety agents. Keisha Moore, a Brooklyn mother whose daughter attends Transcend Academy, was happily surprised when all of the educators already knew who her daughter was, even though she had to start school a week late. She told me,

They’re like, “Are you Keianna’s mom?” I’m like, “How do you even know this?” They’re like, “We get a text if a new student starts. You may be walking around the building, you may see that student come to use the bathroom but she can’t find her way back, this is probably that new student. And you will even have that child’s name already on your form.” I thought that that was that little extra that goes a long way.
The school leaders from the three focus schools I spoke to understood the importance of demonstrating to parents that they knew and cared about each individual child in their school, and realized the positive impression that knowing each child’s name communicated. They were aware that the principal of a school plays a significant role in setting the tone in making the school a caring community. Dr. Franklin, the recently retired former principal of PS970/Harlem Central Elementary School, was remembered by parents as a dynamic, inspirational leader, as evidenced by the praise he was given by the parents I interviewed, and the enthusiastic applause he got when he made a surprise visit to a school PTA meeting I attended. Dr. Franklin had improved the academic standing of the formerly struggling school and left a lasting impression on the school community during his long tenure as principal. The parents from PS 970 commended Dr. Franklin’s rapport with students and families, and talked about how, as a Black man who lived in the community, he was a positive role model for the students. Rhonda Allen, a PS 970 parent, remembered him greeting the students by name at the front door in the morning, and how students who were late had to see him personally to “explain their lack of punctuality.” Kenya Harper, another PS 970 parent, told me that she “wanted to cry” when she found out that Dr. Franklin was leaving. “You know how they say when an elder dies a library is burned down?” she said. “To me the rhythm of the school and the spirit of the school has not been the same.”

At PS 970, Dr. Franklin was able to build relational trust with parents, through both his long history at the school and dedication to students and families. Parents spoke highly of school leaders, administrators and staff such as him, who had done the work of developing caring relationships with families through a long commitment as an educator at a school. However, staff turnover is an issue at many urban schools (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013; Simon &
Johnson, 2015), and as with Kenya’s words about Dr. Franklin, a common thread in the conversations I had with parents was that when teachers and principals left a school, it diminished the sense that the school was a caring community that knew its students and families.

Research indicates that charter schools have even higher staff turnover than public schools (Renzulli, Parrott, & Beattie, 2011; Stuit & Smith, 2012), and in New York City, some of this turnover is a result of No Excuses charter school networks’ reliance on hiring teachers from alternative certification programs—such as Teach for America—where recent college graduates commit to teaching in urban schools for two years (Rich, 2013; K. Taylor, 2015b). To mitigate problems associated with turnover and staff not having long history with the school, No Excuses network charter schools standardize routines that communicate to parents that the school is a caring community. For example, it is common policy in these schools for all of the staff to know every child’s name, as is stated in the official website mission statement of Transcend Academy’s Charter Management Organization. Mrs. Cole, the principal of the No Excuses Charter school, Transcend Academy/Brooklyn, attempted to cultivate her school’s potential to become a caring community in a more authentic way. She became school principal after working in the school as a teacher and a school dean for six years, out of “loyalty” to the school. She believed that turnover was making staffing difficult, and that educators who have been with the school longer have more trusting relationships with families. She told me that one of the things she is most proud of during her three years as principal is that she has increased the number of teachers who stay in the school for at least three years, an accomplishment that many No Excuses charter schools struggle to meet.

Mrs. Bailey, principal of the recently opened PS 1150/North Brooklyn Elementary School, made it a priority to communicate to parents that she wanted her school to be a place
where the educators knew the students and families. As mentioned in the previous chapter, she met all the families before the school year started for the first two years of the new school, asking parents to tell her about their children’s personalities and interests. She told me that it “sent the message” that the school was “interested in the student on an individual basis.” She wanted parents to know that their relationship was “a partnership,” and “the information that they have to share with us about their children is important.” Communicating her wish to know each individual child allowed her to begin to build relational trust with parents and create a caring school community.

The parents I interviewed looked for ways that educators “knowing their child” translated into how they were cared for in the school. Parents also noticed when educators took into account how experiences that children were going through outside of the school might impact their behavior, mood and academic performance in the classroom. As did Camika in her story about the teachers not caring about how her son’s bullying affected his classroom behavior, parents found educators to be neglectful when these factors were ignored. Sheryl Bradley, a Harlem mother whose daughter attends a network No Excuses charter school said that how her daughter’s old DOE school treated her after Sheryl’s fiancé was murdered was the main thing that motivated her to change her school. The family was going through an “emotional state,” and as a result, her daughter had some behavioral issues. Sheryl told me that “the public school just didn’t know how to deal with her…it was more like sit in the corner while I teach everybody else because you’re a bad student.”

Parents also judged whether a school cares for its students by how the school supported students who suffered from problems stemming from living in poverty—such as exposure to crime, unstable living situations, lack of affordable health care and food insecurity. They saw it
as a sign of neglect when schools did not provide sufficient programs and dedicated professionals to support the neediest students. Pamela Wilson, a mother who two boys attend a DOE school in Eastern Brooklyn, described the lack of care this way.

We have a large population of families who are actually in shelters…and we just don’t, from my knowledge, don’t do a lot of support around [them], and those are usually the students that act out the most I guess you would say, and have a lot of other issues. And we also have families that have like drug and alcohol abuse issues. So, there’s no guidance…like have one guidance counselor…I think we have one psychologist and we don’t do home visits. There’s no like real…there’s just nothing to really ensure that families are ok a lot of times.

PS 970 parents talked about the school having a health clinic, with vision and dental services, as something that was valuable to a lot of the school’s families, and showed that the school was committed to caring for its students. Mrs. Watkins, the school parent coordinator, told me becoming a “full service” school was one of Dr. Franklin’s goals before he left. She said that it was important “not only funding-wise” but also in “making a connection in how the community supports the schools and what they can do for the school.”

An important part of educators caring about what children were experiencing beyond the classroom, in the eyes of the parents I interviewed, was how they dealt with issues of prejudice and racism. As Black parents, they were attuned to the micro aggressions that their children might have confront on account of their racial background. Cynthia Green, a Brooklyn mother whose daughter attends PS 1150, told me how upset she was when her 1st grade daughter told her on way home from school that one of her classmates, a Dominican girl, had said that she was “too dark” and so “she couldn’t be friends with her.” After talking to her daughter, telling her that her dark skin was beautiful and so she should take her classmate’s words as a “put up, not, a put down,” Cynthia called the school social worker to tell her what happened. She was heartened by how seriously the school took the situation—the principal, Mrs. Bailey, called her that night
to talk about it, and the social worker brought up race the next time they talked to the children about bullying in class. Parents saw it as a sign of caring for the students, when educators were aware that larger societal problems around racism might impact the students. A few of the parents I spoke to mentioned how reassuring it was when teachers understood how the trauma of police brutality and killing of unarmed Black men in their communities affected the children.

Although the parents I spoke to acknowledged that teachers of all backgrounds could be receptive to where their children were coming from and aware of the challenges they face, they also believed that Black educators—especially Black educators who were familiar with their communities—were able to do this more successfully. Cynthia felt that the fact that the social worker and Mrs. Bailey were Black women helped them understand how seriously to take the racial name-calling her daughter faced. Mya Parker, a Harlem mother whose son attends kindergarten at a No Excuses charter school, was thrilled when she found out that one of her son’s teachers was a Black man who grew up in Harlem and came back to teach, who she will sometimes see in the neighborhood outside of school. She liked that he was able to move comfortably between both worlds, the school and the community, that he could “do both.” “He knows what it’s like, what this place is,” she said, and he is someone her son can “aspire to.” Parents felt that it was sometimes harder for many of the teachers their children had—who were often White women who were not from the community—to have the same level of empathy and demonstrate the same type of care. Ebony Lewis, a Brooklyn mother whose son attended a No Excuses Charter school, ended up switching him to a Catholic school for middle school by the time of our second interview so that he would be “exposed to more.” Although she thought the teachers at his school were caring, she talked about the lack of Black teachers and staff turnover as some of the things she found lacking in the school. She told me,
I just think that…I just have an issue with all of the students being Black and then…it’s just like… Maybe this is just me in my head, ok, but I feel like all of the students are always Black and all the teachers are always White. It’s just is that what education is; that the teachers should always be White and the students should always be Black? Does it seem strange to you to have a Black teacher? When you do have a Black teacher is that abnormal? Is that really realistic of how the world is?

*Nurturing and Protecting the Children*

While school leaders are important in the creation of a caring school community, the students spend most of their time with their classroom teachers. Whether parents trusted or distrusted their child’s school hinged largely on this important relationship. The teacher is the adult that parents leave their children in the care of for the majority of the day, and is the educator that parents come into contact with the most. When discussing the extent to which they trusted or distrusted their child’s school, much of the parents’ impressions depended on whom their child’s classroom teacher was, and so their level of trust could change from year to year. It was very important to parents that their child’s teacher cared for the students and cared about their job. One characteristic that parents noticed in a “good” teacher was that they cared—in the sense that they were dedicated and passionate about educating children. When parents were lukewarm or dissatisfied about their child’s teacher, it was usually because they felt this was lacking. For example, Curtis Wright, a Harlem father, described his son’s teacher at his DOE elementary school as just “fine,” and when I asked him to elaborate, he said that she is “well-trained but doesn’t have the enthusiasm,” and that when “the bell rings she is out the door.” When parents felt that that passion and dedication was present, they often saw it as translating into caring and dedication toward the students. Yolanda Walker, a Harlem mother whose son attends a DOE school, captured this characteristic well when she described how she felt when she first visited her son’s classroom and saw his teachers in action.

There was an energy. You know you can read energy and so there was this energy that [the teachers] loved what they were doing. It wasn’t like this is my job, I’m following
instructions, I have my book and I’m following the checklist...I felt confident that he was gonna be well taken care of that he was not only going to be taught but that he was also going to be loved.

As Yolanda’s quote demonstrates, parents trusted teachers who took good care of their children—who were nurturing and attentive to their child’s needs. When parents saw specific examples where teachers nurtured their child, it built the trust they had in the school as a whole to care for their child. Ebony Lewis, a Brooklyn mother who sent her 3rd grade son to a No Excuses Network Charter School, recalled specific instances where this happened, such as when the teachers made sure that he was wearing his glasses in class.

I trust that they have the kids’ best interests in mind with whatever they’re doing…He has glasses that he’s supposed to wear in the classroom and the teacher’s like, “Yeah I always make sure he’s wearing his glasses.” They switch their seats around throughout the year so that they get to sit next to different people and so they were telling me that, “Anthony sits in the back but we make sure that he has his glasses on whenever…” So, it’s like they make me feel warm and fuzzy.

This nurturing aspect is even more important to parents of young children. Although Pamela Wilson’s sons were in the 4th and 2nd grades at the time of our first interview, she still recalled their kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Parker, with fondness, and said she greets her with a hug when she sees her. Pamela, whose sons attend a DOE school in Eastern Brooklyn, described Mrs. Parker’s classroom as “warm and welcoming,” and marveled at how even though she worked with the “littlest babies” in an integrated classroom that included special needs students, her caring and enthusiastic personality kept the children “occupied and their minds going.” Parents also took note of how well teachers helped young students transition into older grades, and how they guided them through taking on additional responsibilities and becoming more independent.

Parents were disappointed when they saw teachers not attending to the needs of children, and it led to an erosion in the trust they placed in them to care for their child. They remarked on
how it made them uneasy when teachers forgot to make sure that the children’s coats were buttoned or snapped properly when going out in the cold, or when teachers did not notice that a child had smudged food on his face after lunch. Parents were especially critical in judging this aspect of care, as it was something they did regularly as parents. As Pauline Franklin, a Washington Heights mother sending her daughter to a DOE school, said, “sometimes things slip,” but that is because “teachers aren’t necessarily parents,” and may not “tune into something that I would.” Parents called tuning into these things as having a “maternal” instinct. Latasha Edwards, a Harlem mother and PS970 parent, was generally happy with her daughter’s school, but she was put off by how her child’s teacher in kindergarten did not always seem to pay attention to the children in that way.

I’ve never had any complaints though my daughter’s teacher last year she was like a bit off. If a child’s nose was running it would just be running, dried up on their face all day. I didn’t like that. She’s a good teacher, but in terms of having that maternal intuition of, you know, “Your nose is dirty, if I’m not gonna clean it myself then I’m gonna send you to the bathroom,” or if your kid can’t snap themselves, they’re just unsnapped.

As Camika’s story at the beginning of this section highlights, the most consequential type of attentiveness for parent trust in teachers was attention to the children’s safety. The parents I spoke to saw it as the most important sign as to whether they believed that their child was well cared for. Incidents in which a child was injured while at school triggered parents’ fears, and educators could make the situation worse if they were evasive about what happened, or failed to notice when something went wrong. Kenya Harper, a Harlem parent whose 3rd grade daughter attended PS 970 during our first interview in the winter of the 2014-2015 school year, told me about one such negative experience with safety that destroyed her trust towards her child’s classroom teacher from the previous year. When Kenya picked up her daughter, Niara, one afternoon, she noticed that she was crying. Kenya describes Niara’s teacher as “acting like she
didn’t know what was going on” when she asked if she knew what happened. The teacher tried to reassure Kenya, telling her “Niara will be ok.” But later, at home, after pressing her daughter to talk about what happened, Niara told Kenya that another girl in the class had kicked her. Niara said she told the teacher what happened, and Kenya was furious that the teacher did not talk to her about it when she saw her that afternoon.

Like there’s so much stuff that Niara will brush off her shoulders, like a resilient child, and the fact that she came down crying, because she can’t talk about it, she can’t handle it, and that’s the way you leave you her…Niara told me the little girl kicked her…I said, “Did you tell anybody?” She kept saying, “It hurt.” I said, “Well did you tell anybody? [Niara] said, “Yeah I told [the teacher] and [the teacher] just told me just deal with it yourself.”

Kenya had long been concerned about her daughter’s teacher, and this was a tipping point. She was so angry about this incident that she came to the school with “flames coming out of” her, looking to confront the teacher. Dr. Franklin immediately noticed how angry she was, and grabbed her by arm. He convinced her to come into his office to decompress and talk. Kenya said,

Dr. Franklin is from Harlem. He’s from the hood. He understands the dynamic of our community. He understands what poverty is…He understands what social things we do, the things we believe, the music we listen to, the images we see, the people we notice…how they treat us on the bus, how they treat us in the subway, how they treat us in the stores when we’re spending our money. He understands what it is and so it’s almost like he can relate with you and then show you a solution

Dr. Franklin assured Kenya that he would take care of the situation. Kenya said that after that meeting, in which she almost started crying, “I don’t know what he told [the teacher], what was said, but she got it.” Niara’s teacher ended up moving her seat in the classroom away from the other girl, and made a habit of talking to Kenya more frequently at pick up time, updating her on what was going on with her child. As Kenya’s story demonstrates, many Black parents are inclined to be on guard, knowing that it is quite possible that their children will receive poor
treatment in schools. How attuned educators are to this inclination can be consequential for earning parent trust.

Thus, instances where educators demonstrate that they care or do not care for students are fundamental in the trust parents feel towards their child’s school. Parents look to see how this care for children translates into how dedicated teachers are doing the work of educating their children. For the parents I interviewed, there were two major areas of schooling that shaped the extent to which they came to trust or distrust teachers and their child’s school—classroom management and teaching. For the parents, how and whether educators cared for students were seen as essential in how competent educators were in those areas, which I will discuss in the following two sections.

**Having High Expectations for Classroom Behavior: Discipline with Love**

I think it’s just the heart. The heart is not into it as much or the dedication. I have a lot of adopted god nieces and nephews and when they’re in my care I don’t feel the need to call their parents whenever they get out of line. I just handle it. Do you know what I’m saying? It’s like if you’re entrusting me with your child then you’re basically telling me whatever happens when he’s with me I have the responsibility to keep him straight and keep him focused…I think because of the fact that [teachers] don’t have to…They have the paperwork and the procedures and policies in place that they don’t have to go that extra yard. They may feel that they are, but it’s just kind of different because I’m from that old school mentality.

Like Jaeda Price did in the quote above, many of the parents I interviewed spoke of the care and dedication it takes for teachers to manage their classroom well, and for educators to be fair and effective disciplinarians. Many of the parents I talked with had negative experiences with their children’s teacher’s discipline and classroom management style, and it was consequential for how much parents trusted teachers and school leaders. Parents understood that poor classroom management could dramatically impact their children’s academic progress, as it is hard to learn in an unruly classroom environment. Moreover, parents also worried that school
discipline policies and the disciplinary consequences their children might face might be too punitive, as is often the case for Black students—even at a young age. Finally, like Jaeda, parents often felt like they had more expertise than educators when it came to managing their children’s behavior, which lead to additional annoyance, and frustration. In some cases, it led to such distrust that parents opted to try to send their child to another school.

Jaeda Price’s 1st grade son was attending a newly opened, small franchise charter school in Harlem, which focused on dual language immersion. During our first interview, at the end of the 2013-2014 school year, she told me that she was generally happy with her son’s school, which her pastor had endorsed, and which several of her close friends from her church congregation also had also chosen for their children. Her son seemed to enjoy learning, and she appreciated the frequent and open communication that the educators had with parents. However, there was one incident with the school that irked her. Her son and two of his friends were roughhousing during playtime at lunch, and after the teachers verbally warned the boys about it twice, they sent home an official written letter about his behavior infraction, following the school’s discipline policy. Jaeda was upset because the official letter was the first time she had been notified of the behavior problem, despite her usually open communication with the school. She also worried about the ramifications of the letter becoming a part of her son’s “official record.”

The school had a diverse student body, serving a population that is 42% Black/African, 24% Hispanic, 30% White, and 45% free or reduced priced lunch, and while Jaeda thought “being in classes with different types of kids is great exposure” for her son, it also brought up issues of “cultural differences.” Jaeda was concerned that the teachers, who were mostly White, were not used to “dealing with” Black children. It did not escape her notice that the three
children who were reprimanded for roughhousing were all Black boys, and she was suspicious that the teachers might have overreacted to their play. She was also annoyed that they had not nipped the misbehavior in the bud before it got to be a bigger problem, requiring a formal misconduct letter. Jaeda explained to me that she had even talked to her son’s teacher, who was new and inexperienced, beforehand, telling her explicitly how she disciplines her son at home, to try to avoid just this sort of problem.

I said I know my son has a very big personality. Everybody loves him. He can be a bit much. I told them from day one you can’t talk to him [like], “Just please Malik sit.” (meek voice), no its “You need to sit down somewhere.” (firm voice), and I’m ok with that…if I’m telling you this is how I conduct my household, we need to be on the same page.

During our second interview, at the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year, Jaeda told me that frustration with the school’s discipline policies had reached a peak—she had just gotten a phone call from the school that morning in which her son was threatened with suspension. Her son was now beginning the 3rd grade, and while academically he was doing very well, he was having “a lot of issues with behavior.” The teachers said that her son would not sit still in his seat, and became defiant when disciplined. Jaeda’s son had told her that he felt “bored” in class, and so she suspected that the problems stemmed from her son finishing his work early, and not having anything to else occupy himself with during class. However, the teacher seemed unable to pinpoint what triggered his misbehavior. Once again Jaeda felt frustrated that she could not find a way to prevent these problems. She also believed that the teacher over-reacted to small infractions, and went to extreme measures—like calling her at work—for her son’s relatively minor instances of misbehavior, such as rolling his eyes or sucking his teeth. She felt that these problems were happening more than they should for someone who had “just turned eight.”
When Jaeda reflected on her own educational experiences, attending public schools in Harlem, she remembered teachers dealing with discipline issues very differently. She remembered having a strict 8th grade teacher who she “thought was crazy,” but who “pushed her,” and ended up “being the best teacher that she ever had.” She felt that teachers “just don’t have that strong dedication like they used to.” She saw this lack of dedication reflected in the fact that her son’s teachers had failed to engage him, and were labeling him as a troublemaker instead. “People already think Black boys have low attention spans and concentrations levels,” she told me. “I don’t want my African-American son to be characterized as such when he’s been academically excelling.” This awareness that Jaeda had of the barriers her son might face due to his racial and gender identity is a reflection of urban Black parents’ disposition to be on guard, a part of their habitus.

Like Jaeda, the parents I interviewed were aware of the implicit biases that educators often have against Black students—which view them as dangerous and disorderly, evincing overreactions for behavior that might be passed off as innocent and childlike for White students (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017; Monroe, 2005). In this section, I will discuss the signs parents looked for in determining how much they could trust educators at their child’s school to discipline their children well. Some of this trusting hinged on a cultural style that parents associated with exemplary Black educators, and came from shared understandings about educating children born out of relational trust between families and schools. I found that the extent to which parents trusted or distrusted schools to discipline children fairly varied greatly across DOE schools, and depended largely on their child’s classroom teacher. In contrast, No Excuses charter schools attempted to standardize a classroom management style that resonated with Black parents across teachers and schools. However, I argue that this standardization was
not always successful in earning the trust of parents in No Excuses school discipline policies, because it is difficult to standardize a disciplinary style that relies on relational trust with families across all teachers—especially when many of those teachers are White, inexperienced, and do not fully understand the communities that they teach in.

**Poor Classroom Management and its Consequences**

The parents I interviewed believed that the characteristics of a strong teacher included having good classroom management, being able to engage students, and commanding respect from the children. They worried that poor classroom management, which they felt was all too common in the schools their children attended, could result in their children becoming disengaged, acting up, being punished, and not learning. Discovering that their child was in an unruly classroom was a cause for alarm. Janelle Foster, a DOE school Harlem parent whose son was diagnosed with ADHD, talked about his experiences being in a 1st classroom with a teacher who was too overwhelmed to keep the small children engaged and to control student misbehavior. The environment was too stimulating for her son who started to act out.

The teacher wasn’t given any help. It was just her. And you know with almost 30 kids...[it] probably was overwhelming. There were a couple of other kids in the classroom too that you could obviously see that they needed a little one to one or something too, and it kind of threw him completely off because then he started following things that they were doing. It was just kind of like a clash and there was just no help for the teacher. It was just her. So understandably it was really hard to try to get things situated in the classroom.

Janelle spoke of how her son became dejected over the course of the year because his teacher was always scolding him, and how the other kids began to pick on him, blaming him for every behavior infraction even if it wasn't his fault. She, like other parents I talked to whose children had issues with behavior, said that “always getting in trouble” caused lasting damage to her son’s self-esteem. Parents also mentioned how poor classroom management was very
disruptive to learning for all of the children in class. Monica Hayes and Deidra Brown, whose children used to attend a DOE school that was closed for a lack of discipline and poor academic performance, and now attend PS 1150/North Brooklyn Elementary, one of the two newly opened schools that replaced it, felt that the chaotic atmosphere throughout the old school and poor classroom management in many of its classrooms had a lasting negative impact on their children’s academic progress. Monica described how the chaotic classroom environment was discouraging for her introverted daughter, and made her dislike school. She also blamed it for the fact that her daughter was very behind in reading when she started at PS 1150. She told me,

    The classroom management was…it sucked. It was horrible, and then the kids were always arguing …. [My daughter’s] attitude changed because the kids weren’t listening and she couldn’t take the noise. She wasn’t doing well. She wasn’t able to read and do her work because the teacher was always on another kid that’s running out the classroom or being disrespectful. It was a big mess.

Despite the fact that the parents I interviewed trusted educators who had strong classroom management, they were very wary about how official disciplinary sanctions had the potential to unfairly target their children. They wanted behavior management to be proactive rather than reactive. Like Jaeda, they were reassured when educators were able to nip behavior problems in the bud. They feared that if their children were allowed to get out of line, the punishment they received would be overly punitive and do more harm than good. The parents also feared that childish misbehavior that would normally be seen as mischievous or playful is perceived as threatening or intimidating when Black children do it, leading to harsher admonishment.

Education research has shown that such implicit racial biases on the part of educators contribute to the “Disciplinary Gap,” or disproportionate rates of disciplinary sanctions that Black students face in schools (Gregory, Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Monroe, 2005).
The parents of boys that I talked to recalled more instances where they felt that educators over-reacted to something their son did that might otherwise be thought of as childish behavior. Pamela, a Brooklyn DOE school mother, recalled an incident with her son Michael when he was eight years old and in the 3rd grade. Michael, who she described as a “tall boy—almost as tall as her”—had a substitute teacher. Michael did not know the teacher’s name, and tried to get the substitute’s attention when he was working on a class project by tapping her shoulder. Pamela told me,

He kept tapping her to tell her something, and so she didn’t want to be tapped, and so apparently, she told him, “Don’t tap me again.” And then [Michael] went to tell her something and he tapped her [again]. Mind you she’s a sub, he doesn’t know her name, I don’t know the lady’s name. And so, then she called school safety to have him removed from the classroom.

Pamela, who was the school’s PTA president, happened to be at the school that day for a meeting, and found out that the school safety officer was being called to escort her son to the principal’s office. She was alarmed at how quickly the situation had escalated. She called up to her son’s classroom and spoke to the substitute, telling her that it was “inappropriate” to escort a child out of the classroom with a security officer for tapping a teacher’s shoulder. The substitute insisted that she needed to show Pamela how her son had tapped her, and came downstairs. By then Pamela said she was “scared,” wondering if her son had “tap[ped] her on the boob” or somewhere inappropriate. However, what the substitute ended up demonstrating to her was just a “normal” tap on the shoulder. Pamela told the substitute that she didn’t know “what’s any more appropriate for a 3rd grader to do when they don’t know your name” than to “tap you on the shoulder.” The school safety officer and the principal both agreed with Pamela that her son should not be removed by school safety. Pamela was irate when she found out that the substitute tried to change her story about what happened later.
Then [the sub] went to the guidance counselor and told the guidance counselor that [Michael] hit her. Luckily the guidance counselor knows me so she calls me. And I’m like, “Listen, she can’t go around changing her story because she doesn’t like the responses she’s getting. Three different people have told her in three different hierarchies that what she did was inappropriate, he did not hit her. He tapped her and then by going around saying that he hit her changes the dynamic because now you’re talking about a suspendable [offense]… Like, “No, you don’t get to do that Miss.”

Both Pamela and Jaeda’s stories are examples of what the parents I spoke to fear when it comes to discipline. They worried that when educators react to misbehavior the situation escalates more quickly for Black children, resulting in their children facing severe consequences like being removed from the classroom, getting suspended, or having an infraction go on a permanent record. New York City Black students—even those in elementary school—face consequences like suspension much more than their White peers (Zimmerman, 2016), as is the case nationwide (Denice, Gross, & Rausch, 2015), resulting in lost instructional time. Even though the parents I interviewed had young children who were in elementary school, they were still on guard for the possibility of such punitive consequences for misbehavior, even though it might be assumed that exclusionary discipline policies such as suspension are reserved for older students. For example, when Gloria Henderson, a Harlem mother, found out from her six-year-old daughter that she had bit her “church brother” on the finger when they were arguing over a crayon during class that day, she jumped into action. She called her friend, the boy’s mother, and ascertained that her son was completely fine—her friend did not even know that the incident had happened. She then called the school, upset that they had not called her about it, and found out that her daughter had gotten a misconduct letter. She said,

I fought to have the conduct letter removed from her file because as a Black person I know how that works. I don’t want anything, anything in her records that you’re gonna go back and pull ten years from now and say, “Oh well she…” No, we’re not living like that. They don’t understand that from a White person’s point of view because they would never have that thought. But being Black and knowing our struggles and knowing how
...biased the political world is against us...we know we always have to dot our i’s and cross our t’s.

Like Jaeda, Gloria felt that reacting to the incident with an official sanction allowed teachers to feel that they had resolved the situation, while in fact, it allowed them to get away with not being proactive—by effectively managing the classroom and engaging the students—which is more challenging.

*Good Classroom Management, Dedication, Care and Relational Trust*

The parents I interviewed told me that it takes dedication for a teacher to strike the right balance in classroom management, to have high expectations for students’ behavior, while also communicating to students that it was because they cared about them. Parents trusted educators who cared enough to be proactive when managing behavior and doing the hard work of getting to the root of why children act out. Nikki Jones, a Brooklyn mother whose son attended both Transcend Academy and PS 1150, and had issues with behavior in both schools, was disappointed by how quickly school officials jumped to the conclusion that he needed to be evaluated for special education. She felt that his teacher at PS 1150, who struggled with classroom management, had “just given up” even after Nikki tried to give her some suggestions about things that worked at home. Janelle Foster, who son struggled with behavior issues in kindergarten because of ADHD, echoed this sentiment, saying that schools “were quick to label the child a problem child” instead of figuring “ways to work with it.” Janelle recalled wanting to “cry” when her son’s 1st grade teacher was able to keep him engaged and on task and worked with him throughout the year, such that all of the other teachers were amazed by his improvement in behavior. “Literally, like, I cried and hugged her,” she told me. “Because I was just like so relieved that somebody actually finally took the time to give him a chance.”
Part of the dedication that parents wanted from educators when managing student behavior was that they were attentive to the children and responded quickly, intervening in behavior before it got out of hand. What Janelle appreciated in her son’s 1st grade teacher was how she would notice when he was beginning to get restless, and move to stand or sit near him. She was able to find ways to redirect his pent-up energy, while still attending to the rest of the class. As Jaeda said in the beginning of this section, they wanted teachers to “nip things in the bud” and prevent discipline problems, rather than react to them. Latasha Edwards, a PS 970 parent, told me when she watches her daughter’s teacher in action that one of the first things she looks for is whether the teacher is “paying attention to all of the children” and is “quick with it.” Alisha Thompson, a Queens DOE mother, was impressed with her daughter’s kindergarten teacher, in part because she was so attentive in managing the class. She attributed some of this ability to experience, saying that since she’s been teaching for “30 years, she can do it with her eyes closed,” being able to “write on the board” with her back turned and still knowing what the children are up to behind her back.

A common way that parents described educators they trusted with classroom management was that they held students to high behavioral expectations, but that they did it out of love. The parents would often talk about this disciplinary style as being cultural, and something they associated with—but not exclusively so—exemplary educators of color, especially Black women educators. This “old school” discipline style, as some parents referred to it, was stern but also warm and caring. It was based in a shared understanding among parents, educators and students that educators had the best interests of the children at heart when they had to be stern. This is a characteristic that researchers often highlight in educators who are successful in educating Black students (Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Walker, 1996).
Camika Harris, who was very satisfied with her son’s new school after having such a horrendous experience with his old one, had high praise for the principal of her son’s new school, who was a veteran Black educator. She likened her to the school’s “mother,” and thought that set the tone for the whole school—which was a tone of caring for the students. She told me,

She had that nurturing…she’s from the South so I don’t know if you have family from the South. I don’t assume just because you’re Black you know, but it’s just a different upbringing, that nurturing. Yes, so you know that discipline with love, you know…You’re gonna get what you need to get. If you do wrong I’m gonna let you know you were wrong. I love you but you’re wrong, and that’s what they need.

Parents were impressed when educators had a presence that the students responded to, signaling that the students respected them and cared about meeting the high expectations they had for them. Alisha Thompson, a Queens DOE mother, spoke about the African-American principal of her daughter’s school, as knowing and having caring relationships with the students, which allows her to command respect from them and create an atmosphere of respect in the school. She said:

She’s kind of an old school type principal so she has a no tolerance for nonsense. She knows all of her kids by name, most of them, and a lot of times you see her in the cafeteria. She does lunch with the kids so that she does get to know all of them, and she has no patience for baloney. She’ll tell you. She’ll tell you that she doesn’t tolerate fresh children, and I like that… so that’s the kind of school she runs, and she holds both parties, the teachers and the students…all three parties really, the parents, the teachers and the students to respecting each other and doesn’t allow for the disrespect.

Tanisha Young, a Harlem DOE mother, described her daughter’s school principal and how she was able to quiet the noisy auditorium before a school assembly in a way that echoed this theme of balancing a caring and a stern attitude in managing student behavior.

They had an assembly one day, and the principal and like about five parents were all standing upstairs watching, like there’s a window there, watching all the kids. And all the classes are in there with their teachers and they classes are acting up. Like the teachers aren’t even…and she looked at us like, “I’ll be back.” She went downstairs and she goes, “They know I better not get to the number three.” She said, “One, two…” And we didn’t
hear another word. I was just like, “Well, alrighty then.” They know not to play with her. They know she’s fun and she cares but they know when she starts counting; stop.

The parents I interviewed felt that educators of all backgrounds had the potential to be successful at classroom management in the schools their children attended—urban schools with largely non-White student populations. However, they also believed that White teachers—especially younger, inexperienced White teachers from outside of the community—had a steeper learning curve when it comes to understanding how cultural differences impact both how they manage student behavior and how that management is received by students and parents. Pauline Franklin, a mother whose daughter attends a progressive school in Washington Heights said that the “more punitive punishment” that Black children received has to do with the lack of “teachers that look like them” and “running up into teachers who haven’t been teaching for a while, may not have the heart of teaching,” and are inexperienced in general and in dealing with Black youth. Kenya Harper, a PS970 parent who was frustrated at the lack of Black teachers in the school, remarked:

There’s certain things that you can say to children in our community and certain things that you can’t say, and every community has their own internal things. A Black person can tell your child in the street to stop. A White person [does this] and you just still looking leery like…they can tell each other’s kids to stop but to tell our kids it’s a little funny. And when you have children who are taught by other races, and like I said not that they’re not any good teachers, because some of them are fantastic teachers…The issue is some people don’t acclimate to their environment and you have to understand our kids. I don’t think a lot of these White teachers at this school have a real good understanding of the dynamics of our children.

The way that Kenya describes this “understanding” underscores how it is based in relational trust—and comes out of educators understanding the cultural dynamics of the students and community that they are from. When teachers did not have this “understanding” that Kenya spoke about, parents became frustrated, especially since they believed they had more expertise with discipline than educators who struggled with classroom management. Many of the parents
of children who had issues with behavior in class—like Janelle, Nikki and Jaeda—told me that they would try to give advice to teachers on how to discipline their child, describing what they did at home. However, oftentimes teachers were unable to replicate what parents told them to do—both because the disciplinary style was unfamiliar to them, and because they were unable to command the respect of students that comes out of relational trust. These situations undermined the trust that parents had in educators, because they saw good classroom management as essential in creating an environment where their child could learn.

*Attempting to Standardize a Balance of Discipline and Caring in No Excuses Charter Schools*

The DOE school parents I talked to said that classroom management varied widely from teacher to teacher, and would sometimes try to get their children’s classrooms changed if a teacher was bad at management, as they could not trust them to educate their child. Curtis Wright, a Harlem father whose daughter attends a No Excuses Charter School and son attends a DOE school, was frustrated by the inconsistency in discipline at his son’s school. He told me “public school teachers really have their own universe in the classroom,” and since they “set their own rules and it’s different from year to year,” one of the “struggles is that it isn’t that consistent.” In No Excuses charter schools, parents found discipline policies and classroom management styles to be much more uniform across teachers and classrooms. I found that No Excuses Charter schools attempted to standardize an approach to discipline that is stern and caring—as they promise parents that they will accept no excuses for educational failure and hold all students to high expectations for behavior and academics. However, it is difficult to standardize a disciplinary style that relies on relational trust with families across all teachers—especially those who are White, inexperienced, and do not understand the communities that they
teach in. Thus, while the disciplinary approach in No Excuses charter schools was more consistent, parents at times questioned whether teachers’ sternness came from a place of caring.

As discussed in the previous chapter, No Excuses charter schools were known by parents for their stringent approach to discipline and insistence on order in the school and classroom, which includes dictating how exactly students are to dress in matching school uniforms, walk silently in uniform lines through school hallways, eat quietly in the lunchroom and sit in class, in their seats or on the rug, attentively. New students have orientation meetings before school starts where they learn and practice how to sit and walk in the school. The reasoning behind this approach was that it creates a distraction-free environment for children to learn. When I attended Back to School at Transcend Academy, I watched how the teachers used this rationale when they explained the school rules to parents. One of the things that the teachers emphasized was that the students were not to bring anything from home with them to school except for the book bag, homework packet and reading book provided by the school. Additional items—like pencils, pens, pencil sharpeners, hand sanitizer and Kleenex—could potentially be a distraction if students “played” with them, and all of which were available in classroom already.

The No Excuses charter school parents I spoke to were continuously on guard about whether the “structure” of this educational approach would work out or be too much for their young children to handle. While having an orientation and knowing what they were getting into—as part of the contractual relationship they established with the school—allayed their fears somewhat, they were still on high alert, as they were making a bet on whether the academic progress they expected their children to make was worth the strict discipline. Keisha Moore, a Transcend Academy mother, described her worries about whether her 1st grade daughter would
adjust to the school’s structure, and how she was vigilant in making sure that she was able to handle it.

I was concerned about whether she’d still be able to do it because my daughter’s a very talkative child, talkative in terms of her personality. She has a lot of personality. She likes to joke. She likes to express herself. She likes to color…and I didn’t want that to just be muffled at all, so I was just like really concerned about how would she do. So, I was like a watchdog in the classroom. Is she doing ok? Is she adjusting? Is she ok?

Whereas Keisha felt reassured that her daughter was able to handle the structure after watching her in class, other parents continued to have reservations and questioned the purpose of some of the strict policies. Parents were upset when the schools got overly stringent about the school uniform policy—like giving students demerits for having bits of White on shoes that were supposed to be “all Black,” or having their hair styled in a way that the school said was “too distracting.” As Mya Parker, a Harlem No Excuses charter school mother, put it, when “you’re talking about what type of haircut my child can get, that’s a little much. Mind your business. That's not your concern. That's mine.” Parents also were concerned about their children becoming too focused on how they did behavior-wise each day, and not on what they learned.

No Excuses charter school students usually come home with a packet that includes their homework and a report of their behavior for the day—being “on green” means that they did not have any behavior infractions, while they could slip down to “yellow” or “red” for failing to sit the right way or talking out of turn—small misbehaviors that the school referred to as “kids’ stuff.” Anita Johnson, a Transcend Academy mother, talked about how her two children in the 1st grade became fixated on their behavior reports.

They always associated a good day with being on college bound green, and I said but that’s not…you know you can have a good day other than just being on green. So that was like the first…because I had to break them out of thinking that they had to be on this color, because that’s all they would talk about was green. So, then I had to try to get them to talk about other things.
While Anita’s daughter was able to adapt to the behavior rules, her son had a much harder time. Recently diagnosed with ADD, he struggled to continuously sit in SLANT\textsuperscript{17} position with his hands folded during class. Anita was worried that her son was starting to “hate” school, as he thought the teachers had it out for him. Her worries underscore the difficulties the school had in balancing discipline with caring. She told me,

He takes it as them being mean to him and that’s what he’ll tell me. He’ll come home and say, “Mommy, Ms. So, and So is mean.” I told him, “Why is she mean?” “Because she made me do…she made me write my work over or something,” he’ll say. I say, “Well that’s not mean, she just wants you to like…” You know he can’t focus and they’re thinking he has this ADD or whatever. I think that’s why everything is…they’re mean, and I don’t like school. I think it’s…I think the setting is a lot [for him].

No Excuses charter school parents noted that the discipline was becoming even more punitive for children in older grades, and they had concerns about how quickly small behavior infractions escalated into serious disciplinary sanctions, including detention or suspension. In New York City, No Excuses charter schools networks have been found to have the higher rates of suspension than DOE schools students in all grades (Decker, Snyder, & Darville, 2015), prompting sector leaders, according to local reporting, to rethink aspects of the rigid disciplinary approach (Disare, 2016). In kindergarten through 2\textsuperscript{nd} grade, Transcend Academy students do not serve detention for behavior infractions, giving them a couple of years to adjust to the strict discipline, with detentions beginning in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} grade. Some of the parents I spoke to also had children who were in middle school, and told me how the discipline was “extreme,” and that students could get detention for things like making a sound when dropping a pencil, or dozing off in class. Gail Howard, a Transcend Academy mother, told me about how her son got

\textsuperscript{17} SLANT is an acronym used in many of the large network No Excuses charter schools for how students are supposed to sit attentively in class. It stands for Sit up, Listen, Ask and answer questions, Nod if you understand, and Track the speaker with your eyes.
detention because he tried to tell the teacher than another student was cheating off of him during a quiz. She told me:

Why did it have to go straight to detention if he was trying to tell the teacher something that’s going on? I think maybe the teachers could communicate more with parents about like the boundaries of why it goes straight to detention if something could be resolved before it goes there…Maybe the teacher could have gave me a phone call and we could have talked about what happened, as opposed to just automatically not listen to what he was saying and thought he was in the wrong.

Gail’s critique of Transcend Academy’s discipline highlights that parents and the school did not always have a shared understanding around the purposes behind the disciplinary style, and that there was little room to build it given the rigidity of the school policies. This can impede the development of relational trust, especially if Black parents believe that they might have expertise when it comes to managing the behavior of their children that is undervalued by the school.

**Academic Rigor and Cultivating a Love of Learning: Educating Children Well**

It would be balanced. I mean it would be the type of education where they know the basics. They’re not memorizing. It’s instilled in them; you know the stuff that they need to know in terms of math, reading, writing. When they do go off to college they’re prepared…and I want them to have a skill, you know have something that they love to do. Whatever it is that they’re good at I want that to be cultivated…And when I send them off to school I want the teachers to be able to cultivate that too, and not deter them from something that they’re gifted at, you know. So that’s the kind of education I want them to have.

In the quote above, Nikki Jones, a counseling administrator at a local college in Brooklyn, described to me what she envisioned as the ideal education for her two children. When we first met at the end of the 2013-2014 school year, she told me about the concerns she had with the “No Excuses” style at Transcend Academy that led her to switch her 1st grade son and 3rd grade daughter into PS 1150/North Brooklyn Elementary. However, she also had problems with PS 1150, becoming frustrated by what she saw as a lack of consistency in teacher quality, lack of academic rigor, and lack of transparency around academic progress. Nikki ultimately
removed her children from that school as well. Nikki’s story highlights the difficulties parents had in trusting schools to educate their children well—which for them meant cultivating a love of learning in children, while holding them to high academic standards. This aspirational understanding of education is linked to Black parent habitus, which is structured in part by a faith in the promise of education and a sense of urgency around the importance of Black youth being educated well.

Even though Nikki thought the teachers at Transcend Academy were “passionate” about their profession and the students, and her children “loved them,” she had concerns about the school’s structured pedagogical approach. She noticed that the teachers had little “control” over what they taught because the “curriculum was scripted.” She also noticed that both of her children were becoming disengaged by what she called the school’s “assembly line education,” where the approach was to treat the students as a “group,” not appreciating that “every kid has different learning needs” and “different styles of learning.” It was when her son, Robert, “who fought against the structure,” began to have behavior problems that she realized she could no longer trust the school to educate her children in the “balanced” way that she wanted.

Nikki had heard about PS 1150, liked that it had a diverse student body, and after meeting with Mrs. Bailey, she was encouraged by her dedication to “cultivating the individual child” and decided to make the switch. She said:

I basically made the choice to move them because I felt like the curriculum and the activity at Transcend Academy was just…it was unbalanced and I felt like PS 1150 was a bit more balanced in terms of the curriculum, you know the instruction and the free time…I want my kids to love school. I think elementary is…the purpose of elementary is to really instill the love of learning in kids, and I didn’t feel like they could have gotten that at Transcend Academy.

In our first interview, Nikki hinted that while she was supportive of Mrs. Bailey’s vision for her school, which includes an emphasis on inquiry-based learning, dual-language immersion
and meeting the needs of diverse learners, it was not “all that well executed yet,” as the new school was still finding its footing. However, when I met with Nikki for a second time in the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year, I was surprised to hear that she had switched schools for her children again.

Once again, disappointment in the school’s academic approach was what spurred her decision, but this time her distrust was cemented after experiences with teachers who she believed were not passionate and dedicated. Her son’s 1st grade teacher, who struggled with classroom management, chalked up her son’s inability to pay attention in class to cognitive difficulties, and suggested that he be evaluated for special education services. However, Nikki said, the evaluation showed that “he was on point—on grade level with everything” and when the teacher was switched to another class, her son did a “360” and performed much better. Nikki was also frustrated that Robert’s teacher was not sharing graded classwork, homework and quizzes with her, which kept her in the dark about whether he was grasping the material he was taught. “You would never know what he was doing in the class,” she said. “He would bring back like three spelling tests where he did really good.”

Nikki was also disappointed in her daughter’s 3rd grade teacher who was “low energy” and not passionate. She knew that her son, Robert, would eventually be in her class, triggering her decision to find another school. Nikki felt a sense of urgency around making sure that her children were getting a rigorous education that prepared them for the future, which is why it was so concerning to her that she did not know whether her children were progressing academically. She told me:

These descriptions come from the school website’s description of its academic mission.
I think Black children especially should hold education to a higher degree because you know education in the Black community has been poor and we have been marginalized and haven’t been able to have access to education…I think they’re necessary if we’re going to level the playing field because Black children are still playing catch up.

Looking back, Nikki felt that she “wasn’t pushed enough” when she was a magnet high school student in St. Louis. She got her associates degree at a local community college, and did not complete her bachelor’s degree until later in life when she lived in New York City. Nikki’s story of not being held to high expectations when she was in school, and not being prepared for college, was a common theme that the parents I interviewed talked about. However, Nikki also remembered the elementary school she attended in the suburbs of St. Louis as having a “huge impact” on why she “loves learning” and why “learning is so important to her.”

Like Nikki, the other parents I interviewed worried whether educators were dedicated enough to hold their children to high academic standards, and were reassured when they saw concrete evidence of this. Part of the impetus behind the focus on standards and accountability in education reform was the concern that educators did not have high expectations for students—especially lower-income students of color. These policy reforms initially enjoyed support from civil rights organizations, because activists felt that it was high time that educators were held accountable for closing the “achievement gap” between White and Black children (DeBray-Pelot, Lubienski, & Scott, 2007; McGuinn, 2006). However, critics have argued that a reliance on these policies—especially high-stakes testing—has actually compromised academic rigor, especially in schools serving low-income children of color (Darling-Hammond, 2010) and might be detrimental to fostering greater trust in a school community (Meier, 2002). With the standards and accountability reform as a backdrop, I found that Black parents struggle to trust schools to educate children well—which included both an attention to academic rigor and cultivating a love of learning rooted in the aspirational potential and importance they place on education, a part of
Black parent habitus. As parents were not experts in academic instruction, how well educators could demonstrate that this education is taking place was consequential in earning parent trust in this area.

**Tracking Progress in Learning**

Having clear markers of academic progress was important for parents because, unlike with caring for and disciplining children, they did not claim expertise over the intricacies of educating students, and deferred to the expertise of educators. I found that No Excuses network charter schools tended to have standardized rubrics for grading that all teachers used, and standardized procedures for turning in and checking homework, whereas in DOE schools how parents were appraised of their child’s academic progress varied between teachers and schools, despite efforts to standardize the curriculum across the system. Thus, parents who send their children to No Excuses charter schools saw more evidence that their children were meeting academic benchmarks, which helped to earn their trust in this area.

As part of the contractual relationship with parents, No Excuses charter schools promised parents that their children will be educated well—as evidenced by proficiency rates on state standardized exams. In fact, the Transcend Academy network website states explicitly that closing the achievement gap is their primary goal, and that they use an acute focus on student data to improve instruction and outcomes. In return, parents commit to help the school in carrying out this mission, by supporting their child’s learning.

One of the main commitments parents make is that their children will always have their homework completed. In No Excuses charter schools, students who do not complete their homework receive a punishment—at Transcend Academy, for example, students in 3rd grade or older received afterschool detention, while students in kindergarten through 2nd grade missed out
on class parties. Homework at No Excuses charter schools is generally given out in weekly packets, and parents can call the teachers—who are required to give out their cell phone number to all parents in their class—if they have a question. This allows for informal day to day communication between parents and teachers regarding what children are learning. Mya Parker, a No Excuses Harlem mother, said to me:

That’s another good thing about this school. DOE frowns upon kids having access to the teachers via like text messages and things like that…honestly a lot of the work that these kids are doing these days it’s not the same work that us as parents went to school and did back then. So how am I gonna help you with school if I don’t know nothing about what you’re doing? It doesn’t make any sense. So, to be able to contact his teachers whenever we need the help or whatever, that’s a great thing.

The standardized procedures that schools had in place for the distribution of homework, giving feedback to parents, and holding students accountable for not completing it, allowed parents to track how their children were doing in school week to week.

Although the No Excuses charter schools required parents to ensure that their child’s homework was finished, they were wary of parents helping out with homework, believing that parents might not understand how the skills were taught in the class lesson. Sheryl Bradley, a Harlem No Excuses charter school mother, told me that her daughter’s school asked parents not to help out with homework because it might be “confusing” if they used a different “method.” The fact that No Excuses charter schools ask parents to check but not help with homework underscores the fact that schools perceived a gap in expertise between educators and parents in teaching students. The fact that the parents I interviewed generally deferred to this expertise differed from how they reacted to school discipline policy. Parents had more trust that educators were competent in teaching students academic content, and so building trust relied on how transparent schools were in showing academic progress. The No Excuses charter school parents
felt that the procedure for giving out and grading homework was transparent, and found that it yielded frequent feedback on how their child was doing academically.

The parents from No Excuses Charter schools described report card or back to school nights as a time when they could get more formal feedback from educators about their child’s progress. At Transcend Academy, attendance at back to school nights, held three times a year, is “mandatory”—if parents neglect to attend one of them, their child will miss field day at the end of the year. The parents meet in their child’s classroom and sit at their child’s desk. In the first round of Back-to-School nights that I attended at Transcend Academy in the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year, the teachers explained to parents how student work was graded—and that the rubrics they used were standardized across all grades—even into high school. They also demonstrated to the parents the kind of academic progress they would see in their child. As I wrote in my field notes:

The teachers discussed how the “scholars” would progress in reading throughout the year. On the wall to my right, was a series of laminated cloud shapes that corresponded to a reading level and a hot air balloon would represent each child. The teachers explained that the balloons would move up as the children made growth. They also displayed on the smart board an example of what a scholars’ writing looked like at the beginning of the year compared to the end of the year. The beginning of the year scanned image of student work, showed a child’s drawing and unintelligible letters. The end of the year image showed a neatly written sentence, with letters inside of the sentence lines, and a child’s picture. Many of the parents in the room responded to the image by nodding. The teachers mentioned that the rubric used to grade written work in kindergarten was the same that was used for all Transcend Academy network students—through high school.

The parents I talked with at Transcend Academy appreciated the transparency in knowing where their children were academically, and how academic progress is communicated to them informally throughout the year and formally during the Back-to-School nights. Gail Howard, a Transcend Academy mother, told me how the school would notify parents early in the year if their child was “promotion in doubt” so that they would be prepared and have time to help them
catch up. She said that it “paid off,” because they gave her extra work to help him, and he ended up being promoted to the 4th grade. Anita Johnson, another Transcend Academy mother, who met with the school’s academic dean and her son’s teachers during Back-to-School night when he was “promotion in doubt,” felt that they were very clear in communicating with her exactly where her son stood, as they “pulled out laptops,” “went over everything,” and showed her what “his rankings were.”

In contrast to No Excuses charter school parents, the ways that DOE public school parents were able to keep track of their child’s academic progress varied a lot more across different teachers and schools. Report card nights, which happen four times a year in all DOE schools and do not require parents to attend, are the main opportunity for parents to get formal feedback on their child’s progress that is standardized across the whole school system. The DOE school parents I interviewed often felt that these meetings, budgeted for fifteen-minute time slots, were too short to really have a productive conversation with the teacher. Only experienced, highly organized teachers were able to use the time well, and parents felt guilty and pressured if they took up more time to ask questions because other parents were waiting in line behind them.

Pamela Wilson, a Brooklyn DOE school parent, told me:

There’s never enough time to talk about any of the things that you want to talk about. There’s never any real solutions put forth. You feel…like as a parent you feel like the kid in the principal’s office almost, like I have to answer for all the things that you don’t like about my kid, all the things that my kid did wrong.

For DOE parents, the frequency of more informal updates on academic progress depended largely on their child’s teacher. Pamela, like many of the parents I spoke to, appreciated having informal communication with teachers, such as getting notes home from school, or chatting with teachers at drop off or pick up time. Tanisha Young, a Harlem mother whose two daughters attended two different DOE schools in Harlem, felt that “she didn’t really
need more time” at report card nights, because she is always at the school volunteering and keeping in touch with the teachers. However, the fact that Tanisha was on maternity leave for her youngest son allowed her to have more flexibility in her schedule to visit the school. It was hard for working parents to do this. Some of the working DOE parents I spoke to who were happy with the level of communication about their child’s academic progress told me that their child’s teacher used mobile phone apps, such as ClassDojo, allowing for updates via text message about quizzes and homework during the day.

Another major way that DOE parents were able to keep tabs on their children’s academic progress was through helping them with homework and seeing how they did on the class assignments. Like Nikki, many of the parents I spoke to were frustrated that teachers did not grade student work and get it home to them consistently. Kenya Harper, a PS970 mother, was annoyed that she was not seeing any graded work from her daughter—either due to “the teacher not checking it, or Niara not turning it in,” but she was planning on bringing up the issue at the upcoming report card night. However, helping Niara with homework gave her a sense of what she was working on in school and what she struggled with. “I know what my child can and can’t do,” she told me, “because we do homework every night.” But, Kenya said, “she doesn’t always know where [her] daughter is supposed to be,” whether she is on or behind on academic benchmarks.

In an effort to make what students need to master academically at each grade level to be college-ready more transparent, in 2011, New York State, along with 42 other states, initially adopted Common Core standards. When I was interviewing parents, the Common Core standards were new, and many DOE schools were struggling to handle the bumpy implementation of the new policy (Wall, 2014). Despite the fact that this policy change was supposed to clarify where
children should be at each grade level, the parents I spoke to found the new standards and curriculum to be confusing. Some of the parents talked me through examples from their child’s homework where their child was working on something simple—like a long division math problem—and showed me how frustrating it was to help them because the terminology and technique that their child was supposed to use in solving it was foreign to them. Claudette Peters, a Harlem mother, explained:

It is confusing. It is not the way we learned how to do math. And it’s not that it’s difficult, but it’s just that they’re introducing terminology that the parents have never heard before. So, when our children come home and we’re trying to help them with the homework, you know, we’re like, “What is this?” It’s not that we can’t add one plus one, but you know it’s when you’re…it’s just the terminology’s different, so when you would say, you know, you borrow one, they say it’s not borrowing; it’s renaming, because when you borrow something you have to give it back, so they don’t want to call it borrowing anymore. They want to call it renaming. So, it’s like little things they are saying, oh do it with renaming, and you’re like, “What? What is that?” So that’s why a lot of the parents are anxious.

While the Gifted and Talented Upper West Side School that Claudette’s older son attended was able to use resources to recover quickly from the bumpy implementation, parents from other less well-resourced schools spoke of how the introduction of the Common Core was sloppy and haphazard, with schools not getting the materials until well after the school year began, and teachers having to photocopy textbooks and other resources because their schools were not given sufficient materials. The lack of coordination and confusion undermined the trust that parents had in whether they would be able to keep track of their child’s academic progress.

**Being Challenged to “Really” Learn**

A major theme that emerged from my interviews was parent concerns over academic rigor, and how that factored that in their impressions of whether they trusted the school to educate their child well. While testing did allow parents to keep track of where children were, they also worried that a reliance on only testing undermined the full potential of the education
they were looking for. Parents not only wanted to make sure their children were being held to high academic standards, they also wanted their children to learn the value of learning and what education could do for them.

The parents I interviewed were concerned about whether teachers were dedicated to having high academic expectations for their children, regardless of their academic track. Many of the parents told me that they were frustrated when their children came home with reading books from their class libraries that were too easy for them. Evette Davis, who is the primary guardian of her granddaughter, who has hydrocephalus and cerebral palsy, was upset that she had not made any academic progress since she started at the school three years ago, and was still reading on the same grade level. She said that teachers at her granddaughters’ District 7519 DOE school, “weren’t paying attention” to the assignments and books they were giving to her for homework, “and just gave her the same ones over and over again” without checking them. Parents also worried that if their children were quiet or well behaved, they would get overlooked and not held to high academic expectations. Claudette Peters, whose 2nd grade son attends a predominately White and Asian gifted and talented school in Manhattan’s affluent Upper West Side neighborhood, was unhappy to hear that his teacher was “shocked” by his advanced reading level when she did assessments a couple of months into the year. Her son had been bored and disengaged in class, but since he was quiet and did not participate that much, his teacher was unaware that he needed more challenging work.

In light of the low expectations educators often had for their children, the parents I interviewed generally thought that standardized assessments had the potential to be useful in

19 District 75 schools are NYC public schools that are specially designed to educate students with disabilities.
allowing them to keep track of whether their children were being held to high academic expectations. However, they believed that, in practice, “high-stakes” testing, with its narrow focus on student test score outcomes, and punitive accountability for teachers and schools that failed to meet benchmarks, ultimately compromised academic rigor. Kimberly Campbell, a PS 1150 mother, told me that she believed that there “needed to be testing” but she did not like how schools ended up “teaching to the test,” because children “don’t really get the grasp of the concept[s] because they have to go through it so quickly that it’s missed.”

This concern that educators “teach to the test” was a common refrain among the DOE parents I interviewed—especially those sending their children to schools serving lower income, predominately Black and Hispanic students—who believed educators at their children’s schools were concerned with the appearance that students were meeting standards, instead of authentic learning. They noticed that the homework their children received became more skills-based, as children were explicitly taught test-taking strategies. This was especially true for parents whose children were in 3rd grade or older, which is when DOE elementary students begin to take state mandated standardized exams for English language arts (ELA) and math in the spring. Many parents mentioned that they knew when they were approaching a state standardized test, because their children would start bringing home test prep booklets.

Kenya Harper, a PS970 mother, who described her 3rd grade daughter, Niara, as “not a great test taker,” was disappointed in the new Common Core curriculum, which she thought was not giving her daughter “enough real practice,” and that her child’s teacher was always rushing on to the next section, to make sure her class covered all of the material for the test. She thought that standardized tests did not capture whether her daughter was really learning. She told me:

[With the test] she just reiterates the information that’s disseminated, not that she’s learning but the fact that she’s able to just to repeat it. I have a problem with that because
to go to the next grade or just to go through life you gotta know things fundamentally, but the way the test is going they just move them through. Then you run into a problem where you have the children not really grasping what they really need to go to the next grade and then it’s like the uphill battle.

While PS 970 was, as Mrs. Watkins put it, a “model” school for the neighborhood and often compared favorably to other Harlem schools in the Community School District (CSD), it still had much lower student academic outcomes when compared to Whiter more affluent schools in other parts of the socioeconomically diverse district, or to some of the high-performing large CMO network No Excuses charter schools in other parts of central Harlem. Mrs. Watkins told me that due to the school’s location and reputation, “expectations were raised” for it, especially when compared to other Harlem schools. As a result, PS 970 was not immune to pressures to produce higher student test scores. Rhonda Allen, a PS970 mother of a kindergarten son and the school PTA president, told me that parents of older children felt that there was too much of a focus on test prep, and that there was a switch in the focus of instruction once students approached testing grade levels. She said:

They’re preparing the kids for testing and it’s daunting for many parents…some parents may feel like they’re getting inundated with this test prep, which they need because its state mandated, but I don’t feel that yet so I can’t really say how much they’re educating. I think it’s below standards because I have looked at the state scores, which are not great. Even though there were improvements you know we only have 25% of our kids reading at a proficient level, and that’s alarming. So, what is happening with the other 75%?

Other parents also worried that the focus on test prep took time away from other learning activities that children would find more engaging—such as school trips, class projects, science experiments and the arts. Tanisha Young, a Harlem DOE mother of a 3rd grade and 4th grade daughter, said of her oldest daughter’s school:

________________________

20 Many local news articles about school options in the neighborhood talk about PS 970 as being one of the few “quality” schools.
It seems like they were teaching to the test all the way up until the test. You know that’s what the teachers are expected to do. So, they taught them the different strategies they needed [to take the exam] but it seemed like all they were focused on…like there were no trips because they were getting ready for the test all school year up until the test.

The parents I interviewed wanted their children to receive an engaging, well-rounded education, because they wanted elementary school to not only hold their children to high academic standards, but as Nikki Jones said, to cultivate a “love of learning.” This was the aspirational value Black parents often place on education—the parents I interviewed saw education as potentially empowering and liberating for their children, and they wanted their children to appreciate its value so that they would remain committed to learning, despite the obstacles they would face.

As mentioned earlier, No Excuses Network charter schools have become popular in this education policy context focused on standards and accountability, because their mission is closely tied to closing the gap in test score outcomes between lower-income Black and Hispanic students and affluent White students. What parents especially appreciated about these schools was this attention to academic rigor was tied explicitly to going to college, which infused an aspirational, goal-oriented understanding of education into the school culture. At Transcend Academy, as with many No Excuses charter schools, this translated into classroom being named after the teacher’s alma mater, and each class of students denoted by the year they would graduate from college. As Keisha Moore, a Transcend Academy mother, who believed that a college education meant that “you can have opportunities” and “you can go out do whatever you want to,” spoke about how the school’s college-going culture resonated with her:

College is something that…one thing I really like is I love… I just love the idea that college is like your end goal from the beginning. It’s very visual. You can feel the culture in the school. You can see it on the buildings. You can hear it because they sing chants. They have chants that they do in the morning about going to college and different things, so it instilled. You hear it, you see it, you feel it.
The parents I interviewed whose children attended No Excuses Network charter schools generally believed that their children were getting an education that was more rigorous and goal-oriented than what they would have received at their neighborhood zone school. Although there has been much debate over whether charter schools are linked to better educational outcomes for students in a more holistic sense, several research studies demonstrate that the charter schools in New York City outperform comparable district public schools on statewide tests (CREDO, 2013; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009). Claudia Page, a Harlem mother who is a director at a local pre-K and daycare program, and whose son attends a No Excuses Network Charter School, told me that she “saw the difference in the work habits, the type of work the students was getting” between her son’s school and neighborhood DOE schools, and that even though she was an educator in a public school, it is “sad to say” that she “would not send her child to a public school in New York City.”

However, charter school parents still had concerns about the consequences of an overreliance on testing and the limited nature of the school curriculum, which was often very scripted. The No Excuses charter school parents I interviewed had worries that the focus on preparing students to be successful on state tests might be compromising deeper learning—like comprehension, retention and critical thinking. Ebony Lewis, whose 3rd grade son attended a No Excuses Charter School in Brooklyn, put her concerns this way:

Here’s the thing. … …I feel like it’s more reaching goals than the actual learning, if that makes sense. Like I feel like they’re more focused on, “Let’s make sure that we at least have 90% of the students reading at their grade level by the end of the year,” than “Do you really understand what you’re reading when you read this passage? Are you reading just to be able to see that you went up a reading level? Do you know what it means?” Do you know what I mean? It’s like does the actual content of everything that you learn…I don’t know if they’re actually grasping everything.
Parents from charter schools also worried that the intense academic focus that students had to maintain throughout the day was grueling for students, and resulted in them disliking school. As mentioned earlier, Anita Johnson, a Transcend Academy talked about how it was a bit “much” for her 1st grade son, who was diagnosed with ADD, to stay focused for so long, and how he would often get in trouble for not being able to do it. In addition, No Excuses charter schools often had extended school days—Ebony described her son’s day as starting at 7:15am and ending at 4pm, during which he was required to concentrate only on instruction, with only a fifteen-minute snack break and a twenty-minute lunch break—and no recess or time to unwind and let out pent up energy. Ebony told me that although her son was very well behaved and always on task at school, it was like “pulling teeth” to get him do homework at night. She told me, wistfully, how he said to her at one point, “When I’m at home, I just wanna be free.”

In our interview, Mrs. Cole, the Transcend Academy principal, hinted at this tension between student engagement and a narrow focus on academic outcomes. Although she was proud that her school was able to improve upon meeting the socioemotional needs of students, she still felt the pressure of academic outcomes, which diminished these other accomplishments in her mind. When I asked her what the school needed to improve she said:

There’s just so many things. I think our results just need to be better, right, like our academic achievement results need to be better. I think more and more we’re making the school a more joyful place. It’s certainly a much safer place than it used to be when I was a teacher, but our results speak very loudly and right now we’re not achieving the level that we want to achieve.

Mrs. Bailey, the principal of the newly opened PS 1150, also struggled with balancing student socio-emotional needs and a focus on academic rigor. Since her school was new, and had taken on students who had previously attended a school that was closed because of discipline and safety issues, Mrs. Bailey said that in the first two years, the focus was to “support the students’
social and emotional well-being so that they could learn.” However, she acknowledged that for the Black parents—whose children were largely in the “upper” grades—the stakes in making sure that the academics were challenging were high—especially since the chaotic atmosphere at the old school was disruptive to instruction, and they felt that their children were behind. Mrs. Bailey said these parents knew that opportunities were “not just going to be handed to them,” and they had to “do the best they possibly could for their children.” Monica Hayes, a PS 1150 parent, discussed this when she told me about some of the concerns about academic rigor that PS 1150 parents—especially the largely African-American upper grade parents, whose children were from the school that phased out—had.

I’ll say Black people… we need to have an education…and more [Black] parents want that structure. I was just speaking to a parent yesterday she wants the structure for her child to learn because that’s the only way we gonna get anywhere. White people … their concept [of learning] is different. They’re more into the imaginary play in the school and more interactive and different things within the community. Do you know what I mean? But we’re like…we gotta learn this. There’s no time for play, we gotta learn this.

Both Monica and Mrs. Bailey said that many of the Black families were attracted to the No Excuses charter school that opened in the same building, because it was known for its structure and academic rigor. Reflecting the fact that parents from different backgrounds have different expectations for what education should look like, Mrs. Bailey felt that both the newer affluent and largely White parents of children in the “lower” grades and the Black families of children in the “upper” grades who came from the old shut-down school were both dissatisfied with the school’s academic program. As a result, her new school experienced both Black and White flight. She told me,

It’s funny because our second year or our third year I had like a mass exodus that ended up being good. It felt uncomfortable at first because it felt like a reflection on what we were doing. And, of course, my White families were nervous…that so many people were leaving…But they didn’t realize I was having Black flight at the same time because we were not progressive enough for you guys who just want your kids to come to school and
play all day, but we were also not rigorous enough for the families who want their children reading novels in kindergarten. But now that people know who we are it’s much easier. You know what you’re signing up for now.

Deidra Brown, another PS 1150 parent, recalled having some concerns about whether the school’s curriculum was rigorous enough for her 4th grade son after he started at the school, and one of her friends pulled her son out of the school because she felt like it “wasn’t academic enough.” She acknowledged that she was a PS 1150 parent who had “ridiculous” expectations—“you know like wanting them to do algebra in like pre-K or whatever,” she joked—and felt reassured after she met with Mrs. Bailey and heard about “new ideas she was having” for instruction. Her son’s West Indian teacher, who was “strict in a good way” and held her son to high expectations, instead of giving him good grades just because he was well behaved, also reassured her. Monica also stuck with the school, and was happy that her daughter, who had struggled with reading, “moved up six reading levels” due to the extra support the school had for the upper-grade students. When I spoke to Mrs. Bailey in December 2015, she felt that the school had “stabilized,” and that she was proud of the marked improvement she has seen in her self-contained classrooms.

The School System and Institutional Neglect

The experiences that parents had with their child’s school, and fact that whether educators cared was fundamental to the trust they placed in it, translated into distrust parents had in the school system. Such experiences often affirmed parents’ disposition to distrust schools and educators, an example of how habitus is shaped by experience. The parents I interviewed universally lacked confidence in the city school system, largely due to their perceptions that it was set up to neglect that educational needs of Black children. They believed that efforts to try to hold schools accountable for student outcomes and to standardize what students learned resulted
in schools caring that it looked like they were educating students, rather than actually doing it. When parents talked about teachers in general, they also voiced a lot of distrust, concluding that many teachers were not as dedicated to students as they should be. However, they also attributed some of this lack of teacher dedication to educators being beleaguered by the demands of high-stakes testing.

*It’s All About the Façade: The School System and Education Reform*

As a result of the negative experiences that they and other parents they knew had, the parents I interviewed largely believed that the school system systemically neglected the needs of Black students. Pamela Wilson, a Brooklyn mother, noted that there are “Black schools, then other schools,” and “where all the Black schools are, usually in lower income communities of color, we just don’t care for those students.” Parents put part of this blame on the fact that the NYC Department of Education is a big system, and the individual needs of children often get lost in the shuffle. Noel Carter, a Harlem DOE mother, said, “there’s a lot of mistrust,” but it is the “problem of big bureaucracy,” which does not “really care about your personal situation.”

Parents often said that schools in general paid attention to whether the education they provided “looked good” on the surface, because to tackle the real systemic problems in the system was too difficult and overwhelming. Claudia Page, a Harlem charter school mother who is also a pre-K director for a DOE school, told me that this resulted in children—especially lower-income children of color—not really being educated. She said:

Like I said I believe that so much things are spent on the façade of things opposed to really educating the child. They have teachers doing so much where they can’t focus on students…I think that because of the bureaucracy around public school, teachers; their demand is on so many other things besides the children. And I think that your focus is on so many other things, the façade of things, the way things look opposed to really educating the students.
Reflecting this sentiment, many parents believed that the school system ended up just passing students through the grades, without making sure that they were learning and prepared for the future. The parents I interviewed would often say that when it came to struggling students, the system would just “label” children as having academic and behavioral difficulties, and no work would be put into addressing the problems so that children could learn. Janelle Foster, a Harlem DOE mother whose son struggled with behavioral issues, told me that the DOE “doesn’t deal well with behavioral issues,” and is “really quick to label the child a problem child instead of trying to figure out what exactly is the problem and try to find ways to work with it.”

Parents felt that labeling was especially an issue with Black boys. Jaeda Price, a Harlem mother who had frustrating experiences with her son’s school’s discipline policy, said that one of the biggest complaints she hears from friends is the “concern for Black boys,” and that educating them is one of major things that the city schools are “failing” at.

The idea that the NYC school system was not really educating their children, and was more concerned with creating a “façade” that learning was happening, centered on the focus of schools on test preparation and test score outcomes. The parents I spoke to believed that testing could be useful if it was used diagnostically—but they felt that high stakes testing made it so the schools taught students to the test instead of actually teaching. Mya Parker, a Harlem No Excuses charter school parent, told me that they do not “teach” children “to teach them” anymore, “they’re teaching them to take a test.” Parents also felt that new reforms in the school system—like the Common Core—were often attempted in order to make it appear that school officials were trying to make changes—without thinking through the ramifications of what would happen when they were implemented. Camika Harris, a Harlem mother, was very critical
of the changeover to the Common Core curriculum standards, which she felt was pushed on schools haphazardly without really being fleshed out. She said,

[The Common Core] is not fully in place. What they have now done is taken a project, an experiment and given it to our children. I’m sorry but it upsets me when you use my son as a guinea pig. When I’m sitting in this room and a representative from the board of ed looks me in my eye and says, “Well we don’t know about that part yet, we haven’t finished piecing it together,” how are you giving my child something incomplete? If my son hands in incomplete homework he gets a partial grade. So, what does that say about the Board of Ed? What are you really teaching my son?

Yolanda Walker, a Harlem mother echoed that sentiment when she said that children in “our communities” are “seen as the throw-aways,” and that reforms are tried out, and if they work they are applauded and if they “don’t work, so what, you know, it’s this hamster wheel of educating” where nothing is really being changed. Rhonda Allen, another Harlem mother said, “it’s almost like…the DOE can constantly go to the blueprint” and “it’s almost like they’re winging it.” “We’re working so hard to keep up with or be at a level of the Chinese or everyone else,” she added. “That we’re losing the essence of what makes them effective, productive, happy children that can still perform extremely well.”

Teaches Do Not Care Like They Used to: A Loss of Relational Trust

While the parents I spoke to at times had high regard for and trusted the dedication of their child’s teacher, when they spoke about teachers in the school system in general, they would often say that too many of them did not really care about educating children. Parents felt that too many teachers in the school system did not have the commitment to overcome the many challenges that teaching students in their communities, burdened by a history of systemic educational neglect, entailed. A common refrain was to say that too many of the school system’s teachers were there “just to collect a check.”
A few of the parents I interviewed placed the blame on the teacher’s union—which they felt worked to further the interests of teachers over the children that they taught. Curtis Wright, a Harlem father and one of the most vocal critics of the teachers’ union, said that “so many of these folks care more about adults” than the children, and he gets so angry when union leaders claim they care about children—they would not prevent principals from getting “rid of crappy teachers” if that were true. Nikki Jones, a Brooklyn mother who sent her children to both PS 1150 and Transcend Academy, echoed this sentiment, saying that DOE schools needed to change their hiring process for teachers. She said:

I mean I really hope that we can develop a hiring process that is dependent on a teacher’s ability and experience and not… I’m not sure how to do this, but we really just need to get teachers who want to be teachers and not teachers who just want to be a part of a union, who want to just get a paycheck, you know who want summers off. I would like to see more teachers who are passionate about what they do.

A more common explanation that surfaced from the parents I interviewed was to attribute this lack of passion and care that many teachers demonstrated to the pressure put on them by high-stakes testing. As Pamela Wilson, a Brooklyn mother told me, “she always has to imagine that teachers” have her child’s “best interest at heart,” and believes that people “did not become teachers to hurt” children, but that they are dealing “with a million of outside forces” that they do not have control over. Parents believed that teachers could not really demonstrate care toward their children unless they were treated well and all too often teachers were working in challenging conditions without enough support. Gail Howard, a Transcend Academy parent, said:

You know it depends on how well they take care of the teachers…If they don’t want to pay the teachers properly and give the teachers the resources that they need and the time that they need then it’s not gonna go well, because if the teachers can’t perform, they’re not gonna be able to carry that over to the students
Most of the parents I interviewed grew up in New York City and attended the city’s public schools. When they talked about their own educational experiences, many of them remembered the teachers in the past as more caring—both in their dedication to students and to the communities that they taught in. Ebony Lewis, a Brooklyn mother who went to public school in the borough, thought that “there was a certain degree of commitment there” among teachers “that she doesn’t know is here now.” Kenya Harper, PS 970 Harlem mother, remembers that the teachers “loved us” and did not “just put up with us,” and “even the teachers that was hard on us, they were hard because they understood was it was gonna be like when we got to the next level.”

The way that Kenya describes teachers in the past hearkens back to the kind of caring that is linked to exemplary Black educators, and suggests the presence of relational trust. Janelle Foster, a Harlem mother, also talked about relational trust, remembering the teachers being closer to families, even though most of her teachers were not from her neighborhood. She said,

I think there’s a big difference in the way the teachers are. I think when I was in school I felt like there were more teachers that cared more and that were really interested in the kids doing better and learning. Even just that whole village raise a kid thing, it was just more of that if that makes any sense...There was just more of a sense of community and you’re not just a kid that’s coming to school, we’re a family, we’re a community, we have to take care of each other. It was more of that. There was more communication with the parents. It was just more of a close-knit kinda thing. I don’t know how else to explain it. Now it’s just so…it’s like now for the majority it’s a paycheck and it’s not really that closeness…

The parents wondered whether this change in how much teachers cared for the students stemmed from the increased pressure teachers are under due to high-stakes testing. Janelle Foster wondered if it had to do with the “amount of stuff” they put on teachers who are “so stressed half the time” that they do not have the time to build more caring relationships with students and families. Mya Parker concurred with this idea, saying that she remembers school as not “so focused on a test as it is right now,” and that it was “more comfortable between parents and
teachers.” These accounts from parents suggest that perhaps the focus on high-stakes testing has made it more difficult for teachers to build relational trust with students and parents.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I clarify and discuss which purposes of schooling were the most consequential for Black parents in the development of trust or distrust. For the parents I interviewed, many of the moments that triggered an affirmation or diminishment of the trust or distrust that they had in their child’s school and its educators revolved around school discipline and student learning. Crucially, whether and how educators cared for their child was fundamental to whether parents came to trust educators in these areas, as institutional educational neglect informs the distrust that parents are disposed have toward schools and educators in general. Claims to expertise also played a role in the nature of parent trust in discipline and learning. Parents felt a greater claim to expertise when it came discipline, and so trust with educators was fostered through sharing and negotiating understanding around it. Parents were more likely to defer to the expertise of educators when it came to student learning, and so the development of trust depended on educators’ ability to demonstrate academic progress, and whether they shared the aspirational understanding of education that parents held, as a part of their habitus.

The findings also from this chapter also shed light on the relationship between school type and the development of trust. Regardless of school type, school leaders play an important role in establishing a caring school community and relational trust with Black parents. However, there are aspects of different school types that can impede the development of relational trust. Thus, for PS 970, which through past charismatic leadership had already developed relational trust with parents, maintaining trust was dependent on parents’ evaluations of their children’s
teachers—who varied widely in how they taught students and managed classroom behavior. With PS 1150, which was a newly opened school serving a racially and socioeconomically group of parents, establishing relational trust relied on building shared understandings about education between parents and educators—especially around academic rigor. Finally, at Transcend Academy, the rigid standardization of discipline policies and teaching methods that attempted to eliminate variation and mitigate risk left little room for negotiation on the part of both educators and parents, and impeded the development of authentic, relational trust.

This theme of having the room to negotiate and development shared understandings about educating children is shaped by power dynamics between educators and parents. In the next chapter, I will discuss how this plays out by investigating how the ways that Black parents engage with schools relate to trust and distrust.
CHAPTER SIX

Vigilance as a Form of Cultural Capital: Disrespecting Black Parent Engagement in Different Educational Contexts

I would want her to have more than what I had. I don’t know how else to put it. It’s just that I just want more for her and in this day and time there’s so much available and I don’t understand why she can’t seem to get that here especially in America where everything is so free and other places people have to pay and die for an education. And here we are with all of this available stuff and I think she’s slighted twice; one because she’s Black, and two because she’s got a disability.

Evette Davis is raising her granddaughter, Nicole, who has hydrocephalus and cerebral palsy and faces significant learning delays. Ms. Davis knew that she had to stay vigilant to ensure that her granddaughter—who she said was “slighted twice” as she was vulnerable to unfair and uncaring treatment from educators, due to institutionalized biases and policies that harm students who are Black, disabled and lower-income—received the education she needed. Ms. Davis knew that if she did not look after Nicole’s best interests, it was unlikely that anyone else would. However, while Ms. Davis’s protective stance and advocacy toward her granddaughter’s school was a crucial part of how she cared for her child, educators at her child’s school found this orientation to be unsupportive, hostile and even threatening. Ms. Davis’s experiences highlight how vigilance toward educators is vital in the protection of Black children against poor treatment. How vigilant parents believed they needed to be toward their child’s school was related to the extent to which parents trusted or distrusted their child’s school. It also reveals the importance of respect as a fundamental feature of trusting relationships between parents and schools (see Table 1). How much schools received, understood—and most importantly respected—this vigilance was consequential in whether they were able develop more trusting relationships with parents.
Nicole currently attends a DOE District 75 school in downtown Manhattan which is co-located with a high school and serves a student population that is 38% Black/African-American, 44% Hispanic, 10% White, 6% Asian, and 69% free and reduced priced lunch. Though Ms. Davis considers the school principal to be “inviting” and “wide open” and found her to always be responsive when she calls with a concern, she did not find the school to be transparent in other ways. Educators only welcomed parents to come and visit classrooms when it was planned in advance, and Ms. Davis objected to the fact she would have to visit the security desk, go to the main office and have them call the teacher before she was able to stop by. Even though she acknowledged that it was probably due to security issues, she wished that she could “pop up” to see what things were like when teachers were not expecting parents. She said,

Because I’ve been to all of the planned [events], and I know that they set this up for when we’re coming, so I want to know does the same procedure go on when it’s not being prepared for us to come. There’s two times that I’ve popped up. I just never was able to get there in the classroom. Either [Nicole] was somewhere else in a therapy class or the teacher wasn’t there…like they deterred me from different places but I said, “You know, I’ll try again.” But like I said every planned visit they had for us I was there, but I just wasn’t able to pop up in the classroom when unplanned. I was always at the school but never able to catch her in that classroom.

Ms. Davis also perceived evasiveness and defensiveness in the ways that her granddaughter’s educators treated her. She was very disappointed with the level of respect afforded to her by her daughter’s classroom teacher and paraprofessional, who she said, got very “defensive” and had a “snappy attitude” whenever she asked them questions about how her granddaughter was doing in class, even though she is “only concerned about her well-being.” Ms. Davis told me, “I think

21 Paraprofessionals—or “paras”—are teaching assistants who provide services to students—usually those with special needs—in addition to the certified classroom teacher. The paraprofessional is part of the educational staff that satisfies the educator to student ratios required in classrooms for some students with special needs. Some special needs students have a one-on-one paraprofessional who stays with them for the entire day.
they taking it as an attack or they’re not doing their job.” She noticed that the paraprofessional, who was “very young,” would speak to her like she “was one of my peers”, and that the teacher would talk to her like they were just “two people on the street.” About all of these instances of disrespect, Ms. Davis said:

The behavior was really just really unacceptable to me because I didn’t know teachers behaved like that. I understand that they’re human, but I just had so much high standards and hopes for teachers, and all the teachers I had come up with you know I looked up to... And because I’m from an older generation, and I guess I must look younger or they feel because they’re educated and I’m not, that they can talk to me and tell me anything. Because I wouldn’t allow that to happen, and I spoke up for myself, I became the enemy and the principal stepped in.

Ms. Davis ended up having a several meetings with the teacher and the paraprofessional that were mediated by the school principal. She noticed a change in their tone afterward. The paraprofessional started “minding her Ps and Qs,” by addressing her more respectfully, and calling her to let her know if she was going to be late to the school. The teacher’s tone also changed—she began calling her “Ms. Davis,” asking her if she needed anything or if she wanted to come and help. Ms. Davis believed that the teacher and paraprofessional’s demeanors changed because they knew that “she’ll go over their heads” and “directly to the principal” if she had a complaint—highlighting how her vigilance was critical in earning their respect and responsiveness. Ms. Davis noticed that she was one of the few special needs parents who was able to have a presence in the school, and attributed that to why the teachers “[felt] they can get away” with having an uncaring attitude toward students. This suggested to her that educators assumed that the parents of these students did not care and so felt no pressure to do the difficult work of caring for and being dedicated to students.
Valuing Black Parent Engagement: Vigilance as a Form of Cultural Capital

Ms. Davis’s account highlights the vigilance that the Black parents I interviewed exercised toward their children’s education. In a racist society, a watchful and protective stance was essential for parents in making sure their children were cared for and educated in school, and comes out of a knowledge of the barriers their children may face and a disposition to distrust educators, that is a part of Black parent habitus. At times, this orientation compelled parents to try to have a presence in their child’s school—to have a watchful eye, prepared to intervene. Research has documented that this protective stance and style of parent engagement does not always conform to the expectations of educators, who can find it unsupportive and even hostile (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Annette Lareau & Erin McNamara Horvat, 1999). Thus, how Black parents—especially lower income Black parents—engage with educators, born out of a disposition to distrust, is often understood as counterproductive and furthering poor relationships between Black families and schools.

I argue for a shift in perspective, where a disposition to distrust schools and educators—or vigilance—on the parent of Black parents is recognized and respected for its value. While much of the literature of trust in schools assumes that trust is inherently productive (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004), it is often prudent in this society for Black parents to be distrustful when it comes to their children’s education. It is shrewd for parents to trust schools only when they earn it. Thus, joining other work that highlights the valuable aspects of cultural childrearing strategies associated with parents (especially mothers) of color (Collins, 1994; Cooper, 2009; Diamond, 2000; Lofton & Davis, 2015) and the forms of cultural capital associated with communities of color (Carter, 2003, 2005; Yosso, 2005), I understand Black parents’ vigilance as a form of cultural capital. Recognizing that how much cultural capital is
valued is context-dependent (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Carter, 2003), whether schools stifle or respect Black parent vigilance plays a role in the development of relational trust between educators and parents.

Though it may be prudent for Black parents to have a guarded orientation toward schools in general, individual schools and educators often disregard the worth of this vigilance, which is manifested in disrespect toward parents. As institutions, schools can either diminish or affirm the distrust of parents through how they structure opportunities for parent involvement, and whether these norms respect parent vigilance. Classic models of parent involvement, such as that put forward by Epstein (2010) understand parent involvement as ranging from more basic supportive home-based assistance—such as helping a child with homework—to more meaningful partnerships as families and schools collaborate in school policy decision-making. Such models encourage schools to foster an environment where collaborative partnerships between schools, families and communities thrive. However, these models understand parent involvement narrowly and through a lens of White middle class cultural norms (Cooper, 2009; Doucet, 2011), which assume that parents and educators have shared understandings about education, e.g., when parents are not present in schools it means that they are uninvolved and not dedicated to their children’s education, and parents should be supportive of educators in order to exercise parent involvement that is beneficial to children. These narrow understandings of parent involvement do not take into account the potential benefits associated with a protective and reformist orientation. For parents of color, being vigilant and ready to intervene when they engage with schools is a way to ensure their children get what they need in educational settings (Auerbach, 2007; Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Fennimore, 2017).
These models of parent involvement also downplay how power influences the reception of parent engagement, and how a vigilant and reformist stance on the part of affluent White parents is often respected by schools, even when it is overzealous (Demerath, 2009; Lareau, 2003). The lack of respect that Black parents—and especially lower-income Black parents—often perceive from educators is consequential to the development of trust as respect is a fundamental characteristic of trusting relationships between parents and schools. If schools respected the vigilance of Black parents as an asset, there could be greater negotiations of understandings around educating children, and more impetus for schools to be transparent and keep parents appraised of their children’s educational experiences—all of which could help earn the trust of parents. However, as an example of how unequal power dynamics can be detrimental to development of trust (Farrell, 2004), schools often have little incentive to value the engagement of Black parents—especially those whose children attend lower income schools that predominately serve Black and Hispanic students. Indeed, educator bias against Black parents—especially lower-income Black parents—based in “deficit-thinking” (Valencia, 1997) is based on negative assumptions that distrust the worth of Black mothers as parents that are dedicated to their children’s’ education (Cooper, 2009; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, 1978). Educators often respond to parents with disrespect and distrust, and as distrust is reciprocal, this can affirm parents’ disposition to distrust schools.

In this chapter, I investigate how parent engagement, and the extent to which schools respect it, is associated with the affirmation or diminishment of the distrust Black parents often have toward schools. I find that although many parents struggled to be as involved in their child’s school as they wanted, they believed that having a presence in their child’s school helped them manage distrust. Having a presence at their child’s school gave parents opportunities to be
vigilant—to monitor what was happening and to intervene if the situation warranted it. I also found that parents understood having a presence at the school was not just about dealing with their distrust of the school—it was also about dealing with educators’ distrust of them and their worth as parents. Parents tried to be present in schools not only to keep an eye on their children, but also to earn the trust and respect of educators and prove their dedication, so that their children would receive better treatment.

I also find that how schools received engagement from Black parents varied by school type and the racial and socioeconomic make-up of the school student body, but that across these different contexts, parents felt disempowered and disrespected by educators. Schools earned parent trust based on how accessible and transparent they were; whether they effectively communicated with, responded to and respected parents; and how much power parents had to negotiate school policies. In lower-income DOE schools serving predominately Black and Hispanic student bodies, while there were instances where individual educators built trusting relationships with parents, overall the power differentials between parents and educators led schools to disregard parent vigilance and to default to systemic practices that bred distrust.

Educators in No Excuses charter schools allowed parents to monitor instruction and classrooms, and were eager to demonstrate that they were following through on what they promised educationally. However, how parents engaged in their children’s education was entirely on the schools’ terms, and limited the scope of parent vigilance, as school contracts mandated parents to be supportive and participate in specific ways, and parents had very little room to negotiate rigid school policies. In socio-economically diverse DOE schools which include a sizable portion of affluent White students, schools did respect parent vigilance, and put in place systems that allowed for parents to monitor the school and negotiate school policies.
However, in these contexts, affluent White parents wielded disproportionate power in demanding changes that benefited their children, and Black parents were often marginalized. I end this chapter with a discussion of how the parents I interviewed, regardless of the school their child attended, did not trust the school system to respond to parent concerns. This reinforced their disposition to be vigilant—they knew it was up to them that their children got the education they needed.

**Having a Presence at the School to Manage Distrust**

The parents I interviewed saw being present in their child’s school as a way to manage distrust—both distrust that they had of educators and that educators had of them. While many parents could not be involved in their child’s school as much as they would like or in the way that they would like—due to inflexible work schedules or school policies—they used the opportunities that they did have to monitor how their children were doing in school, and to protect them from poor treatment. Parents tried to be strategic in their interactions with educators—making sure that teachers and school staff knew their child had a parent who cared and was on the watch. They realized that educator bias against Black parents—especially lower-income Black parents—based in “deficit-thinking” (Valencia, 1997) which assumes that Black mothers do not care about their children and are lazy and hostile (Cooper, 2009; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, 1978), is all too common. They knew that building cooperative and supportive relationships with educators could directly benefit their child. However, they also were ready to intervene if something was wrong, even if it meant coming into conflict with the school—because the stakes were high, and they realized that being passive could result in their child being neglected.
A major theme that emerged as I interviewed parents was that they saw being involved in their children’s schools as a way to dispel the distrust that educators had of them, as Black mothers. Parents talked about how they believed that educators would have negative assumptions about their dedication to education before getting to know them. Anita Johnson, a Brooklyn mother whose son and daughter attend Transcend Academy/Eastern Brooklyn, spoke to me about how one of the school deans regarded her when her children first started at the school. She “basically got the impression” that the dean thought she “wasn’t going to be an involved parent”—it was her “tone,” her body language” and the “movement of her eyes” as she gave her a condescending, judging look, that let Anita know, “ok I can see what we’re working with here.” Latasha Edwards, a mother whose daughter attends PS 970/Central Harlem Elementary School, talked about how she believed that the negative assumptions that educators made about her also hinged on the fact that she was a younger mother. She told me:

Just like the parents are judgmental, the teachers is judgmental too. I’ve been judged in different daycares that I took my daughter to. I was even judged [at PS 970] a little bit when I first came here until people got to know me. A lot of times they’re like, “You’re young, so you’re gonna have an attitude, or you’re gonna want to fight, or you’re gonna be loud and curse.” I was never grown like that. They gotta get comfortable with you like you gotta get comfortable with them.

The parents I interviewed saw being involved as a way to disrupt these assumptions. Parents were aware of the negative stereotypes that plague Black mothers—that they are lazy and do not care about their children, and that they abrasive, ignorant and difficult to work with (Cooper, 2007; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Annette Lareau & Erin McNamara Horvat, 1999; Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, 1978). Given the stereotypes that are often associated with Black mothers—and especially lower income Black mothers—as not caring about their children’s education, the parents felt they had to make sure that teachers knew that they were involved and
dedicated. Tanya Perkins, a Harlem mother whose son attends a No Excuses charter school, described the importance of proving to educators that you were an “active parent.” She told me:

A lot of times it’s I feel like on the parents as well because if you aren’t an active parent and if you don’t show the school that…listen I’m involved in my kid’s life and I’m checking homework and I’m here at report card night. If you don’t to that then the teachers won’t know that this kid does have someone who cares.

Parents also talked about how having a presence in their child’s school helped educators to view them as reliable and credible. Citing a history of vindictive behavior on the part of some teachers towards “difficult” parents, Latasha Edwards talked about how having educators in her daughter’s school who could “vouch” for her character, and say that she was “very involved” parent, was a form of protection. She said,

This neighborhood has a trend that it’s like if they don’t get along with you or they don’t like you for whatever reason they do spiteful things like try to make fake ACS cases and things like that. I’ve seen that happen to other people around here who have been parents. So, by doing that you know I have people that can vouch for me, “Listen she’s a very involved parent, she is a good parent, you know,” things like that…I’ve seen it happened to people who were close to me that it could have easily been me. Since the first time I’ve seen it happen I’ve been proactive in school and I’ve been proactive in trying to let people see what kind of parent I am.

Parents also understood the strategic advantage of educators at their children’s schools trusting them as a “good” parent. Pauline Franklin, whose daughter attends a DOE school in Upper Manhattan, told me that being involved in her daughter’s school gave her “street cred,” which was not afforded equally to all other parents. As a result, she has the “kind of relationship” with educators in the school where they value her input and “they listen” when she has a concern. Parents talked about how getting this “street cred” helped them to build relationships with staff, so if they did have a concern they knew that the staff would be more responsive. Alisha Thompson, a Queens mother whose daughter attends her neighborhood DOE school, talked about important it was that “the principal knows her face,” and how that proved useful
when she wanted to get her daughter’s kindergarten class changed to a veteran teacher’s, who had a better reputation.

Mya Parker, a Harlem mother, told me that having a relationship with the staff at her son’s No Excuses charter school allowed her some leniency with the strict uniform policy. Even though it was school policy that students’ boots had to be all Black, her son’s father bought him a pair of winter boots that had White letters. Nevertheless, Mya felt they were the best shoes she had to protect her son’s feet from the cold and snowy winter, and had him wear them to school. She said that she was able to get away with this infraction because of the relationship she has with the adults at the school:

I mean I feel like it’s because I have such a relationship with them. I’ve been here for so long, and the person that is the operations manager down there I was here when she started…Little stuff like that they let go. My son will pull his pants over the top of his boots or whatever so that only the Black part is showing on the bottom, but I’m not changing his boots.

In the face of the unfair treatment that Black children often receive in schools, the parents I interviewed believed that it was up to them to make sure their children got the care they needed at school. Following the saying that “the squeaky wheel gets the grease,” parents felt that being present and vocal at the school was a way to attempt to make educators more responsive. As Jaeda Price, a Harlem mother put it, her son’s school knows that she is “that parent,” she is “fully involved” and wants to know everything, and she is not one to have an “ok whatever you say” attitude. Kenya Harper, a PS 970 Harlem mother, admitted that people might think that she is “a bit overbearing” as a parent, but that it was because “she was not going to let her daughter slip through the cracks.” She said that she wanted to know how the teacher was feeling, and if she needed anything, because “anything that can elevate [her] day” will “make [her] daughter’s day better.”
Monitoring the School: How Parents Handle Their Distrust of Educators

Another theme that emerged from my discussions with parents was the desire to “pop up” at the school to peek into their child’s classroom—in order to observe what goes on during a regular day—not one where their children’s schools expected parents to be there. The practice of “popping-up” was an example of how parents wanted to exercise vigilance. Some parents did acknowledge that it could be disruptive either to the teacher’s instruction or the children’s behavior. Kimberly Campbell, a PS 1150/North Central Brooklyn Elementary School mother, said that although she feels that volunteering in the classroom “boosts” her daughter’s “confidence,” that there needs to be “limits,” and that parents visiting the classroom should be something that is “set up with the teacher” and associated with the plan for the day. Ebony Lewis, a Brooklyn No Excuses charter school mother, did not “see the need” to visit her son’s classroom and sit to watch, even though she knew that school would allow it. She had “never gotten any reports” about him misbehaving or not staying on task in the classroom, and so “she didn’t feel the need to just pop up on him” and “disturb him.”

However, many of the parents I talked with were reassured by opportunities to see what was going on in their child’s classroom. Highlighting the importance that parents placed on classroom management and how they often felt they could claim expertise in this area, it was usually to make sure that the teacher was keeping their child on task and engaged with the lesson. Cynthia Green, a Brooklyn PS 1150 mother who is a frequent volunteer in the school, admitted that she liked to peek into her daughter’s classroom, to “see her in her element.” Parents also looked to check whether they were satisfied how the teacher managed the classroom environment and behavior of other children. Kenya Harper, a PS 970 mother, said that she looks for how the “teacher’s dealing with it if there is a problem child” in the classroom, as well as the
“climate and temperature of the classroom too.” “The thing I have with some teachers,” she added, “Like some of them just don’t care. That’s pretty much what I’m looking for.” Keisha Moore, a Transcend Academy mother, talked about peeking through the window just to check on how her 1st grade daughter was behaving, and whether she was “struggling with the person sitting next to her.” This helped her to know, beyond relying on teacher accounts, what was causing her misbehavior if she came home with a report noting that she was distracted in class.

Mya Parker, a No Excuses Harlem mother, echoed this, saying:

I’m looking at just about everything…That’s why sometimes I stand outside the door and just watch, because I don’t want the teacher to treat you a certain way because I’m sitting there. I want to see how you’re acting when I’m not sitting there, you understand? I’m watching everything. I’m watching. I’m listening for stuff, and if there’s annoying noises and things like that that might be distracting to my child, fix that, because I don’t want to hear no problems later on about, “Oh he was all distracted.” Well that buzzing that was in the back, y’all never did fix it, so of course.

Like Ms. Davis, in the beginning of this chapter, some parents started trying to “pop up” as a reaction to a harmful experience, usually related to poor classroom management or a failure to keep children safe. Pamela Wilson, a Brooklyn mother of two boys in a DOE school, and a frequent volunteer at their school, recalled how chaotic her son Michael’s 1st grade classroom was whenever she saw it during the school day. The teacher “didn’t have any classroom management, so that class was constantly on tilt,” she said. “I would go up there and the class would be torn apart.” Pamela said that after being in that out of control classroom it took him until the middle of 2nd grade to “regroup,” especially since most of his classmates from the poorly managed class the year before were still in his class. She told me,

I think I pop in probably because of that experience. Like [before] I would kind of be around but I wouldn’t like really pop in. I would still talk to the teachers and see them and be like, “Give me a call if you need me,” but I didn’t do pop-ins. It was really because…it really is because of that experience that I was like…or like make a really concerted effort to be like, “I’m coming in your classroom. I’m gonna believe everything
my son tells me about your classroom if it’s crazy, like just so you know because I’ve been through this before.”

Jaeda Price, a Harlem mother whose son attends a racially and socioeconomically diverse charter school, as discussed in the previous chapter, was very frustrated with her son’s teacher’s classroom management and discipline style. She felt that her engagement in the school, and the fact that her son was in the first class of students, allowed her to feel comfortable being present in the school and voicing her concerns to school administrators. She also wanted to do a classroom visit to get some more insight into why her son was having behavior difficulties. However, she did not like that it had to be scheduled in advance. “I want to surprise my child,” she said. “But I want to surprise you too...let’s be real.” She wanted to see how the classroom interactions unfolded on a “normal day.” She said:

I want to see a natural session or a normal session, because if I’m telling you as a parent to the teacher that I’m coming in… It’s human nature. If I’m telling you I’m coming to watch what’s going on, your habits are gonna be different, your movement is gonna be different, but if you don’t know either way, just like the child doesn’t know, then I just want to see it in action. Then I can either fault both of you guys, fault neither one of you guys or see where the disconnect is.

Camika Harris, a Harlem DOE mother, whose son experienced bullying at his school, which I also discussed in the previous chapter, felt the need to be present in the school to protect her son—especially since she felt the school staff were not keeping him safe. She told me that the first reason she made a habit of going to the school was so that her son “understands” that “she is there” and “is always going to support him,” even if nobody else was. The second reason was that so that she would “know what is going on,” because “just because things are going on” it “doesn’t mean that [she] will be informed about it.” “Popping up” at the school was a way for Camika to be a witness, to be able to say “ok, I saw that.” She told me about what she watched out for when she goes to the school saying,
I look at everything. I look at the new staff that’s coming in. I look at the students and their behavior. I look at the parents and their behavior. I look to see who he’s hanging out with when I’m not looking. I am the parent that will come and stand in the doorway like a stalker and you won’t know I’m there and I see everything. I just…I’m paranoid a lot. I worry a lot. I want to make sure you’re ok.

*Intervening in the School: Stepping in When Things Go Wrong*

When parents monitored what was happening in their child’s school, their vigilance could give them the opportunity to try to intervene when something was going poorly. Some of the parents that I interviewed whose children struggled with behavior in the classroom knew that being present at the school gave them the opportunity to step in and help teachers with classroom management. Highlighting the expertise parents believed they had when it came to disciplining their child, these parents also tried giving teachers advice on discipline strategies that worked at home. Janelle Foster, a Harlem DOE mother, whose 1st grade son was eventually diagnosed with ADHD, realized that his teacher was a poor classroom manager, and so she “literally had to sit in the classroom” with her son to make sure he stayed on task to learn in the distracting and unruly environment. Janelle, who was grateful that her job was “kind of lenient” with her and allowed her to go in to the school, started the IEP evaluation process for him and “sat in the class for the first half of most mornings” with her son. Janelle explained that she “wasn’t in denial,” and that she “realized that her son could be a handful.” However, she thought that the poor classroom management was exacerbating his behavior problems, and did not like to think about what would happen if she weren’t there. She ended up speaking to the vice principal about what she saw in the classroom.

I spoke to the vice principal…because I noticed a couple of things while I was there—not only that the class was all over the place—like just the management alone was just horrible. The teacher wasn’t able to deal really…she would have rug time and the kids were like jumping all over each other, and this one’s pushing that one and the other. I’m looking like…but of course [my son’s] sitting because I’m watching, so who knows what he would have been doing had I not been there? [The teacher’s] just kinda just going
about, and I’m like, “When is she gonna say something?” Never happened…Then they go to the tables, she turns her back and a child takes chips out of his desk and throws it at my kid, like throws it across the table, and he’s looking like… He goes to pick them up to give them back and she turns around. She gets on him because he has the chips in his hands and I had to tell her, “No, those weren’t his, he just threw it over to him,” and it was just …so if I’m not there to catch those little things and tell you this is what happened what would have happened?

After her conversation with the vice principal, Janelle’s son was moved to another classroom. Janelle felt that the new teacher had much better classroom management—that everything “just flowed in a better way,” and earned her trust. Her son’s evaluation was finally completed, and he got behavioral therapy and began to take Ritalin for his ADHD. Janelle very grateful to the new teacher, who she said actually cared enough to “really worked with him” such that by the time he began the 2nd grade, he was not even on the teacher’s radar as a behavior problem.

Parents were aware that many of the children in the schools their children attended “slipped through the cracks” as they became lost in a large school system that was not always responsive to their educational needs. They knew this was a common a problem with a large bureaucratic system like the NYC DOE—but also knew that this institutional neglect often hurt children in their communities the most. Ms. Mullins, a Harlem grandmother, told me about how her vigilance prevented her special needs granddaughter from slipping through the cracks. Her daughter “wasn’t much help” to her child, and because of her own struggles, and was not able to be proactive in getting her daughter the speech and language therapy, hearing, vision and counseling services that she needed. Ms. Mullins lamented her daughter’s IEP evaluation process was not started sooner, and that her disabilities were not “caught” until she had to take the citywide exams in the 3rd grade, even though she was held back as a 1st grader. Ms. Mullins had to fight during the year to make sure her daughter was placed in the appropriate setting—she was
supposed to be in a 12 to 1 to 1 classroom, but was placed in a mainstream classroom. Due to Mrs. Mullin’s dogged advocacy—which involved an arduous process of navigating bureaucratic hurdles—her granddaughter was eventually placed in the appropriate educational setting. For Mrs. Mullins, this experience underscored the importance of parent vigilance. She told me:

The teacher’s sending work home, and if you’re not looking over the work, it’s not gonna do anything for the child. You have to help with the homework. You have to look at the class work, see what notes the teacher may have written on the paper and that’s not what happened.

For other parents, being vigilant allowed them to intervene in matters that went beyond their individual child. Being present in the school allowed parents to see if things were off with the classroom environment—either if students did not have adequate supplies, or if the facilities were dirty or needed upkeep. Donna Baker, a Harlem DOE mother, was frustrated when her daughter’s school no longer allowed parents to pick up their children at their classroom due to a security issue. She told me that it “threw her for a loop to suddenly be picking her up in a gym full of a thousand kids.” When she last picked up her daughter from her classroom, she found mouse droppings on the floor, and alerted both the assistant principal and the custodial staff. She was frustrated that she would not have been able to catch things like that with this new policy. She believed that the school “didn’t want parents coming in and out of the building because they find out that too many things are going on.”

Respecting or Disregarding Vigilance: How Schools Structure Parent Engagement

Although the parents I interviewed discussed being present in their children’s schools as a way to manage the distrust that could exist between them and educators, how educators received their engagement—especially when it was reformist in nature—was also important. How schools respond to parent vigilance shapes whether schools can earn the trust of parents, and whether educators come to value parent vigilance as an asset to the school community. As
institutions, schools can both structure norms of interactions between parents and educators, fostering trust or distrust, and become an object of institutional trust or distrust (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011). Though individual educators could earn parent trust, whether schools disrespected or disregarded parent vigilance, manifested in policies and routines for parent engagement, and patterns of parent interaction, was consequential in how much parents came to trust schools. I found that how schools received parent engagement varied across different types of schools. However, in all of these different contexts, there was a pattern of power asymmetry between Black parents and educators that impeded the development of relational trust.

Disregarding Parent Vigilance: Lower-Income DOE Schools Serving Students of Color

Parents whose children attended DOE schools serving predominately lower-income Black and Hispanic students generally considered their schools to be ineffective at valuing and encouraging parent engagement and vigilance. Although there were examples of individual educators who earned parents’ trust, the schools overall suffered from systemic problems in communicating with and responding to parents. It was already difficult for parents to be as vigilant toward their children’s education as they wished in the face of the competing demands of work and family. When parents could be present at their children’s schools, despite all of these obstacles, they became discouraged when the schools were unwelcoming and educators were disrespectful—inciting patterns of parent alienation. When parents voiced concerns, they generally found that educators reacted with defensiveness and evasiveness. Due to stark power differentials, educators oftentimes did not feel pressured by parents to be accessible, responsive and transparent—further damaging trust (Cook, Hardin, & Levi, 2005; Farrell, 2004).

How openly schools communicated with parents was associated with how much schools valued parent vigilance, and was fundamental to parents’ judgments of schools’ trustworthiness.
Many parents whose children attended DOE schools serving predominately lower-income Black and Hispanic students perceived deficiencies in school-parent communication. As discussed in the previous chapter, although parents were sometimes able to build rapport with their child’s classroom teacher and establish ways to communicate frequently and informally about their child’s progress, parents generally noticed that their schools did not have consistent and well-established systems for distributing information to parents. Tanisha Young, a Harlem mother whose two daughters attended two different DOE schools in Harlem—the first serving a lower-income, predominately Black and Hispanic student body, and the other, a newer school with a university partnership serving a socioeconomically diverse student body—compared the two schools’ communication styles. She told me that the lower-income school did not correspond regularly with parents, only reaching out to them when there was a problem. She told me:

I think for [lower income school] they have a communication issue. I mean they try… I don’t think they use every avenue to communicate whereas at [the higher income school] they’ll send stuff home, they’ll email us, they use an app called ClassDojo, and they’ll send messages through that. They communicate through an app, with emails, with the class parent, with backpacking, whereas [the lower income school] usually does backpacking and then if that doesn’t get to the parents, then it’s like, “Oh well I sent it home…” So, it’s like if you don’t get the information with the backpack or go into the school to get it, then…you don’t see it.

Many of the parents I spoke to had frustrating experiences where inquiries for information about their child’s progress were brushed aside or ignored. Pamela Wilson, a Brooklyn DOE mother, said that it was “disheartening” when “you send emails that, you know, aren’t answered or returned, or call and there’s no call back.” When we first met for an interview

---

22 The higher-income school serves a student body that is 47% free and reduced-price lunch, 39% Black/African-American, 25% Hispanic, 7% Asian and 22% White. The lower-income school serves a student population that is 88% free and reduced-price lunch, 50% Black/African American, and 46% Hispanic.
at the end of the 2013-2014 school year, Pamela was serving on the SLT (School Leadership Team)\textsuperscript{23} at her sons’ school in Eastern Brooklyn, which served a student population that was 73\% Black/African-American, 24\% Hispanic and 97\% free and reduced priced lunch. Pamela, who was also very involved in the school’s Parent Association, and had been on the board in the past, was frustrated with the history of poor communication and broken promises from officials at her sons’ school. She noted that after losing a “strong principal,” the interim principal would promise to hold workshops for parents to get information out and then never follow through. When a new principal replaced her, Pamela was happily surprised that he actually listened and followed through on parent suggestions. She described how he began to establish credibility with parents from the beginning of his tenure:

His first year [the PTA] met with [the new principal] right before the school year started and we were like, “Yeah, we wanted to do, like, a curriculum night in September or something before parent/teacher conferences just …so parents have a chance to meet the teachers, go to the classroom, have a sense of what’s happening.” And so, he was like, “Oh ok,” and we’re like “Pffft, that was great, riight.” And then we’re getting emails like, “This is happening. It’s gonna be on this date. What do you think?” And that was like the first indication of, oh wait, what we say matters.

Most DOE schools have a parent coordinator, whose role, according to the DOE website,\textsuperscript{24} is to create a welcoming school environment for parents; conduct outreach to engage parents and strengthen parent involvement; and act as a liaison between the principal and parents to address parent concerns. However, in practice there is wide variation between schools in how active the parent coordinator is, and many of the parents I spoke to found their school’s parent

\textsuperscript{23} An “SLT,” or school leadership team, is a decision-making body in DOE schools, required by law. An SLT must include the school principal, PTA president and the UFT (United Federation of Teachers) chapter leader. The rest of the membership is composed of equal numbers of elected parents and educators.

\textsuperscript{24} See http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/FACE/ParentCoordinators/MeetPC.htm for further information.
coordinator ineffective. Alisha Thompson, a DOE Queens mother, had an exasperating experience with her schools’ parent coordinator when she called to get her daughter’s ARIS number—a DOE account number that allows parent to view online data about their child’s academic performance, such as grades and attendance. Alisha said that the parent coordinator had “rubbed her the wrong way” from the beginning, and that “she brushes things off because she never knows anything” and just “sits in her office,” barely interacting with students and parents. After Alisha tried to call the parent coordinator repeatedly and got no response, she was able to get the number from an administrative assistant, when she stopped by the office after school.

The parent coordinators that parents were satisfied with usually had worked at the school for a while, allowing them time to build trusting relationships with students and families. Pamela believed that her school had a strong parent coordinator, who not only knows the students and the parents, but also understood “that her position is to be a liaison between parents and the principal and that it’s not just to do the administrative work of the principal, and so she’s always trying to think through new partnerships or having like workshops.” Ms. Watkins, the PS 970 parent coordinator, had been at the school for eleven years, and before that had been the PTA president of one of Harlem’s first charter schools. Her long experience with both schools in the community had allowed her to build relationships with various community organizations that ended up partnering with the school. She told me that Dr. Franklin, who had hired her, “appreciated having a parent coordinator,” even though a lot of principals are “still fighting” the idea, and “do not know what they are for.” Ms. Watkins went on to say that the job description for the parent coordinator is “very vague,” and that the person who takes on that role needs to take the initiative and “assess what the needs are and deal with them.” In her role, she tries “to
get communication barriers minimized” between parents and teachers, and is also available as a parent advocate in IEP meetings and to conduct mediation sessions between parents and teachers.

The PS 970 parents I spoke to trusted and considered Ms. Watkins to be valuable to the school. However, they noticed that a lot of parents—especially parents of children in the upper elementary and middle school grades—could not have a presence in the school, and so did not fully benefit from what they school offered. Kenya Harper found it discouraging that the family involvement wing of the school, which was tucked away on the second floor and where I held some of my interviews with PS 970 parents, was only accessible to parents who volunteered regularly at the school.

And that’s one thing I don’t like about 970 is that they don’t have…like their parent wing is totally out of the way…They have a parent bulletin board right here (pointed to board). Ninety-nine percent of the…I would say 99.9% of the parents… on the other side of this wall, never have ever seen that board because you have no reason to come up here. If you haven’t been a PTA officer or help Mrs. Watkins you would never…most parents have never been up here.

Low participation in the school PTA was a problem that many parents who sent their children to schools serving predominately lower income Black and Hispanic students talked about. For parents who were able to participate and volunteer, it was a point of frustration that so few other parents could have a presence in the school. Tanisha Young, a Harlem DOE mother, was on maternity leave during our first interview in the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year, allowing her to regularly volunteer at her two daughter’s schools. She was disheartened by the lack of parent presence in her oldest daughter’s school, especially when compared to the more robust parent engagement in her younger daughter’s school—which was much smaller and served a more affluent student body. She believed that the lack of parent participation meant that
parents could not be vigilant, and did not really know what was going on. She said of her older
daughter’s school:

Well it’s a bigger school. It’s over 500 families, 500 children there, but they’re…just the
way they communicate with the parents, the way the parents don’t seem to have a vested
interest…There are a lot of parents that the school is just a drop off point and they show
that…Like they don’t set foot in the building until report cards or if they’re getting calls
from the principal or something bad is happening. And it’s just…you know, they get told
what’s going on there instead see[ing] what’s [really happening] in the school.

Pamela Wilson, who attended her sons’ school as a child, felt a strong sense of loyalty
toward it, and remembered it as having better resources and programming. After experiencing
stress and anxiety over her oldest son’s standardized test scores, and whether he would be
promoted, she realized that parents needed a better understanding of the school’s curriculum and
their children’s academic progress. She advocated for parent workshops, which the school’s
parent coordinator ended up conducting weekly. However, even though she thought the
workshops were “great,” and covered topics like health and nutrition, math and reading, stress
management, and identifying children’s learning styles, she was discouraged by the fact that they
were “poorly attended.” Yolanda Walker, who was the former PTA president at her son’s
Harlem DOE school, said that her school’s parent coordinator had to “knock her off of her high
horse” when she would complain about the lack of parent engagement—especially when it came
to having a presence in the school, and volunteering or participating in PTA meetings. She
recalled he parent coordinator talking to her:

And she says, “For some of our families, bringing their children to school is their parent
participation because they’re dealing with domestic violence, they’re dealing with they
can’t pay their rent, they might be evicted, they’re coming from a shelter, they can’t feed
their kids.” And so, “I was just like, oh.” I was just like, “You know what, if your parent
participation is bringing a child to school, amen, but [I can] at least provide [parents] with
information.” So that was my crusade my first year.
As Yolanda’s words illustrate, many of the parents I interviewed had a hard time making it to PTA meetings between work commitments and childcare demands. Alisha Thompson, a Queens DOE mother, said that a “problem with [her daughter’s school]” was that the “PTA was very small” and “had very low turnout.” Alisha usually missed the meetings because they were scheduled right as she was getting home from work, and she needed to make her daughter dinner and help her with homework. She told me that the school was trying to have events for the students—like movie nights or pajama parties—concurrent with PTA meetings so that parents do not have to worry about childcare. Pamela Wilson spoke of how her Brooklyn school tried to find new ways to get parents into the school, but that these efforts usually were unsuccessful. “It’s hard to gauge where parents are versus where you want them to be,” she told me, adding that it was a struggle to get parents into the school, “when they probably don’t want to be, or don’t trust you, or don’t like you.” Ms. Watkins felt that one of the reasons that many parents did not come to PTA meetings was because people “talk at them, not with them.” She believed that schools needed to go out into the community to engage parents in an environment where they are comfortable. She said:

I just believe that the outline, or the expectation, that the Department of Education has for family engagement is not realistic, based on my years of experience in schools. I believe at this point we need to go out of the schools and into the community. I think parents would be willing to come to a community event if you make it fun and interesting versus coming to a school. They have their preconceived ideas about school.

Many parents mentioned that their school was not welcoming to parents, which was another reason why parents might feel uncomfortable coming to the school to volunteer or participate in the PTA. Pamela Wilson told me that the fact that “there was a history” at her sons’ school of not having “an open door” contributed to the reluctance parents had about coming in. The school “felt really closed off,” and parents had to have an “escort” such as a school safety officer take them upstairs, which signaled the school’s distrust and disrespect toward parents.
Even though many parents felt that it was “a sign that they were respected” and that schools are being “transparent,” as Yolanda Walker put it, to welcome parents into the school building, in general these DOE schools were wary about having parents around.

Some of the parents I interviewed wanted to have the opportunity to volunteer in their child’s school. Several parents told me their children’s schools were partnered with Learning Leaders, a program that trains parents and other community leaders to tutor and provide other instructional support to teachers in classrooms.\(^{25}\) However, in practice, the schools did not use parent volunteers effectively. Yolanda Walker talked about how her son’s school had “sixteen parents who signed up” for the Learning Leaders workshop, and believed they would “have had more” if the school had advertised it. However, ultimately the school refused the volunteers. She told me:

> We had to manually go outside and hand out flyers and post them outside on the lampposts, on the telephone booths at the corner deli, anywhere we could plaster it, on the trees. Sixteen parents signed up, and we knew that we couldn’t volunteer in our children’s class and we said, “That’s ok, we’re here.” And we were told no.

Tanisha Young said that the lower-income school that her older daughter attends attempted to have the program, but the administration eventually believed it was too much of a problem, since “some parents were there just roaming the building, and not really helping,” and shut the program down. She noted that her younger daughter’s more affluent school “welcomes parents to come in and help.” When I interviewed Ms. Watkins, the parent coordinator at PS 970, in November 2015, she told me that the school “used to do Learning Leaders” but that there had not been sufficient parent interest in volunteering for the current year. This was a point of

\(^{25}\) While many of the DOE parents I interviewed talked about the Learning Leaders program, by March 2017 the program had been disbanded due to NYC DOE funding cuts.
frustration for Kenya Harper, a PS 970 parent, when I interviewed her for a second time later that month, who was still waiting to be able to volunteer in the school again.

Another aspect of transparency that parents valued was how accessible school administrators were when they had a major concern and wanted to intervene and makes changes. Some of the parents of children who attended schools serving lower-income, predominately Black and Hispanic students struggled to access school officials. At PS 970, all of the parents I interviewed remembered Dr. Franklin as being easily accessible—he was always around during drop off and dismissal, and parents could usually meet with him in his office. For parents, that was critical to how he built trusting relationships with families. However, parents viewed the new principal, who used to be the school’s assistant principal, as much less accessible. Latasha Edwards, a PS 970 parent told me, “if I go in [the school] today” and ask to meet with the principal, “they’re not even gonna say, ‘Well let me make you a time to speak to her,’” they will “direct me” to someone else.

Camika Harris, a Harlem DOE mother whose son faced bullying at his school, tried and failed to get a meeting with the principal after her son enrolled, which was an extremely harrowing experience for her. She told me about how she would try to go to the school repeatedly, and the school safety officer would make her sit and wait in the attendance room, telling her that the principal was “not around.” After she “put up a fuss,” the school safety officers eventually would not even let her stay in the attendance room—they put her in the “auditorium away from everyone.” Camika finally got to a point where she was so fed up with this treatment, that she went into the main office and asked to speak to the principal, telling them that she had the Department of Education on her phone. Camika said,

I walked out and around the corner and I went into the main office. “Excuse me, can I please speak to [the principal]? I’m on the phone,” and the [office assistant] comes in and
she’s like, “Oh my God. Somebody told her to call the Board of Ed.” So, she calls the [DOE representative] on the other line while I’m talking to her. The [DOE representative was like, “[The office assistant is calling.” I said, “I know; I’m standing in front of her (chuckles)...” All of a sudden, the police officers come and they’re like, “Listen you’re causing a disturbance.” I said, “I’m not causing a disturbance. I asked very calmly if I could speak to the principal of this school who for some reason does not feel it’s necessary to speak to the parents of the children she’s responsible for on a daily basis.” Here’s the crazy thing. Because the security guards had seen what I was going through, and it pissed [them] off a little too, because they escorted me out the school but they didn’t do it the way [the office assistant] wanted them to do it. They were like listen, “We know what you’ve been going through, can you please just...please don’t make it hard for us.” I was like, “Only because you’re cool I’m gonna leave.” I’m not even gonna lie, I was a little extra...I was very extra, but I was so angry at that point.

As Camika’s story highlights, some of the parents of children who attended DOE schools serving lower-income, predominately Black and Hispanic students, felt that their schools reacted to vocal parents with disrespect, defensiveness and even hostility. As Janelle Foster, put it, “the school” may want parents there to help, but not to give feedback; “if you’re too voiced” and “bring things to their attention” you get the “cold shoulder.”

Several of the parents recounted instances where their child’s school became defensive when they questioned aspects of the Common Core curriculum and the reliance on testing and test preparation. Alisha Thompson recalled a PTA meeting where she was very offended because parents were called “lazy” when they brought up concerns about the burdensome amount of homework that young children were being assigned. While very few of the parents talked about “opting out” of state testing—a more common practice among affluent White parents in New York City (E. Harris & Fessenden, 2015)—those who did noticed their school’s resistance to this trend. Rhonda Allen, the PS 970 PTA president, told me that if parents asked about opting out, they get the spiel that “the school was lose funding” if too many parents did it. “It’s funny how they thought that could manipulate and threaten poor people,” she added. “Just because we need all of the money we can get.”
Kenya Harper, a PS 970 mother and one of the two parents I interviewed who opted out of the state standardized assessments, knew that educators were annoyed with her because it generated “a lot more work for the school,” as promotion for such children is determined by evaluating a portfolio of student work. As mentioned earlier, Yolanda Walker, a Harlem mother, distributed a packet of important information that she made for parents which, among other things, discussed opting out. After a contentious PTA meeting in which Yolanda described vocally confronting the school administration about its treatment of parents, she was given a Limited Access Letter, which restricted her access to the school, a tactic that critics say has been used by school officials to silence vocal parents—especially parents of color (Zimmer, 2016).

*Mandating Parent Involvement on the School’s Terms: No Excuses Charter Schools*

The parents I interviewed whose children attended No Excuses Charter schools saw their schools as extremely transparent, and believed that educators were eager to demonstrate that they were following through on the education they promised to deliver. The schools were open to parents watching instruction and being present in the school. However, the schools limited the scope of parent engagement, by encouraging it only when it was passive and supportive, and discouraging it when it was interventionist and reformist. The parent-school contracts stipulated parent involvement on the school’s terms, and mandated that parents be involved in specific ways that the schools understood to be constructive. In fact, following a mindset some have dubbed the “new paternalism” (McDermott & Nygreen, 2013; Whitman, 2008), No Excuses charter schools communicate a belief that they knew better than parents what was best for students, and required parents to relinquish control over some aspects of childrearing—including dictating how students dressed, and instructing parents to join their children when punished for behavior infractions. Parents talked about how the schools struggled to respect parents and
involve them in decision-making around school policy. Given that parent relationships with No Excuses charter schools begin on a contractual basis, with the expectations about what parents need to do and how the schools operate made clear, parents had little recourse to negotiate with educators if they were unsatisfied—except for leaving the school entirely, which two of the No Excuses charter school parents I interviewed did.

No Excuses charter schools tended to have explicit and universal open-door policies—something that distinguishes them from DOE schools, where openness depended largely on the relationships the teacher and/or school administrators had with parents and the value they placed on parent participation. As Mrs. Cole, the Transcend Academy principal told me, it is official policy, written in their handbook, that the school has an open-door policy, but it does ask “that parents let them know ahead of time” if they are coming, to only stay for “around 30 minutes,” and to not interact with teachers or students if they are busy. In practice, however, Mrs. Cole said that they welcome parents into classrooms if they just pop up at the school unannounced. She said that the language they put in the handbook was mostly to “protect” the school from the very small number of parents who have come to the school angry to confront their child’s teacher during class. While they had to put “restrictions” on those families, she said, for the most part having an open door has never been a problem.

The open-door policies at No Excuses schools helped educators to earn the trust of parents. All of the No Excuses charter school parents that I interviewed appreciated this transparency and felt welcome when and if they decided to stop by. Sheryl Bradley, a Harlem mother whose daughter attends a No Excuses charter school, told me that parents can “pretty much come in, sign in at the main office,” and “then they’ll let you sit in the class the entire time.” Sheryl added that she “never felt” like she was “bothering” the teachers or school staff,
and told me that her daughter’s school just installed classroom doors with glass panes, making it even easier to watch classes in action. Mya Parker, a Harlem No Excuses charter school mother, echoed this sentiment, saying that whenever she comes her son’s school, the teachers greet her by name, and invite her to sit in the classroom. Having informal opportunities to interact enabled educators and parents to build relationships. Parents also believed that the policies communicated that the school had nothing to hide. Nikki Jones, the Brooklyn whose children attended both Transcend Academy and then PS 1150, thought that the lack of an open-door policy at the DOE school was a turn off.

1150 doesn’t have an open-door policy, so it’s like you have to get approval to go into your child’s classroom, which, I don’t like that, because at Transcend Academy, you know, you check in with security, and you’re welcome to go and visit the classrooms openly…I feel like PS 1150 is trying to hide something. What do you have to hide? You have my children. I should be able to come and observe my kids in their learning experience anytime that I want…that’s something I’m very passionate about, as you can see.

While No Excuses charter school parents appreciated the transparency and welcoming atmosphere of their children’s schools, they had mixed feelings about the efficacy of parent-school contracts that try to mandate parent involvement. As discussed in Chapter Four, when a parent’s child gets admitted to a No Excuses Charter school, they generally sign a contract, or commitment statement, pledging to be supportive of the school—by making sure that their child does homework, comes to school on time and in uniform and attending “mandatory” parent events.

This stipulation of “mandatory” parent involvement communicates a distrust of parents, intimating that parents will not be dedicated to their child’s education unless they are required to be. This struck some parents as patronizing, and factored into their decision of whether their child would even attend a No Excuses charter school. As Tanisha Young, a DOE Harlem mother
told me, her husband was “turned off” by a network orientation he went to—“just by the attitude
the way, they spoke”—even though he really wanted his daughters to go to a charter school
beforehand. “[The network leader] was like you know we come for you, like, if [your child] is
late we come knock on your door,” Tanisha said. “You have to be in detention with the child.”
[Her husband] just got real turned off by that.” The parents whose children did attend No
Excuses charter schools felt that the consequences of violating the conditions of the contract
could be overly punitive, especially when the punishment fell on young children who have no
control over what their parents were able to do.

At Transcend Academy, if a parent misses a required meeting—Back to School nights,
Report Card nights, or other parent workshops—her child misses out on special events. In our
interview, Mrs. Cole acknowledged that the school “struggled with its in-person touch points”
and that even when they hold events in the evening or on the weekend to accommodate parent
work schedules, there are many parents who cannot come because of work. She said:

We constantly are getting ourselves into this struggle. When we incentivize attendance at
events we get one subset of parents, when we try to punish them in some ways for not coming…so if we have a mandatory event and they don’t come, which means their child
doesn’t earn X, then they get angry. It’s like this constant struggle of how do I get parents
into this building? And then I start wondering, like, “Should I even be trying to do that?”

At the sparsely attended Parent Leadership Council Meeting that I attended at Transcend
Academy in June of 2014, Mrs. Cole mentioned that 27 families had missed one of the required
Back-to-School nights last year. She proposed changing the consequences of a missed meeting to
the child not being invited to Harvest Day in the fall instead of Field Day in the spring, so that
they would be more immediate. When I held interviews with the different Transcend Academy
mothers later in the month, they all had concerns about these policies. Anita Johnson, a
Transcend Academy mother, was irked when she discovered that the school thought she missed a
mandatory event when her 1st grade son and daughter came home “crying” because they were not invited to field day. Anita was certain that she had attended all of the mandatory workshops and believed that she went above and beyond when it came to parent involvement—she was always at the school volunteering. Although Mrs. Cole cleared up the miscommunication and allowed her children to go to the event, she still had issues with the policy. She said:

My thing is that I feel like a child is a child, so you can’t really reprimand a child for the parent’s mistake. So that’s why I feel like it’s wrong. …I mean I see it so often where kids come to school and they don’t have homework. You can’t blame the child because they can’t…I mean at 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade they still need help. I mean even at 6th grade they still need help…I don’t think the blame should always be on the child.

Though the parents I interviewed were uneasy about children being punished for their family being unable to meet the conditions of the school, they also were unsure whether parents should be inconvenienced as a consequence. As Keisha Moore asked, “how can a school penalize the parent without it affecting the child?” In light of this issue, some other large CMO No Excuses charter school networks have policies where parents have to come in to school to serve detention with their child if they do not follow through on all of the parts of the contract.

Sheryl Bradley, a Harlem No Excuses Charter School mother, noted that parents used to be required to come in with their child for Saturday school after a certain number of behavior infractions—including tardiness, absences, lack of uniform and behavior. She noticed that the school had gotten more lenient about holding these required Saturday sessions, and now held students after school for detention “randomly” if “they built up enough infractions.” She told me about a time when she was unaware that her daughter had after school detention. Sheryl explained to the principal that while she knew the meeting was important, she had to go and pick up her other child. The principal gave her permission to take her daughter, but when she went to the classroom to get her, the teacher refused to let her daughter go. Sheryl said,
So, I go back to the room and I’m like, “Jasmine’s coming with me. [The principal] knows I’m not going [to stay].” Then the teacher was like, “Oh no, you’re not going,” and I kinda went crazy, because that’s how I am. I told her, “You have my kid from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm; any time after 5:00 is kidnapping. That’s my child. Jasmine, put your stuff on, let’s go.” Jasmine’s like, “Ok,” like throwing on her coat and her book bag, and the teacher’s looking at me, and I’m like, “Don’t get in our way,” and I took her and we left. Sometimes you have to get a little bit aggressive with them because they feel like they own your kid when they’re in that building, like, no you can’t have her. I was like, “I birthed her; she’s coming with me.”

Sheryl acknowledged that while she “did complain” about parents having to sit in detention, it might be something that some parents “needed.” However, the policy of schools punishing parents for their child being late or not having their homework done brings up issues of unequal power dynamics between parents and the school, as the schools tried to take control over aspects of child-rearing usually left to parents and punished parents who did not match their conditions of what parents should do. The fact No Excuses charter schools feel entitled to take ownership over the children in their school, even when it comes into conflict with parents, brings up issues of respect—and whether the school trusts parents to raise their children the “right” way. I asked Sheryl whether she thought her daughter’s school respected her. She told me, “not during their time,” and this took her “some getting used to,” because she was not accustomed to “giving up any type of ownership over [her] children.” Ebony Lewis, a Brooklyn No Excuses charter school mother, summed up the attitude educators had toward parents at her son’s school in this way:

We don’t ask too much of you aside from making sure the homework is done, making sure that they read every night and getting them to school on time. It’s almost like, “Once they cross the door border we got the say. Don’t trouble us.” That’s how I take it.

A lack of respect for parents also came through in the way that some No Excuses charter school teachers—who were often younger, White and did not have children of their own—interacted with parents. Parents described how teachers and other staff could, at times, have a condescending attitude. As Claudia Page, a No Excuses charter school Harlem mother who is
also a pre-K director, put it, while as an educator she is more sympathetic to what the school is trying to do, she has heard other parents say that the teachers “don’t know our kids,” but “that they think they’re gonna save our kids.” Anita Johnson, a Transcend Academy mother, told me that some of the teachers “could be a little sarcastic sometimes,” and that she has seen instances of educators “talk[ing] down” to parents. Mrs. Cole acknowledged that there were problems with the ways that teachers spoke to parents:

Parents come to me about a lot of different things. They’ll come and say, “I don’t like the way she talks to me,” and then, I’ll have follow up conversation with that person and say, “Listen, it was your facial expressions, it was, you know, you were not pausing, you did not say good morning, you did not ask if this was a good time.” These are basic little things that you need to know how to do in order to prevent those things from coming up so frequently.

Mrs. Cole said that it was challenging for teachers—especially new teachers—to strike a “warm demanding balance” when they “share information with parents” without communicating condescension, especially since “a lot of [their] teachers are White and most of [their] teachers do not have kids.” Mrs. Cole holds periodic professional development sessions with teachers on how to talk to parents—especially about incidents of misbehavior, which can be a touchy subject. She instructs the teachers to ensure that the tone of such conversations is supportive, and warns teachers against making negative assumptions about what is happening in a child’s home.

The school’s narrow idea of parent involvement translated into limiting parent voice, as there were few formal avenues for parents to be involved in decision-making around school policies. It is uncommon for No Excuses Charter Schools to have PTAs, despite the legal requirements that they do. Mya Parker, a Harlem No Excuses charter school mother, was taken aback when she found out that her son’s school did not have a PTA. While the charter network’s middle school that her older daughter attended had a parent association, she found it to be a “bunch of nonsense,” just put in place to “placate the parents,” as educators told parents what to
do, and they had “no say in whether it happened or not.” In our last interview in the fall of the 2015-2016 school year, she told me that her son’s elementary charter school was thinking about trying to have a parent association as well. Mya planned to be vocal if it was not put in place to encourage meaningful parent involvement. She told me:

    Well they already heard my mouth last year. I have no problems telling them that. It wasn’t just myself, it was a couple of parents who felt the same way. Don’t give us the BS just to say that you did something. That’s not what we want here.

Transcend Academy experimented with having Parent Leadership Council, a body akin to a PTA. Originally the PLC had a core group of parents who were able to commit time to planning events for the school. Mrs. Cole acted as a “consultant,” and provided parents with the supplies and materials that they needed. However, the children of that initial group of parents eventually graduated, and after those parents moved on, the meetings were not well attended. Both Anita Johnson and Keisha Moore had been among the more active parents in the group, and were frustrated with the low participation—although they acknowledged that work schedules made it difficult for parents to participate. Keisha believed that many of the parents at her school, after investing a lot of effort in finding and applying to the charter school lottery, were “hands off” in terms of involvement once their child was in the school. They would ensure their child was ready for school, but were content to let the school take the reins in all other matters. Keisha believed that the school should make it clear that they did not “only want the child, they wanted the parent” too.

    Mrs. Cole ended up disbanding the parent group because of low attendance and participation, saying that it was not what the parent “community was asking for.” Instead, she decided to hold monthly sessions where parents drop by her office and talk to her about different topics. Mrs. Cole acknowledged that the PLC might have felt like an “event committee” instead of a place where parents have input into school policy. The school had very few outlets where
parents could voice their dissatisfaction with school policies. Mrs. Cole said that they had tried to have “forums” to discuss school policies—most notably discipline—but that the parents who had the most serious concerns did not show up, so she felt like she was “preaching to the choir.” Mrs. Cole said that the “angriest families” refuse to come in to talk. She said:

I’m finding that with my angriest families, they’ll get angry, but then they don’t want to actually come in and talk about it. They want to almost, like, report me to someone else...We’ve had, you know, since I’ve been principal, maybe five of these situations come up...I’ve had two parents who reported me to the DOE or reported the school to the DOE. I’ve had two families who have made complaints to the committee on special education, and I’d say probably about two parents also who have made a complaint to the [CMO network] board. I’ve also had a couple of parents who have threatened to go tell the media about something or the other but nothing ever came of that and I don’t know how to change that.

The fact that No Excuses charter school parents tend to try to report problems to a higher authority, or just exit the school when they are dissatisfied, signals that parents find there to be little room to negotiate with educators around school policy. This can impede the development of relational trust, as educators and parents are unable to generate shared understandings around education.

Marginalizing Black Parent Engagement: Racially and Socioeconomically Diverse DOE Schools

The Black parents I interviewed whose children attended schools that served socioeconomically and racially diverse student bodies—including a significant number of affluent White students—noticed that parents had the power to earn the respect of educators, making them more responsive and accessible to parent concerns. Educators understood the benefits that parents could bring to the school, and respected and acknowledged parent vigilance as valuable to the school community. However, in these educational settings, the affluent White parents had disproportionate influence—even when they only constituted a relatively small portion of the school’s overall parent population, their involvement tended to overpower,
disregard and even exclude lower income, non-White parents and students, a finding that is consistent in the educational research about diverse urban schools (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Posey-Maddox, 2013, 2014). When powerful parents organized to effect or demand changes in school policies, they often primarily served the interests of their children. The Black parents who sent their children to these schools often felt marginalized and worried that White parents were receiving preferential treatment from educators.

As has been well documented in the education literature (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Lareau, 2003; Posey-Maddox, 2014), affluent parents of public school children often augment their child’s educational experiences through their privileged financial, cultural and social capital. Noel Carter, a Harlem mother whose daughter attends a Gifted and Talented program in the Upper West Side neighborhood, talked about the social capital that affluent parents bring to her daughter’s racially and socioeconomically diverse school. She described the parents at her daughter’s school as having “a lot of agency” and “relationships with elected officials.” For example, the Assembly member and City Council member, who represent the school, made an appearance at a school fundraiser. She imagined that other schools in Harlem “weren’t having silent auctions, where people are drinking champagne,” and where parents can go up to an elected official and talk about an issue that they feel is important.

DOE public schools that serve affluent students often solicit generous donations from parents, allowing them to have PTA budgets that can fund additional resources for students—such as teaching assistants in classrooms, extra-curricular programs, facility upgrades and field trips. Due to their financial clout, affluent parents feel entitled to having input in school policy. Claudette and Frank Peters compared the fundraising power of the affluent, predominately White
Upper West Side school with a Gifted and Talented program that one of their sons attended to that of PS 970, which their other son attended. While PS 970 struggles to solicit suggested parent donations of $50/ a year, as mentioned in a PTA meeting I attended, the Upper West Side school asks that each parent donate at least $2,000 a year. Claudette noticed that parent input was taken much more seriously at the Upper West Side school. As Frank said:

At the end of the day money talks… If someone’s donating $2,000, you best believe they want some say in how that money is allocated. So, I mean you almost have to cater more to the parents…Those schools who are getting heftier donations there’s probably some sort of incentive to want to at least appear to listen to parents, or make it seem like their voice is important. The last thing [they] want is for the donations to dry up.

Affluent parents used their power to compel educators to be responsive to their concerns. Though many schools struggle to systematically communicate information to parents, when affluent parents noticed communication problems in their children’s schools, they used their social capital and other resources to ensure that educators were communicating and responding to them. I found examples where affluent—and largely White—parents created their own systems for communication in schools when they were lacking. However, this often resulted in marginalizing the less affluent, non-White parents—including the Black parents I interviewed.

Pauline Franklin, whose daughter attends a progressive dual language school in Upper Manhattan that serves a student body that is 13% African-American/Black, 53% Hispanic, 22% White, 2% Asian and 47% free and reduced priced lunch, described how the affluent parents organized to augment the school’s haphazard communication system with their own. They created a “Google group” which became something of a “rumor mill.” Pauline had to help “mediate” a discussion on the school’s “Google group” that got “heated” when a Black parent asked for

26 The PTA president said that they only get donations from 11% of the families.
information, and a White parent criticized her for not knowing about the online group beforehand. Pauline believed it would be helpful if the school’s PTA had a committee to help “different families understand one another in terms of habits and culture.” Pauline also felt that while she had a good relationship with the principal, some of the other Black families did not, which could be “isolating.”

Gloria Henderson, a mother whose 1st grade daughter attends a racially and socioeconomically diverse charter school in Harlem, similarly felt that the school’s educators—who were predominately White—had closer relationships with the White families than Black families, and communicated with them more. She described how they seemed more at ease with White families, allowing for opportunities for informal check-ins before and after school. She said:

[The school’s educators] have a good relationship with the children, but I noticed that they spend more time communicating with the White parents in general than they do the Black parents. Like, unless the Black parents engage them they don’t generally necessarily just start a conversation, to where I’ve watched the White parents walk up and drop their kids off and [the teachers] engage them. I sat there one morning, because I’m a crazy person, and I watched about six White children walk through the door that they stopped and they hugged and they called them by name. How many of those Black children did you stop and hug and call by name? See I’m that crazy person.

At PS 1150, the affluent predominately White parents similarly organized to create communication systems, and it led to the school’s families of color—whose children had attended the old school that was closed—feeling marginalized. Monica Hayes, a parent of a 3rd grade daughter at the school told me, in our first interview at the end of the 2013-2014 school year, that the school did not have a parent coordinator because it was new and too small. However, she said that all of the parents were already “interacting and mingling,” and a parent had taken on the job of answering parent requests for information. However, this information ended up circulating through social networks that were mostly confined to groups of affluent White parents. Mrs. Bailey, the PS 1150 principal, told me that she was accused of favoritism—because the parents of
children in the youngest grades—who were much Whiter and more affluent than the students in the older grades—always had information first. She said,

My families of color felt marginalized. They actually would say, “You know what’s going on? You’re catering to…you know you’re having meetings for these families, the younger kids. Everything is tailored to the pre-k and the K.” And the fact of the matter is there are two things going on. One, it’s a new school. We did not have efficient systems of communication established, and the White families who came in immediately organized, and got their friends and acquaintances onto a Yahoo group where there was constant communication. They would get the information to themselves, and to their families, before I could backpack something home.

Mrs. Bailey realized that the school had to “adjust” to try to make sure all parents were getting access to information in a timely fashion. She realized that it was not “going to be standard DOE,” and by the time she “backpacked information home” it would be “old news.” She worked to try to make the methods of communication more systemic to include all parents—such as linking the online group explicitly to the PTA, and distributing information by multiple avenues, including implementing a “class parent” system. She admitted that the school still struggled communicating with some parents—especially families that did not speak English at home. She was happy that the school had hired an English to Spanish translator for the school’s PTA meetings, which I noticed when I attended the school’s first PTA meeting of the 2014-2015 school year. However, the translation services seemed to still be a work-in-progress. Given that the meeting was very well attended (I counted about fifty families there) and the room was noisy, a group of Spanish-speaking parents and the translator had to step outside of the room so that they could hear each other. In the minutes for that meeting, the translator requested that in the next meeting, people should speak slower and pause between thoughts.

The school also made an effort to be accessible to parents in other ways. In the PTA meeting I attended, Ms. Bailey talked about parent communication, and referenced a handout that had “tiers” of parent communication. The first step was to go to the class parent, then to the
teacher, and then the principal/assistant principal. She emphasized that the principal and assistant principal were “two heads on one body,” and that parents should not expect to go to one of them and then the other and get a different result. She said that if parents had instructional concerns that they should go to her. However, in practice the parents I spoke knew that if they volunteered at the school, the principal was very receptive to informal conversations with parents. As Deidra Brown, a PS 1150 mother told me, when she “wasn’t working so much,” she would “seek out volunteer opportunities to speak to the principal”—and while she knows there is an official “chain of command,” she felt like she could “go straight to the principal.” Mrs. Bailey told me that there are a lot of “access points” for parents to interact with her, she is “outside every day at dismissal,” and she has “office hours on Tuesday afternoons, so anyone who wanted to just see me could just drop in and discuss something.” She said that parents are “welcome to come to the table,” and she “will hear them out” before giving her feedback and making a decision.

When it comes to accessibility, DOE schools serving more affluent and Whiter student bodies did not tend to have truly open-door policies—similar to DOE schools serving a lower income and predominately Black and/or Hispanic student bodies. Parents could not just pop up in their child’s classroom to watch instruction, and as Mrs. Bailey told me, she thought that this could be “disruptive, and depending on the child, counterproductive.” She did welcome parents to schedule an appointment if they wanted to visit their child’s classroom. However, despite this lack of open-door policies, parents of children in these schools told me that it was common to have parents present in the classroom as volunteers. Unlike the parents of children in lower-income DOE schools, the parents in more affluent schools talked about how parent volunteers were appreciated in the classroom. Noel Carter, whose daughter who is in a Gifted and Talented program in a racially and socioeconomically diverse school in the Upper West Side, told me that
the school thinks that it is “valuable” that parent volunteers enable children to “have an enriched experience” which leads to “mutual respect.”

PS 1150 used the Learning Leaders program, which as Cynthia Green, a parent of a 1st grade daughter, described it, “teaches parents” the “proper way” to volunteer in the school and classroom, which entails “deferring to the teacher’s expertise” and “asking what [teachers] need” help with. She said that the school had used Learning Leaders volunteers for two years, and held workshops for parents and community members to receive training, resulting in teachers having extra help in their classrooms, and benefiting students.

Despite the fact that involvement from more affluent parents brought additional resources to schools, often non-White parents were marginalized when it came to decision-making power around school policy. Noel Carter noted that at her daughter’s school, a more affluent and predominately White “clique” of parents who had the most power in the school PTA, bred a “racially charged environment.” She told me that “some of the parents of color who had been involved in the school for a long time” felt that they “weren’t really being engaged” because the group felt closed off and many of the meetings happened during the day.

At PS 1150, the parents I interviewed thought that the affluent and largely White parents exerted a lot of power. As Monica Hayes put it, the parents “don’t play,” and if they do not like a decision the administration makes around programming, they will band together and raise the money to make it happen. However, similar to the other schools discussed above, non-White families ended up feeling marginalized by this involvement. Due to that fact that the families of younger grade children at the school are much more White and affluent than families in the older grades in the school—who are predominately African-American and working class—it created an imbalance in power between these different groups of parents. The more affluent parents
organized and elected their peers to the PTA, and ended up focusing on programs that benefitted the youngest grades and neglected the needs of the older grades. As Monica Hayes told me, “in the beginning there was difficulty with parents” because some of the parents who had been a part of the PTA at the old phased out school “felt left out of the process.” She commented:

In the beginning, we had a meeting, and they already had decided who was gonna be the PTA president (laughs), who was gonna be on the SLT team. They already started planning events, and it was like, “Wait a minute, you know I’ve been here, [I know] more than half the people in the neighborhood,” and it’s like, “You never came to the other parents that’s here and explained to them, this is what we want to do, and we started... and you never came to us to find out about what do the older kids want.” It was more Caucasian people in the pre-K and kindergarten grades so that was like the whole PTA…they were more focused on what the pre-K wanted, what their kids want and everything. They weren’t focusing on the upper grades, and the kids that’s been there longer...if you feel like you want to have a community school, you have to include everybody within your community.

Cynthia Green, a PS 1150 mother of a 1st grade daughter, remembered the racial tension among parents in the early days of the new school’s PTA. She admitted that the lower grade parents—including her—were much more “active,” but felt that she personally was not “intimidated” by the White parents, and “didn’t care if” she’s “the only” Black parent in the room; she “was here for her daughter’s education.” She noted that a lot of the older grade Black parents from the phased-out school were “very negative” in the beginning, and had “concerns that the school was “catering more to the White parents.” Recalling that Monica Hayes, in particular, was very wary in the beginning, she admired that Mrs. Bailey made an effort to build bridges with the parents who were most distrustful. Cynthia told me this about Mrs. Bailey’s outreach to the parents from the old school:

No matter who it is they just want to be heard. They want to know that they’ve been heard... Like I said with Monica in the beginning she was against [Mrs. Bailey]. [Mrs. Bailey] said, “[Monica] was sitting in the back of the auditorium,” and that “She hadn’t met her yet.” And Monica stood up, and said something, and [Mrs. Bailey] said, “That’s who I want to be friends with.” Even though [what Monica said] was negative [Mrs. Bailey] didn’t take it that way. She said, “I can understand that.”
Mrs. Bailey realized that the marginalization of Black families on the school’s PTA was leading to an erosion of relational trust—not just between educators and Black parents, but also amongst the parents in the school community. She said, “the trust issue came up” with her “families of color” when they felt like they “left the room for a minute,” and when they came back the “PTA was all White.” Mrs. Bailey held a meeting with PTA parents, in which they had an explicit conversation about race and power dynamics. Kimberly Campbell, a PS 1150 parent of a daughter in kindergarten, told me that because the upper grade parents were “upset” and “had a lot of reservations,” they had a meeting with the parents, principal and the PTA executive board, and “talked openly about race.” Monica Hayes said that she thought the issue was that parents “were not really listening to each other” and trying to understand “where everyone was coming from.” She said,

We talked about just listening and hearing about people, parents that’s been there before who still have kids in the building, and just understanding these are the things…you might do it this way, and I might do it that way, but we have to come to some type of agreement on what we should do for our kids. So, you know at the end of the day we’re gonna be there for a while because we all have kids that’s in pre-K, kindergarten that’s coming up, so we all have to get along somehow.

Mrs. Bailey and the PS 1150 parents I interviewed felt that this meeting was a turning point, and led to a reduction of the tension in the PTA. However, the parents said that it was still a struggle to get the parents of children in the older grades involved in the school. When I met with Deidra Brown, a PS 1150 mother of a 4th grade boy, she spoke of her frustration at the lack of involvement among “upper” grade parents, and felt that she was alone in fighting for their needs on the PTA. As the 4th grade class parent, she “stayed outside” after school and “harassed parents” in her son’s class, giving them a “beautiful letter she made with clip art” and collecting the parents’ contact information to email each of them, all in an effort to try to get them to come
to the PTA meetings. Still she ended up being the “only 4th grade parent” who showed up to PTA meetings. She said,

And it’s hard for me to fight for the 4th grade parents because I feel like at the beginning of the year everything was geared towards the younger children. Everything was like…if you go on the website all the pictures are of the younger kids. Everything is the younger kids, so I’m like, “Hey, what about us? Take pictures of us. Go up to our classrooms.” But how am I…I’m the only one fighting. Eventually I’m like…I’m sitting there arguing, “Listen, you have to also acknowledge the upper grades,” by myself.

When I asked Deidra why she thought so few of the parents of older children went to PTA meetings, she believed it had to do with age. She said, “The older kids get, the less involved their parents are.” She also thought it had to do with the shutdown of the old school—that parents were demoralized after trying to keep it open, felt alienated, and did not believe that their involvement made any difference. Monica Hayes also thought that the low participation had to do with inflexible work schedules. She said:

[The meeting] fixed some of the problems, but we still keep finding it hard to pull in the upper grade parents. I don’t know if it’s because the majority of the upper grade parents are African-American and Spanish and we work. We work it (laughs). You know what I mean? So, it’s like they have…we was explaining that ok the majority of our parents in the upper grades the majority is just African-American. I think it’s from the 2nd grade up. So, right now, we’re going into the…we’re gonna have a 5th grade next year, so we’re up to the 4th grade, and the majority of the parents are African-American. So, I’m like wait a minute, but the majority of us work. We gotta work. The Spanish parents they gotta work. [The lower grade White parents] are not on punch time like many of us African-American and Spanish parents are, so this is why you might not see them in PTA meetings or committees.

Cynthia Green, a PS 1150 mother of a 1st grade daughter, felt that the lack of participation among Black families resulted in the events and fundraisers that the PTA held catering more to White families. She said that the fundraisers that the PTA decided to hold—such as silent auctions—while lucrative, were not they types of fundraisers that Black families in the neighborhood tended to be familiar with and comfortable participating in. When I met with Cynthia for our second interview at the end of the 2014-2015 school year, she told me about a
forum that the PTA organized to talk about race relations. When she went to the meeting and it was “99% White” with only “six or seven” Black parents, she realized that the forum was not meant for her and was meant for the White parents. She said:

I don’t think people are ready to talk about [race] honestly. We actually, the ones that did go, just thought it was a joke because you still didn’t feel that, not that you weren’t heard but that wasn’t a meeting for us. It was a meeting for them, we felt, to maybe make them feel better.

The difficulties that PS 1150 had in engaging and including lower-income Black and Hispanic parents, and tailoring school policies and practices to meet the needs of a diverse set of parents and students, underscored how unequal power dynamics—both between educators and parents, but also amongst parents—can impede the development of relational trust in a school community.

**Parent Involvement and the School System**

Mirroring the marginalization that they often experienced in their children’s schools, the Black parents I interviewed almost universally believed that the NYC Department of Education and school officials did not care to listen or respond to their concerns. They noticed that the school system was more responsive to affluent parents, who had the political clout to pressure officials to be responsive. While some parents talked about instances where the parents in their communities were able to organize and successfully advocate for their children’s schools, they realized these instances were not the norm. Parents believed that the school system was beholden to powerful interests—and as such, had no reason to trust that it would be credible and accountable to them. Parents realized that they had to have faith in themselves to be vigilant and advocate for their children—underscoring the importance of vigilance as a form of cultural capital for Black parents.
When discussing the school system and whether it was responsive to or even “heard” parent concerns, the parents I interviewed largely felt that it did not. They characterized forums where parents can voice their opinions—like Panel for Education Policy meetings or Chancellor visits to community districts and schools—as put in place just to make it appear like parents have a say. As Sheryl Bradley, a Harlem No Excuses charter school mother put it “they already have their minds made up,” and whenever they “try to hear parents,” it is “just for show that so they can say that parents voiced their opinions.” Parents also noticed that school officials were not responsive to them. Anita Johnson, a Transcend Academy mother, remembered an event that solidified her belief that school officials do not respond to parent concerns. The DOE Chancellor came to a meeting at her school. The teachers and staff members had many questions for her, and so they ran out of time before the parents got a chance to ask questions. Anita said:

[The Chancellor] had a meeting here, and we came, and you had a lot of teachers, you had a lot of staff come in that were asking administrators questions, and she didn’t give the parents…to me there wasn’t enough time for the parents to ask her questions. Then she said that…she told us to write the questions down, and someone will return the phone call, and still today I still have not gotten a phone call.

Pamela Wilson, a DOE Brooklyn mother, is active in a parent education advocacy group. She said the experience has “given [her] a more cynical eye,” especially as she realized that most education policy decisions happen at the state level, and sometimes there was very little that local officials could actually do. She supposes that school officials “hear the concerns” from parents, but that “they do not always know how” to address them.

It was common for the parents I interviewed—regardless of the type of school their child attended—to say that powerful political and moneyed interests controlled the school system, and that those interests were often protected at the expense of children. Tanya Perkins, a Harlem No Excuses Charter school mother, said, “the school system doesn’t really care about how parents feel” and “it’s all about money at the end of the day.” Jaeda Price, a Harlem mother, told me that
“humanity is thrown out the window, and it’s all about the bucks.” Several parents had frustrating experiences where they encountered examples of political interests drowning out the concerns of parents. Noel Carter, a Harlem mother, had been a part of a group of parents who raised concerns about impending construction near her daughter’s school. The experience made her realize that the city “prioritizes development” over public education and children.

Some of the parents discussed the politics surrounding the city school system, and how claiming that it was improving was Ebony Lewis, a Brooklyn No Excuses mother, felt that “political drama” between elected officials mattered more in policy decisions that what parents say. She referenced the political battle over whether charter schools should pay rent to use DOE facilities, saying:

I feel like because of that higher-level sort of drama that they really aren’t concerned with what the parents are saying about what’s happening…I feel like it’s more about however they feel about what should be done. So, it doesn’t matter if, like, a million charter school parents come together and say, “Look you know my son was doing this and now he’s doing that, and look my daughter was here at this school not caring, not doing any homework, and now that she’s in a charter school she’s…” They’re like, “Ok great, but at the end of the day, if we want the charter schools to pay rent that’s what we’re gonna do. We don’t care what that does to them, you know.” That’s how I feel about that…I don’t think that the parents are being heard in the right way to make a difference in whatever decisions they want to make at that level.

After having frustrating experiences with her son’s weak 1st grade teacher, Nikki Jones, a Brooklyn mother, came to the conclusion that the school system is “run by the teachers’ union,” and that they “have much more power than parents.” She acknowledged that sometimes the interests of parents and teachers’ unions “may intertwine,” but at the end of the day they are motivated by “money and benefits, salaries, and things like that” and do not have the “interests and needs of students at heart.” Yolanda Walker, a Harlem mother, who was frustrated with the Common Core and the reliance on test prep at her son’s school, felt that it was “impossible to buck the system” because it is tied to extra funding for schools. She said that since New York
State “bought into the Common Core,” and funding is contingent on that, there is no room to “question” the new policies.

Some of the parents I interviewed talked about how parent concerns are only responded to if they have enough political power. They realized that the concerns of White affluent parents were heard a lot more than parents of color. Claudette Peters, a Harlem mother whose son attends a Gifted and Talented school, noted that when the DOE tried to do away with the policy of giving preferential treatment to siblings in Gifted and Talented admissions, they preserved it due to the outcry from vocal and well-resourced parents. Claudette knew that Black families—especially lower income Black families—would not get the same response if they went to school officials with a concern. She told me about a conversation she had with an educator about this, saying:

I remember speaking to this woman, she lives on 120th and she’s an educator, she’s a White woman, and she basically said that…she said, “Let’s be frank…these Black parents are gonna go to the Board of Ed and get their attention but…quite frankly you know what, they’re not really going to pay attention to them as much as they would pay attention to us.” So that’s a part of it too, because when they say something then they tend to stop and listen. I think that’s part of it. This was a White woman saying to me, “Yeah I know, that’s one of the problems.”

Many parents spoke of the difficulty for parents of color to get organized enough to wield political power. Camika Harris, a Harlem mother, noted that when parents of color are vocal, they are not only not paid attention to—sometimes they can be seen as a threat. She said that people like her who advocate for their children are “seen as a threat,” because you are supposed to “come in accept what [they] tell you, sit down and be quiet.” “When you start to speak,” she said, “you don’t have to be the most intelligent, but if you’re on a mission, and people see that you are determined they try to put up roadblocks.” Keisha Moore, a Transcend Academy mother who is very involved in a larger charter umbrella advocacy group, mentioned that there is
strength in numbers, and that if parents organize, they can pressure politicians through the threat of the ballot box. She told me:

Well [with] politicians it’s kind of like this. It’s like, “If you grease my hand; I grease your hand. You give me votes; I give you a little bit of what you need until I realize that this person can give me a little bit more.” I’m just being honest. That’s how it is. That’s literally how it is. Like ok we meet with you, we show you how we live within…we’re one of your constituents, you know this is the power we have within our neighborhood, within our area. These are the numbers that come out to our meetings. That’s when they listen, because those numbers reflect right back into votes.

The parents I spoke to concluded that they could not depend on the school system to educate their child, especially in light of the lack of power that parents have to make changes in the school system. Claudette Harris, a Harlem mother said, on the topic of parent concerns not being heard:

Are the concerns of parents being heard? (Chuckles) I think with the public-school system, I think it’s a business. I think it’s a business and I just think that, you know, you have to be super involved to make sure that your children are getting what they need to get out of it. I think you have to be…as parents I think you have to be really vigilant. I think you really have to pay attention, because if you don’t, your kids will get short changed.

Her husband Frank added that the “faith” cannot be placed in the school system, the “faith has to be within us.” Gloria Henderson, another Harlem mother, echoed this sentiment, saying that “you can’t depend on the system to educate your children,” because it does not happen that way in the “real world.” Alisha Thompson, a Queens mother, talked about how when the school is “lacking,” it is up to parents to try to fill in the gaps and to advocate for what your child needs, despite the obstacles in the way. As Latasha Edwards, a PS 970 parent put it:

You can’t be afraid to advocate for your kid. You can’t be afraid to say you know what this is not working out; let me see if I can get her into something that’s right now or just for next year. You can’t be afraid. That’s what I learned. If you’re not gonna advocate for yourself or you’re not gonna advocate for your child nobody else is gonna do it.
**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed parent vigilance as a strategy that Black parents employ to manage the distrust that often exists between Black parents and educators, and to intervene if necessary. I argue that how Black parents exercise vigilance to protect and guard against the poor treatment of their children in educational settings can be understood as a form of cultural capital. Such a perspective illuminates how for Black parents, distrust in schools is often prudent, even though most of the literature on trust in schools assumes that parent trust in educators is inherently beneficial and aids in the smooth functioning of schools and the successful execution of school improvement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Black parents are shrewd to wait for schools to earn their trust.

Whether schools earn parent trust depends on how transparent, responsive, reliable, and accessible educators are, and whether parents believe that educators respect them and find value in negotiating and generating shared understandings around education with parents. Thus, it is how schools structure parent engagement and respect parent vigilance that fosters authentic relational trust between families and schools. All three focal schools struggled to engage parents this way. While PS 970 had established relational trust with parents, through leaders who understood the community and made efforts to be accessible to parents, how accessible teachers were varied considerably, and the school still suffered from a lack of parent participation. At Transcend Academy, there were uniform policies that made the school very transparent and all of its educators accessible and responsive. However, parents had very little power to negotiate school policies when there was an issue. At PS 1150, parents were welcomed, educators were responsive and accessible and parents had power to negotiate different aspects of school policy. However, affluent White parents wielded disproportionate influence, marginalizing non-White
families. In the following and final chapter of this dissertation, I will discuss the implications of the findings from this chapter and the previous two chapters.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Discussion and Conclusion

My dissertation investigates the trust—and, more often than not, distrust—that Black parents place in public schools, through gaining an understanding of parent’s experiences and perspectives. This project was inspired by my desire to better understand how urban education policies might be strengthened through a deeper understanding of the views of community members and parents. At a time when education policies relying on market mechanisms and accountability coupled with demographic trends are transforming large urban public education systems, my research provides a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of Black parental trust in public schooling in a city that epitomizes these changes. I explore the extent to which New York City African-American parents trust public schools and the school system to meet both individual and collective ends and what trade-offs might be involved.

The findings from my dissertation study elaborate on treatments of trust in the theoretical literature and education research by examining how trust in institutions, such as public schools, develops uniquely for Black Americans. Moreover, my findings inform practice and policy—by giving educators a better understanding of what fosters trust and distrust between Black parents and schools in various contexts, and policymakers a better understanding of how demographic change and current education reforms are linked to public trust in public institutions. In this final chapter, I synthesize my findings, discuss some of the implications of my work, and make suggestions for further avenues of research.

Research Aims

The inquiry for my dissertation was guided by three overarching questions. The first question asked how the logic behind the trust or distrust that Black parents place in public
schools develops, by conceptualizing trusting as a process that unfolds over time (Khodyakov, 2007; Möllering, 2013), influenced both by socialization processes and the present experiences that challenge or reinforce attitudes, habits and dispositions acquired throughout life. I treated Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) as a mechanism that links socialization to trusting behavior and beliefs through dispositions and orientations. As a matrix of “durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1990) among which can be the propensity to trust (Misztal, 1996), habitus is structured by social position and experience, and shapes how people are oriented to, act in and experience the world (Bourdieu, 1990). The concept of habitus allowed me to study how race and class shape African-American parent trust and distrust in public schools.

My second question was aimed at clarifying what aspects of public schooling Black parents trust or distrust. Following other theorists who study trust (Baier, 1986; Hardin, 2002), I argued that trust should be understood as a three-part relationship, “where A trusts B to do X”. Relations of trust can then be differentiated according to the scope of what is being trusted and entrusted (Frederiksen, 2012; Nooteboom, 2007), as various kinds of trust relations can be at play, ranging from the more concrete and interpersonal to the more abstract and institutional. This framework allowed me to tease apart how Black parents’ trust in public schools might vary across different levels of public schooling from the more concrete to abstract—from their own child’s public school, to the city school system and then to the aspirational ideas associated with public education. It also allowed me to clarify what ends Black parents trust or distrust public schools to fulfill.

My final question sought to understand how school context influences how Black parent trust in public schools unfolds. When I began my study, I assumed that the two types of schools
that New York City Black parents would commonly send their children to would be No Excuses charter schools and traditional DOE schools—both serving predominately lower-income Black and Hispanic students, given the proliferation of charter schools in the city’s traditionally Black neighborhoods and intractable patterns of racial segregation in the city’s neighborhoods and schools. As I began to recruit and interview parents, however, I realized that many Black parents were sending their children to schools that serve increasing numbers of affluent White students, due to the gentrification of historically Black neighborhoods. I also noticed that there were common differences in school policies across these three school types—DOE schools serving lower-income students of color, DOE schools serving a racially and socioeconomically diverse student population and No Excuses charter schools. I decided to do more fieldwork in three focus schools that epitomized this school types, and to investigate how institutional features of schools—including policies, norms of parent engagement, power dynamics between educators and parents, and school culture—shaped the development of Black parents’ trust.

**Findings**

As I talked with parents and refined my interview protocol questions, I realized that the development of trust in schools was linked to critical instances where parents felt reassured or vulnerable when placing their child in the care of educators. One such instance was when parents looked for and then started their child at a new school, which is influenced by the New York City policy context, and the expansion of public school choice. Rather than giving parents more agency over their children’s education, however, I found that increased school choice disadvantages African-American parents who felt that finding a school was high-stakes, stressful and disempowering. Often for parents the process was about finding a school that they did not absolutely distrust with their child. Parents moved to not distrusting DOE schools and No
Excuses charter schools in different ways, which had consequences for how the parent-school relationship and whether it would become more trusting. Parents began relationships with No Excuses charter schools on a contractual basis, which attempts to dispel some of the distrust that exists between Black parents and schools by minimizing risk and producing mutual understandings about how the school will operate. Parents found DOE schools that they did not distrust through social networks; and while relationships between Black parents and district schools were already fragile, they are now even harder to form, as the policy context has weakened bonds between parents and traditional neighborhood public schools. Moreover, due to the racial and socioeconomic segregation in the school system, Black parents who were able to find a well-resourced school that is in high demand for their child have concerns about whether they will belong in the school community that serves affluent White students. Finally, the process of attempting to find a school leaves parents with grave concerns as to whether increased school choice is actually fulfilling the promise of promoting greater education opportunity for all of the children in their communities.

I then investigated critical instances that Black parents talked about as inflection points in their relationship with their child’s school, which occurred after their children began school and parents began to make evaluations of to what extent they trusted and distrusted educators to do different things. I found that differences in how parents came to trust educators in classroom management and student learning reveal the role that claims to expertise plays in trust between parents and educators. Parents believed that they could claim expertise in managing the behavior of their children, and so trust in this area was based on whether educators shared or could negotiate understandings with parents about the discipline styles that were appropriate for children. When it came to learning, parents deferred to the expertise of educators, and trust in
this area was based on whether educators could provide evidence of academic progress, and whether their idea of academic rigor met the aspirational goals—including empowerment and the ability to think critically—that parents believed education had the potential to fulfill.

When asked about their views on the city school system as a whole, parents believed it did not care about the children in their communities, and that it was mired in patterns of institutional neglect, and so for educators and schools, caring for students was fundamental in diminishing this distrust. Having an attitude of caring, and how that manifested itself in teacher’s classroom management and instructional goals and style, was fundamental in whether educators were able to earn the trust of parents. This notion of caring took on a culturally specific meaning for Black parents that is reflected in the literature on Black “womanist” caring—it involved the nurturance of children while also being dedicated to holding students to high expectations, and stemmed from an understanding of the political responsibility of Black youth (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Cooper, 2009; Foster, 1997; Jackson et al., 2014; Knight, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2009). While school leaders, regardless of school type, could play a vital role in establishing a school culture imbued with this culturally-based ethic of care to earn the trust of parents (Brown, 2005; Riehl, 2000; Tillman, 2004a), there were differences in how it was executed in DOE and No Excuses charter schools.

In DOE schools, there was a wide variation in how well teachers and school leaders were able to demonstrate this kind of caring and earn the trust of parents. The risks parents associated with their child having what they saw as an uncaring teacher could undermine the relational trust that other educators might have built with parents. No Excuses charter schools minimized these risks, by attempting to standardize school routines, polices, and teacher pedagogical styles that bore a tenuous resemblance to this culturally-based ethic of care. However, standardization had
the potential to impede the development of relational trust, as there was little room for either parents or educators to negotiate and develop shared understandings and deepen a commitment to cultural-relevant caring for students that resonated with parents.

Finally, I found that a watchful and protective stance was essential for Black parents in making sure their children were cared for and educated in school. Thus, how parents engaged with schools was born out of an attitude of vigilance. At times, this orientation compelled parents to try to have a presence in their child’s school—to have a watchful eye, prepared to intervene. I argue that Black parents’ vigilance can be understood as a form of cultural capital. I find that although many parents struggled to be as present in their child’s school as they wanted, they believed that having a presence in their child’s school helped them manage the distrust between themselves and educators. Having a presence at their child’s school gave parents opportunities to be vigilant—to monitor what was happening and to intervene if the situation warranted it. I also found that parents understood having a presence at the school was not just about dealing with their distrust of the school—it was also about dealing with educators’ distrust of them and their worth as parents. Parents tried to be present in schools not only to keep an eye on their children, but also sought to earn the trust and respect of educators and prove their dedication, so that their children would receive better treatment.

Recognizing that how much cultural capital is valued is context-dependent (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Carter, 2003), whether schools respect or dismiss Black parent vigilance plays a role in the development of relational trust between educators and parents. I found that how schools received engagement from Black parents varied by school type and the racial and socioeconomic make-up of the school student body. Schools earned parent trust based in part on how reliable they were—whether they were transparent, had consistent
routines and effectively communicated with or responded to parent concerns. This was linked to the extent that schools respected parents, and how much power parents had to negotiate school policies. I found that in low-income DOE schools, although there were instances where individual educators built trusting relationships with parents, overall the power differentials between parents and educators led schools to disregard parent vigilance and to default to systemic practices that bred distrust.

Educators in No Excuses charter schools allowed parents to monitor instruction and classrooms, and were eager to demonstrate that they were following through on what they promised educationally. However, how parents engaged in their children’s education was entirely on the schools’ terms, which communicated a disrespect of parents’ childrearing and limited the scope of parent vigilance. School contracts mandated parents to be supportive and participate in specific ways, and parents had very little room to negotiate rigid school policies. In socio-economically diverse DOE schools which include a sizable portion of affluent White students, schools did respect parent vigilance, and put in place systems that allowed for parents to monitor the school and negotiate school polices. However, in these contexts, affluent White parents wielded disproportionate power in demanding changes that benefited their children, and Black parents were often marginalized. Finally, I found that the Black parents I interviewed, regardless of the school their child attended, did not trust the school system to respond to parent concerns, reinforcing their disposition to be vigilant; they knew it was up to them that their children got the education they needed.

Larger Themes and Discussion

Most of the literature that investigates trust in schools is based in functionalist assumptions that trust between educators and parents is inherently constructive. In these
accounts, trust acts as a lubricant that facilitates the smooth functioning of a school community, and higher levels of trust between parents and school officials are thought to generate social capital and assist in successful school improvement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). However, I argue that when such accounts make normative judgements about parent trust in schools, they downplay the role of socio-cultural exclusion, power asymmetries, discrimination, and a legacy of institutional racism and neglect—across many institutional contexts—that foreground orientations of parents of color toward educators and schools. Indeed, it is often prudent for Black parents to distrust schools, and having a vigilant stance is a way for Black parents to exercise agency in raising their children. I argue that it is important not just to explore the benefits of trust in schools, but to also investigate the reasons for parent distrust in schools, and why schools fail to earn the trust of parents. Earning the trust of Black parents probably would entail active negotiation and contestation between educators, parents, and communities over understandings around education, and disrupt many of the taken-for-granted ways that schools operate. The other larger themes of my dissertation relate to how urban education policies at the school system level and the local school level have attempted to earn the trust of parents of color—including African-American parents.

Urban Policy Trends and Attempting to Earn Parent Trust in the School System

Two major urban education policy trends that animate school reforms efforts in large American cities, such as New York, are the expansion of opportunities for parent public school choice, and a move toward standards, high-stakes testing and accountability for educators and schools. While there are a complex and often competing set of political interests that have supported these reforms, some of the impetus behind them was the lack of trust that parents—and especially urban parents of color—had in public schools, and rightfully so. The reforms
sought to make troubled urban school systems more accountable to parents and communities. However, as these reforms have taken place in a context of a neoliberal reliance on the power of competition and unfettered markets to improve public services, and were implemented with colorblind and power-neutral assumptions about race and class, I find evidence that they have not fulfilled the promise of earning greater African-American parent trust in the school system.

As in other contexts, increasing school choice in New York City has seen support from Black parents and communities, though often not with the same logic as the original architects of school choice policies, who saw free-market solutions and direct democratic control as a panacea in fixing troubled school systems (Chubb & Moe, 1990). African-Americans have sound historical reasons to be cynical about the outcomes of unfettered market forces (Dawson, 2003), so Black parents and school choice proponents have embraced school choice policies strategically (Apple & Pedroni, 2005). African Americans school choice proponents have hoped that such policies could bring empowerment, control and agency over the education of children back to parents and communities (Pattillo, 2015; Scott, 2011, 2013; Stulberg, 2008). Implicit in this logic is that empowering Black parents and communities would make schools more responsive, reduce the power asymmetries that have existed between educators and parents, and move them toward providing Black parents and communities with public schools and school systems they can entrust with their children.

However, despite the fact that city policymakers have made efforts to increase educational choice for parents, I found that parents do not feel empowered by these changes—as finding a school they trust remains extremely challenging. Moreover, given the homogeneity of the city’s charter school sector—which is dominated largely by No Excuses charter schools—parents who exercise exit cannot always find a school that closely matches the educational style
they would prefer, as charter school parents’ concerns with inflexible discipline policies and rigorous but test-oriented curriculum suggest. Parents in charter schools also realize they had little power to negotiate school policies. In No Excuses charter schools, parent voice in decision-making is discouraged, and there is little incentive for schools to negotiate with parent ideas for reform, because in a saturated market, parent exit is not a credible threat. When theorizing about how schools can become more responsive to the needs of historically marginalized communities and build trust with parents, issues of power need to be taken into account.

An expansion of public school choice also has consequences for how much Black parents trust the public schools to serve all children in their communities well. A problem associated with charter schools is that the neediest students—such as students with special needs or who have chronic behavior problems, and families with the most instability, who may struggle with attendance—are less likely be served by them (K. Taylor, 2015a; Winters, 2013). As Somers and Wright (2008) argue, when taken to the extreme, infusing market-based principles into the provision of public services makes it so that these services have to be “earned” by people, and become “conditional” on whether people can “exchange something of value” for the service. As schools compete to produce high test scores, there are incentives to enroll and retain students with relatively fewer academic challenges (J. Jennings, 2010). Moreover, while school choice policies tend to understand education as a private good and focus on individual parent choice, it is still also an inescapably public good (Labaree, 2000), as all taxpayers and citizens have a stake in whether schools can produce politically competent citizens and skilled workers. I found that African-American parents, living in communities undergoing school reform, experience this even more keenly—as they have family members, close friends, and children in their communities who they worry are not getting a quality education.
The focus on standards and accountability in urban education reform was also born out of parent distrust. Against the backdrop of larger trends of declining confidence in the American public-school system in the late twentieth century, epitomized by the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report, the concern that educators did not have high expectations for students—especially lower income students of color—animated some of the rationale behind these policy reforms. As a result, these reforms initially enjoyed support from civil rights organizations, because activists felt that it was high time that educators were held accountable for closing “achievement gap” between White and Black children (DeBray-Pelot et al., 2007; McGuinn, 2006). In June of 2002, the New York state legislature turned control of the New York City school system over to Mayor Michael Bloomberg, ushering in an era of market-based school reform that has reshaped the school system. Bloomberg-era education policy was focused on creating systems of accountability for schools and educators—and included giving schools a widely publicized school quality “grade” based largely on test score outcomes and shuttering schools that had continued poor performance. The schools with the lowest grades were concentrated in community districts with the largest Black and Hispanic populations and with the most Black and Hispanic students (Meade et al., 2009).

The literature on institutional trust suggests that if oversight and accountability controls are too excessive, it can lead to distrust in institutions (Shapiro, 1987). Thus, too much emphasis on standards and accountability could make parents more skeptical about the school system’s competency. I found that parents were often suspicious about whether high-stakes testing was driving teachers to educate students with more rigor. They believed that a narrow focus on test score outcomes, compromised the depth of understanding and critical thinking that their children were receiving in their education. Instead, parents often believed that teachers were just
“teaching to the test.” Parents were also suspicious about the political motivations behind the use of these measures—they believed that they were often used to present a facade that schools were improving, and that schools and children were being “labeled” but not actually given supports to improve. With the standards and accountability reform as a backdrop, I found that Black parents struggle to trust schools to educate children well—which included both an attention to academic rigor and cultivating a love of learning, and is rooted in the aspirational potential they place on education, and how well educators can demonstrate that this education is taking place.

Related to this, I found that parents had a lot of distrust in teachers, when considered in the aggregate, but that distrust was alleviated when they reflected on their own educational experiences. On the one hand, parents believed that many teachers in the school system did not have the dedication required to educate children from their communities well. However, when parents reminisced on their own educational experiences, they remembered many examples of teacher who cared, even though many parents believed that they were not prepared academically for post-high school education. Parents attributed some of the lack of caring of present-day teachers to the burdens that high-stakes testing and accountability policies place on educators. This is an example of how parents saw high-stakes testing as narrowing the scope of how teachers educate students—highlighted in a lack of attention to students’ socio-cultural needs.

The Development of Parent-School Relationships Across Different School Types

Another major theme that emerged from my findings was that relationships between Black parents and school developed differently across different school types. These differences first emerge in the varying ways that parents establish relationships with schools when their child enrolled, and how parents tried to find schools for their child that they did not absolutely distrust.
The basis on which these relationships began had consequences for how the parent-school relationship developed, and to the extent that it became more trusting.

In their classic account of trust in public schools, Bryk and Schneider (2002) argue that the trust that operates in successful schools can best be described as relational—as the school is a complex, social organism of mutually dependent relationships among educators, students and families. Historical research demonstrates that this kind of trust existed in the tight-knit segregated Black communities in the Jim Crow South, as parents, educators and community members had to draw strength from within to resist oppression and provide educational opportunity for Black youth (Comer, 1986; Edwards, 1993, 2016; Fields-Smith, 2005). In these communities, educators and families would see each other socially outside of school—such as at church or the neighborhood grocery store—and have ongoing informal conversations about the progress of students. Students realized that the eyes of the community were on them, reinforcing norms of high expectations for academic performance (Comer, 1986; Edwards, 1993, 2016; Fields-Smith, 2005; Walker, 2000). Thus, these communities had strong social network closure, as conceptualized by James Coleman (1988), with dense, cohesive and interconnected links among educators, parents, students and community members that generated commonly understood ideas about education for the youth and a web of mutual obligations that fostered high levels of trustworthiness.

Currently, affluent White parents often buy homes in racially and socioeconomically segregated suburban communities, where they fit socially, to ensure that their children would go to a local school that they trust. Lareau (2014) finds the trust that such parents place their social networks and their new community spills over into a reflexive trust in the local school; in fact, these parents rarely even feel the need to do a confirmatory check on school quality measures.
before moving. However, it is not a given that trust between urban African-American parents and
their neighborhood schools can be established through relational and community bonds in this
way. There is greater social distance between urban Black parents and educators than there was
in the Jim Crow South, as parents and educators do not always come from the same cultural
backgrounds or communities, which makes relational trust harder to form (Bryk & Schneider,
2002; Noguera, 2001). Moreover, due to a history of schools not serving their children well,
Black parents have learned to approach schools with a protective stance, making distrust towards
schools a default stance. For New York City Black parents, finding a school that they do not
distrust with their child is challenging.

The parents I interviewed, tried to find DOE schools that they did not distrust through
social networks—whether through a school being vouched for by someone they trusted, or
through social ties and familiarity with schools that have been fixture in their communities. Due
to the destabilizing pressures of school choice, school closures, and gentrification, which has
transformed the landscape of schools in historical Black neighborhoods, I found that the bonds
between neighborhood schools and parents have been weakened, and parents struggled to find
schools in their neighborhoods that they trusted. As an example, PS 970, a longstanding
neighborhood school, had historically-established relational trust with parents. However, the
school struggled to resist destabilizing pressures, such as charter school expansion, school
closures and gentrification. In addition, school leaders at PS 1150, a brand-new school that
opened in the wake of a school closure, had to work hard to establish relational trust with
parents, as exemplified by Mrs. Bailey personally interviewing every new family that enrolled.

Both schools attempted to develop deeper relational trust with parents. Thus, for PS 970,
which through the charismatic leadership of Dr. Franklin had already developed a reservoir of
relational trust with parents, developing and maintaining trust was dependent on parents’ evaluations of their children’s teachers—who varied widely in how much parents believed that they were caring and competent—especially in managing classroom behavior and in their familiarity with the community. The school struggled to involve parents and make them feel welcome, and it was unclear how Dr. Franklin’s departure was going to affect how comfortable parents felt at the school. With PS 1150, which was a newly opened school serving a racially and socioeconomically group of parents, developing relational trust relied on building shared understandings about education between parents and educators—especially around academic rigor. PS 1150 welcomed robust parent participation as an asset, and allowed parents to negotiate with educators around some school policies. However, the school struggled to include all voices in the dialogue, making Black parents feel disrespected, and damaging some of the good will that Mrs. Bailey had built with parents of color.

Given that trust between New York City educators and Black parents cannot be assumed, network charter schools have an advantage in the beginning of their relationship with parents, as they assume that distrust is a given. Through marketing strategies borrowed from the business world, large EMO network charter schools promote and sell their brand to parents of color—and are very transparent about the academic results parents should expect to see for their children. No Excuses charter schools standardized orientation procedures, which are effective in introducing the parents to how exactly the school will operate, signaling to parents that their school is reliable. Finally, they ask parents to commit to what the school requires them to do, with the understanding that exit is always an option if the relationship does not work out.

Thus, charter schools and parents forge initial trust on a contractual basis, through explicitly spelling out the “services” that the parent and the school will exchange. “Relational”
contracts such as these are used in social domains to “facilitate exchanges” and “reduce uncertainty” by establishing mutual understandings (Camén, Gottfridsson, & Rundh, 2011; Molm, Takahashi, & Peterson, 2000). Thus, at least initially, charter school parents begin the school year with some familiarity of what will happen, which helps to put them at ease in the beginning of the school year. Contractual relationships between parents and schools make expectations explicit up front. I found that it was reassuring for parents when they had signs that the schools would be reliable and that they would know what to expect from educators. This was the case with Transcend Academy parents, who had an understanding of how the school was going to operate and some familiarity with the school and its educators, before their child started.

However, generating initial trust between parents and schools on a contractual basis also had consequences for how the relationship between parents and No Excuses charter schools evolved, especially given the unequal power relations at play, which can hinder the development of trust (Cook et al., 2005; Farrell, 2004). No Excuses charter schools face less risk than parents if the relationship is broken. These schools can actually benefit from parent exit, especially if the exiting student struggles with behavior or performing well on standardized tests. Thus, the schools have much more power in the relationship than parents—allowing them to set the terms of how the relationship should proceed. While the fact that No Excuses charter schools make their expectations for parents and students explicit and have structured and consistent routines may constrain behavior and reduce uncertainty, it does not remove the asymmetrical power differentials that exist between Black families—especially lower and working class Black families—and schools. There were many cases where the parents in No Excuses charter schools that I spoke to did not feel respected.
Moreover, while a contract can minimize risk as conditions of how the relationship with unfold are explicitly agreed upon, it cannot address all of the contingencies that might come up in a dynamic and complex relationship such as that between a parent and their child’s school (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). There is an inherent lack of flexibility as the relationship develops. Thus, contractual parent-school relationship is much more rigid and fragile, as the expectation is that parents should leave if they (or if the school) is dissatisfied. I found that at Transcend Academy, while the rigid standardization of discipline policies and teaching methods was able to eliminate a lot of variation, both educators and parents had little room to negotiate school policies—especially around discipline, where parents had doubts about the care and competency that educators demonstrated. Parents felt at times that their perspective was not valued, and was reflected in the fact that parents had few avenues to voice dissatisfaction—besides exiting or trying to report the school and its leaders to a higher authority. This hindered the develop of deeper, relational trust.

Larger Implications for Conceptualizing Trust

The perceptions of reliability, competency, care and respect that Black parents have of their child’s school, and how these perceptions often impede the development of trust between parents and schools, have implications for conceptualizing trust in ways that are not colorblind and power-neutral. While previous work on trust in schools has identified different relational features of trusting relationships—such as reliability, competency, respect and care (see e.g., Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004)—my work reveals how racism and power imbalances affect both the extent to which these characteristics are a part of relationships between Black parents and schools, and how these relational attributes interact with one another to impede the development of trust. Given the ingrained legacy of anti-Black racism in our
society, Black people have encountered dehumanization and disempowerment across most institutional contexts—including schools, for which the stakes are higher because it involves children. Thus, relationships that are respectful—where parents feel that they are empowered and believe that educators value their input and that are caring—where parents can be assured that educators have good intentions and can act on them to meet the needs of their children—are often lacking. Thus, the lack of respect and care are often the drivers of distrust between Black parents and schools, and has consequences for how reliable and competent parents find educators to be, and whether educators feel compelled or obligated to act in competent and reliable ways.

For example, I found that parents—especially those whose children attended schools with a predominately low-income, Black and Hispanic student body—believed that schools failed to communicate with parents and be responsive to their concerns, which undermined the extent to which parents felt that schools were reliable—which included being consistent in their routines and transparent about what was happening. Lack of attention to issues of consistency and transparency in schools, was linked to Black parents sensing a lack of respect for educators. However, in schools with a socio-economically and racially diverse student body, I found that White and affluent parents were often able to pressure school officials to be more communicative and responsive to their children, often marginalizing parents of color in the process. The fact that educators in these schools felt more pressure from those parents to be more communicative and transparent indicates that their healthy respect of the influence that affluent parents wield was related to the school enacting routines that made parents believe that the school was more reliable. In this example, perceptions of respect can be thought of as driving perceptions of reliability.
As another example, I found many instances where parents believed that educators—especially young White educators—did not know how to properly care for Black students, which undermined their competence in areas such as classroom management and discipline. This was linked to the relational attribute of care in two ways; in the sense that parents believed teachers lacked the cultural competence and understanding of the dynamics within their communities, and the perception that parents had that educators lacked the passion to engage and earn the respect of students. This lack of care that parents perceive in educators is related both to the lack of teachers of color who come from their communities and cultural fluency in teachers. In this way, the perceived lack of care drives the lack of competence that parents perceive in their children’s educators.

Given that Black parents believe there is a lack of many of the relational components that are thought to be fundamental to trusting relationships between parents and educators, it is not surprising that the default for Black parents is to approach schools with caution. I found that this distrust often manifested itself in a state of vigilance, where parents were on guard for something to protect their children from mistreatment. I argue that this state of vigilance exists in between the absolute states of trust and distrust. Parents who absolutely distrusted a school would either not send their child to it, or try to find a way end their relationship with it. In my conversations of parents, I did find instances of such unequivocal distrust in a school or educators. Parents who absolutely trusted a school would not have any doubts about the education that their child was receiving, and would not feel the need to be vigilant. I rarely found examples of this state. The most common orientation I found on the part of parents, was not one of absolute trust or distrust, but one of vigilance. If trust can be understood a continuum—with cases of clear distrust on one end and cases of absolute trust on the other, and a zone in the middle with cases that are not
absolute distrust but not yet trust (Ullmann-Margalit, 2004), a state of vigilance can be understood to exist in that middle zone. The relationship the parents I interviewed had with their child’s school and its educators could move toward becoming more trusting or distrusting, but parents always felt the need to remain vigilant.

Trust is often cast as a fundamental component of social relationships. However, some make the argument that cooperation can exist without trust (Cook et al., 2005). In terms of schooling, all parents—barring the ability to homeschool or send their child to a private school—have to send their children to public schools in the city. Parents are confronted with having to find ways to manage their distrust and ensure that their children are getting educated. Thus, rather than being fundamental to relations within schools, I argue that trust is not always necessary, and is in fact, often not actually present in relationships between Black parents and schools. Anti-Black racism is endemic to our society, and so it remains prudent for Black parents have a disposition to distrust public schools. Educators should consider ways to respect their vigilance and empower parents to have more voice in their children’s education.

**Implications for Future Research**

My dissertation study used a qualitative approach, with a focus on parent interviews, to gain a deeper understanding of Black parent perspectives, and the logic behind why parents trust or distrust different aspects of public schools. I also examined how parent trust evolves over time across different types of schools. Finally, I used frameworks that allowed me to add nuance and specificity to the conceptualization of trust.

Conceptualizing trust as a three-part relationship was a useful framework. Adding specificity to the study of parent trust in schools allowed me to uncover what aspects of schooling were the most consequential for parent trust. Moreover, it allowed me to tease out
differences in how trust or distrust in the local school operates when compared to trust in the school system. One implication of my research is that this framework and results could be used to construct more meaningful surveys that explore the relationship between different aspects of schools and parent trust. While such surveys would not be able to capture a deep understanding of parent experiences in schools, they would allow for a broader examination of parent views, produce results that are generalizable to larger populations and allow for comparisons across different demographic groups and different urban contexts with differing policy trends.

This framework also had implications for studying institutional trust. I found that even when parents had relationships with individual schools and educators that had earned their trust, they still tended to place little trust in the school system. This suggests that parents are attuned to the collective ends of education when considering their expectations for the school system, and were considered how well institutions were serving children in their communities as a whole. As parent perspectives were shaped by a disposition to distrust institutions—such as schools—evidence of urban school systems serving Black students poorly reaffirmed their disposition to distrust schools. These findings have implications for how endemic racism influences the trust that people of color—especially Black people—place in institutions. Institutional representatives may be able earn the trust of Black citizens by embracing practices that resist the effects of institutional racism in our society. However as long as it remains prudent for Black citizens to approach institutions with wariness, it will take work for institutional representatives to earn this trust.

On a related note, further research could also be conducted to examine how trust in schools is related to trust in other urban institutions and whether there is a spillover effect. My findings around contractual trust in schools suggest that the trend of infusing market-based
reform into the provision of public services may be consequential for public trust in other areas. Moreover, learning about parent perspectives on their own schooling experiences in New York City revealed for me the need for a better historical understanding of the relationship between a decline in Black educators in urban areas coupled with an increased reliance on high-stakes testing and accountability, and how that relates to Black parents’ trust in their neighborhood schools.

Finally, my study illuminates the usefulness of more nuanced conceptual frameworks to study the complicated concept of trusting. The idea that trust is a process—with the stages of interpretation, suspension and expectations—was useful when examining how trust or distrust is established in the discrete instance when people enter a relationship, as was the case when parents found a new school for their children and entrusted their children to the care of educators. This framework becomes less useful, however, when exploring trusting in a relationship that is already developing. As parents monitored the progress of their children in schools they were continuously interpreting reasons to trust and distrust educators; had many moments where they felt vulnerable or reassured by the risks that they were taking; and were continually adjusting their expectations for the school going forward. It was harder to capture the discrete stages in trusting as a process once the parent-school relationship was ongoing. Changes in trust became most visible when something unanticipated happened. How educators responded to these moments were consequential for the trust that parents placed in their child’s school. The use of research designs that rely less on parents’ recollection of events and more on observing parent and educator interactions as they unfold may do a better job of mapping discrete stages in the process of parent trust in schools.
References


Appendix A: Table with Characteristics of Each Parent Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Name</th>
<th>Child(ren) Age and Gender</th>
<th>School(s) Type</th>
<th>School(s) Demographics</th>
<th>School(s) Location</th>
<th>Interview Date(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alisha Thompson</td>
<td>daughter, kindergarten</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Eastern Queens</td>
<td>February 2014, February 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camika Harris</td>
<td>son, 5th grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>November 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna Baker</td>
<td>daughter, 2nd grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>February 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evette Davis</td>
<td>granddaughter, 5th grade</td>
<td>DOE, District 75</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Downtown Manhattan</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janelle Foster</td>
<td>son, 2nd grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>February 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie Mullins</td>
<td>granddaughter, 4th grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>November 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela Wilson</td>
<td>son, 4th grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Eastern Brooklyn</td>
<td>May 2014, May 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yolanda Walker</td>
<td>son, 3rd grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>October 2014, November 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claudette and Frank Peters* PS 970</td>
<td>son kindergarten</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>March 2014, March 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>son, 2nd grade</td>
<td>DOE, Gifted and Talented</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color, socioeconomically diverse, higher number of White students</td>
<td>Upper West Side</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya Harper* PS 970</td>
<td>son, 1st grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>November 2014, November 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>daughter, 1st grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>November 2014, November 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>daughter, 3rd grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>November 2014, November 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latasha Edwards* PS 970</td>
<td>daughter, kindergarten</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>November 2014, November 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>School Type</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Start Date</td>
<td>End Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhonda Allen*</td>
<td>son, kindergarten</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately</td>
<td>November</td>
<td>November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>students of color</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaeda Price</td>
<td>son, 1st grade</td>
<td>Charter School</td>
<td>socioeconomically diverse,</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>higher number of White students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>June</td>
<td>October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria Henderson</td>
<td>daughter, 1st grade</td>
<td>Charter School</td>
<td>socioeconomically diverse,</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>higher number of White students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>June</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noel Estrada-Carter</td>
<td>daughter, 1st grade</td>
<td>DOE, Gifted and</td>
<td>socioeconomically diverse,</td>
<td>Upper West</td>
<td>March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Talented</td>
<td>higher number of White students</td>
<td>Side</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>March 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pauline Franklin</td>
<td>daughter, 3rd grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>socioeconomically diverse,</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>higher number of White students</td>
<td>Manhattan</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>December</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanisha Young</td>
<td>daughter 3rd grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>socioeconomically diverse,</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>higher number of White students</td>
<td></td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>lower income, predominately</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>students of color</td>
<td></td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia Green*</td>
<td>daughter, 1st grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>socioeconomically diverse,</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>higher number of White students</td>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deidra Brown*</td>
<td>son 4th grade</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>socioeconomically diverse,</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>higher number of White students</td>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly Campbell*</td>
<td>daughter,</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>socioeconomically diverse,</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>kindergarten</td>
<td></td>
<td>higher number of White students</td>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica Hayes*</td>
<td>daughter, 3rd</td>
<td>DOE</td>
<td>socioeconomically diverse,</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade</td>
<td></td>
<td>higher number of White students</td>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>School Details</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Dates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki Jones*</td>
<td>son, 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; grade daughter, 3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; grade</td>
<td>No Excuses Charter School DOE</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color socioeconomically diverse, higher number of White students</td>
<td>Eastern Brooklyn Central Brooklyn</td>
<td>June 2014 November 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claudia Page</td>
<td>son, 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; grade</td>
<td>No Excuses Charter</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>February 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curtis Wright</td>
<td>daughter, kindergarten son, 4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; grade</td>
<td>No Excuses Charter School DOE, Gifted and Talented</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color socioeconomically diverse, higher number of White students</td>
<td>Downtown Manhattan Upper West Side</td>
<td>March 2014 March 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebony Lewis</td>
<td>son, 3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; grade</td>
<td>No Excuses Charter School</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Central Brooklyn</td>
<td>May 2014 May 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Dixon</td>
<td>grandson, kindergarten</td>
<td>No Excuses Charter</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>November 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mya Parker</td>
<td>son, kindergarten</td>
<td>No Excuses Charter</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>March 2015 October 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheryl Bradley</td>
<td>daughter, 4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; grade</td>
<td>No Excuses Charter School</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>March 2015 October 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya Perkins</td>
<td>son, 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; grade</td>
<td>No Excuses Charter School</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Harlem</td>
<td>March 2015 October 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anita Johnson*</td>
<td>daughter 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; grade son, 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; grade</td>
<td>No Excuses Charter School</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Eastern Brooklyn</td>
<td>June 2014 September 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail Howard*</td>
<td>son, 3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; grade</td>
<td>No Excuses Charter School</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Eastern Brooklyn</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace Douhou*</td>
<td>daughter, 3rd</td>
<td>No Excuses Charter School</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Eastern Brooklyn</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha Moore*</td>
<td>daughter, 1st</td>
<td>No Excuses Charter School</td>
<td>lower income, predominately students of color</td>
<td>Eastern Brooklyn</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All parent names are pseudonyms to protect study participants’ confidentiality. Parents with an asterisk next to their name are parents who sent their children to a focus school. The school their child(ren) attend is noted under their name. Only parent participants’ children who are in elementary school are listed here. Listed child grade levels are the grade level at the first interview.
Appendix B: Data Collection for Focus Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Parent Participants</th>
<th>School Leader Interview</th>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Additional Artifacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transcend Academy/ Eastern Brooklyn Elementary</td>
<td>Anita Johnson; Gail Howard; Grace Douhou; Keisha Moore, Nikki Jones*</td>
<td>Mrs. Cole, Principal (September 2015)</td>
<td>Parent Leadership Council Meeting (June 2014) 2 Back to School nights (August 2014) School and Community During Interviews</td>
<td>news articles about neighborhood demographic change DOE school quality snapshots CMO network website news articles/books about CMO network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS 1150/North Central Brooklyn Elementary</td>
<td>Cynthia Green; Kimberly Campbell; Monica Hayes; Deidra Brown; Nikki Jones*</td>
<td>Mrs. Bailey, Principal (December 2015)</td>
<td>Family/Community Event (June 2014) PTA Meeting (September 2015) School and Community During Interviews</td>
<td>news articles about school news articles about neighborhood demographics change DOE school quality snapshots school website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS 970/Harlem Central Elementary</td>
<td>Claudette and Frank Peters; Kenya Harper; Latasha Edwards; Rhonda Allen</td>
<td>Mrs. Watkins, Parent Coordinator (November 2015)</td>
<td>PTA Meeting (November 2015) School and Community During Interviews</td>
<td>news articles about neighborhood demographics news articles about school change DOE school quality snapshots school website</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Nikki Jones sent her son and daughter to both Transcend Academy and PS 1150.*
Appendix C: Interview Protocols

Parent Interview Protocol: Round 1

Background Information—Child and Child’s School

Tell me about your child(ren) who is (are) attending elementary school. (Probes: How old is she/he? Has he/she lived in New York City for his/her whole life? Does she/he have any other brothers or sisters? Does she/he live with any adults—father, grandparents?)

Did she/he attend preschool? If so, what kind of preschool was it? Did you find out about elementary schools through other parents that you knew through your child’s preschool?

How did you feel about your child’s preschool? (Probes: What do you feel that the school did well? What do you feel like it could have done better? Would you recommend the preschool to other parents?)

Tell me about the school that your child is attending for elementary school. (Probes: Is it a charter school? Where is the school located? Is it a big or small school? How many grades does it have?)

What was the experience of looking for an elementary school like? (Probes: How did you go about looking for a kindergarten for your child? What kind of information did you use to choose a school? Did you try to get your child admitted to any other schools?)

Tell me about your child’s first day of school. (Probes: How did you feel dropping off your child? Excited? Nervous? How did your child feel? Did the teacher greet parents at the door of the classroom? Did you worry about how your child was doing during that first day?)

If you ask your child, “How was your day at school today?” what does he/she say? What does she/he say about his/her teacher? What does your child like about school the most? What does your child dislike about school the most?

Does your child have special needs? (If so, probe: When did you first know that your child has special needs? Did you inform the school about your child's needs when she/he was enrolled? Do you know if the school has done any formal assessment of your child's special needs? Has she/he received an IEP? If so what was that process like?)

Does the school have rules about how students are supposed to behave? (Probes: Are they written down? Did the school give you a copy of the rules? What are some of those rules? What happens if a student breaks the rules?) How do you feel about your child’s school’s rules? Has the school ever contacted you because it felt that your child had broken the rules? If so, can you tell me about that? Do you feel like the discipline process was fair?
**Parent Experiences with Their Child’s School**

Does your child's school expect or require you to do anything as a parent? (Probes: If so, what does it say? Are there things parents are expected to do with their child at home—i.e. help with homework? Are parents expected to volunteer?)

Does your child’s school have a parents’ organization like a PTA? Do you participate in it? Is it important to you that your child’s school has a group for parents like that? Why or why not? Do you plan on attending any PTA meetings in the future?

Does your school principal encourage parents to volunteer at school events? Does your child’s teacher encourage you to volunteer for events? Have you ever volunteered at school events? If not, why not? If so, tell me about that experience. Do you plan on volunteering for any school events in the future?

Most schools have parent-teacher conferences. Have you attended a parent-teacher conference for your child? If so, tell me about that experience. If not, how did it happen that you did not attend? When is your next parent-teacher conference? How often do these conferences occur? Ideally, what do you think should happen in a parent-teacher conference?

Have you ever visited your child’s classroom? If so, how was the experience—did it make you feel better or worse about your child’s school? How often do you think that parents should be able to visit their child’s classroom?

**Parent Evaluation of Child’s School**

How do you feel about your child’s school so far? What has the school done well? What can the school do better? Do you think you can count on the school to do a good job?

What do you think are signs that students are well-cared for at a school? Can you count on your child’s school to care for the students? Tell me what makes you think this.

How well would you say that your child’s school is educating students? What makes you think this? What do you think are signs that a school is doing a good job educating students? (If they bring it up, probe about test scores)

In general, do you feel that your child’s school has an open door? (Probe: Are parents able to visit their child’s classroom? Do you feel like you can just come in to the school office if you have a concern? Do you feel welcome at the school?)

If you had a concern with the school, what would you do? How comfortable would you feel bringing your concern to your child’s teacher? The school principal?

What are signs that a school listens to parents? Do you feel like the school listens to parents? Can you tell me about a time when you felt like the school did a good job listening to you? What about a time where it could have done a better job?
Do you feel like the school has been honest with you? With other parents? What experiences make you feel like this?

What are signs that a teacher respects parents? Do you feel like your child’s school respects parents? Do you feel respected? What happened to make you think this?

Sometimes there can be cultural barriers between schools and families, especially when teachers and parents come from different communities or have different backgrounds. Do you feel that this ever an issue at your child’s school? If it is an issue, what are some ways that schools can overcome these barriers?

Do you feel like your educators at your child’s school get where you are coming from? Is it ever hard for them to understand your or your child’s concerns or needs?

Do you feel like educators at your child’s school get the issues and concerns that face your local community?

*Parent Feelings About the Larger School System and Education*

How much do you know about other schools in the community? How does your child’s school compare to other schools in the community? Are there any areas where you feel like it does an especially good job? Any areas where it can do better?

Are there places (i.e. church groups, parent organizations, etc.) where you come together with other parents and people in the community to discuss the schools? Can you tell me about what these experiences are like? What issues come up? Why do you think parents become involved in these sorts of groups and/or conversations? How do they make you feel about the school system? Will you be involved in anything like this in the future?

How do you think the schools in the city are doing in general? Are they doing a good job educating students? How well do you think that the city schools are educating black children in particular?

How much do you think other parents in your community trust the city school system to educate children in the community well? Are there some things that you think parents find easier to trust the schools with? Are there some things that you feel like parents have a harder time trusting the schools with?

How do you feel that the school system is being run? What should be changed for it to be better? Do you feel like concerns that parents like you are being heard by those in charge of the school system? Why or why not? Do you think that those in charge of the school system understand the issues and concerns that face parents like you in your community?

Do you think that parents feel respected by those in charge of running the school system? Would you say that parents in your community trust those in charge of running the school system? Why or why not?
How much do you think that education can help those in your community? If yes, in what ways? If not, why not? How important would you say that education is for black children in particular? Why?

Ideally, how would you describe a “good education”? Do you feel like children in your community are getting a good education? What do you hope that education can do for children in your community?

**Concluding Questions**

Is there anything that I have not asked you that you think I should have? Is there anything else that you want to mention?

**Snowball Question**

I am still recruiting parents for this study. I am especially interested in talking to Black/African-American parents who have kindergarteners in New York City public schools. Do you know of any other parents who might be willing to talk to me? If so, could you give me their contact information?

**Parent Interview Protocol: Round 2**

**Child’s Transition Between Grades**

Last time we met your child was in (X) grade. I’m going to ask you some questions about how the transition from one grade to the next went.

Is your child going to the same school this year as last year? If not, why?

Tell me about your child’s first day of the new grade (or new school). How did you feel? What things did you feel at ease about in this first impression? Did your first interactions with your child’s new teacher raise any doubts?

What things strike you as being different from last year? Can you give me an example? How do you feel about these differences?

**Child’s Educational Experiences**

When you ask your child, “How was your day at school today?” what does he/she say? What does she/he say about his/her teacher? What does your child like about school the most? What does your child dislike about school the most? Do you feel this is different than last year? If so, how?

Now that your child is older, are the school rules for how your child supposed is to behave different from what they were last year? How do you feel like the rules compare to the rules last year?
During this school year the school contacted you this year yet because it felt that your child had broken the rules? If so, can you tell me about that? Do you feel like the discipline process was fair?

(For parents with special needs child) What has the school done so far to accommodate your child’s special needs? Do you feel like you comfortable with the way that the school has handled his/her special needs so far this year? How does it compare to the way things were handled last year? What should the school continue to do?

Do you feel like your child was prepared for the next grade? Is he/she encountering challenges that he/she did not face last year?

(For children in testing grades) Usually, New York 3rd graders to begin taking state standardized tests. How has your school talked about these tests with you? Do you feel like they have done a good job communicating about these tests? Are there things that you are unsure or concerned about?

This year, have you kept track of your child’s school’s test scores? Does the school publicize this information for parents? Is this something that schools should publicize for parents? How important is school test score data to you? Why? Is it more important to you now that your child is older? Why?

Parent Experiences with the School

How much would you say that you visited the school so far this year (i.e. the principal’s office or your child’s classroom)? Do you feel welcome at your child’s school? Why? Tell me about a time when you felt welcomed/unwelcomed at the school. How does this compare to last year?

(For parents in PTA schools.) Have you participated in any PTA events so far this year? Can you tell me about a PTA event that you were a part of that was memorable?

Did you feel like being involved with PTA made you feel better about your child’s school? How do your experiences with the PTA compare to last year?

(For parents in schools with volunteer opportunities) Have you volunteered in any school events so far this year? If so, tell me about the experience.

How did it make you feel to be able to volunteer? How do these volunteer experiences compare to last year?

What was memorable about the last parent-teacher conference you attended?

What did you hope to get out of parent teacher conferences this year? Do you feel like these expectations were met? Why or why not?
How well has the school communicated with you this year? Where there any moments were you felt like you wanted more information?

In general, do you feel at ease about your child’s classroom and learning? Or are there things you have doubts or concerns about?

In general, do you feel at ease about your child’s well-being at school? (Probes: Safety? Socio-emotional needs? Cleanliness of facilities?) Are there any things you have doubts or concerns about?

Many parents feel that it is important that educators at the school listen to their concerns. How well is the school doing listening to your concerns so far this year? What experiences make you feel like this?

Thinking about the year so far, what are some things that the school has done to show that it respects parents? Are there ways that the school has made you feel that it does not respect parents? Can you tell me about an experience that made you feel like the school respects/or could do a better job respecting parents? Do you feel more or less respected by the school that you did last year?

Last time, I asked you about cultural barriers between school officials and parents, especially if they come from different backgrounds. So far this year, do you feel like these types of barriers are an issue at your child school? How does this compare to last year?

Can you tell me about a time where you felt that the school really got where you were coming from? How about a moment where the school did not seem to understand? How did that make you feel about the school and your child’s education?

*Parent Feelings About the Larger School System and Education*

Have there been instances (i.e. church groups, parent organizations, etc.) where you have come together with other parents to discuss the schools? Can you tell me about what these experiences are like? What issues come up? Why do you think parents get out of these sorts of conversations? How do they make you feel about the school system?

At this point, how do you think the schools in the city are doing in general? Are they doing a good job educating students? How well do you think that the city schools are educating black children in particular? How could the city’s schools do a better job educating Black children?

What do you feel about the direction that the schools are headed in? Would you say that you say that you trust those in charge of running the school system? Why or why not?

How much do you think other parents in your who live near you or send their kids to your school trust the city school system to educate children in the community well? What kinds of doubts or concerns do you think parents might have about the school system? What kind of things are parents confident that the city’s school can do?
Do you feel like those in charge of the school system are hearing the concerns that parents like you have? Why or why not? Do you think that those in charge of the school system understand the issues and concerns that face parents like you in your community? What makes you think that they do/or do not?

Do you think that parents feel respected by those in charge of running the school system? Why or why not?

*Looking Forward to the Future*

How much do you think that education can help those in your community? If yes, in what ways? If not, why not? How important would you say that education is for black children in particular? Why?

Last time, you told me about what you feel a good education is. Can you talk to me about the education that you got? (Probes: Did you go to NYC public schools as a child? In this same neighborhood? Did you go on to college?) How does it compare to the education that your child is getting?

Do you feel like children in your community are getting a good education? What do you hope that education can do for children in your community?

Would you say that you are feeling optimistic about your child’s schooling for this year? What do you hope your child will get out of school this year? Do you have any doubts or worries? If so, what are they?

Thinking about your child in particular, what do you aspire for your child 30 years? Do you feel like your child’s school will help your child meet those aspirations? Why or why not?

*Concluding Questions*

Is there anything that I have not asked you that you think I should have? Is there anything else that you want to mention?

**Educator Interview Protocol**

*Background Information*

Tell me a little bit about your history with this school. (How long have you been in this current position? How long have you been an educator?)

Tell me a little bit about your school. What are you most proud of about it? What would you like to see improved?

If you were to describe your school to a new parent what would you say? What would you highlight as unique about your school?
School and Family Engagement

Could you tell me, in general, how you would characterize your school’s relationship with families and parents?

How do you, in your particular role, interact with parents and families? Can you tell me about a recent experience where you interacted with parents and families?

Does the school have a PTA? Can you describe what they do? How many parents regularly go to PTA meetings? What role does the PTA play in the school?

Does your school have an SLT? Can you describe what they do? Who is on the SLT? What role would you say they play in the school?

Which educators at your school would you interact with parents and families the most? (Parent Coordinator? Principal?) Do you educators in other roles should have more interactions with parents and families?

Do teachers (and other educators) receive any training or professional development on how to engage parents? If so, what does that training entail? Do you feel like the training has been helpful?

Do parents sign a contract around school policies? If so, what is the purpose of this contract?

Does your school offer any workshops for parents to support their child academically? If so, what do those workshops involve?

When parents have concerns, whom do they tend to go to? Why do you think that is?

Does your school get feedback from parents? (If yes, probe on how: i.e. Do you give parents surveys? Do you use results from the NYCDOE parent survey?) If yes, can you talk about what this feedback has told you? How do you use the feedback?

Would you describe your school as having an open-door policy? Are parents welcome to pop into their child’s classroom? Why or why not?

In what ways do you think your school is effective at communicating with parents? In what ways could the school be more effective?

Parent Perspectives on School-Family Relationship

Do you think parents feel welcome at the school? Why or why not? How does your school try to make parents feel welcome?
What parents do you find are the hardest to engage? Why? How does your school try to engage hard to reach parents? How have these efforts helped to engage parents?

In general, how do you think parents feel about your school? Why would you say this?

*Philosophy of Parent/Community Engagement*

What do you see the role that parents should play in the school? Why?

Do you feel that it is important for schools to be involved in the community? Why or why not? In what ways in your school involved with the community?