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School Choice Policies and Racial Segregation: Where White Parents' Good Intentions, Anxiety, and Privilege Collide

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A growing body of school choice research has shown that when school choice policies are not designed to racially or socioeconomically integrate schools, that is, are "colorblind" policies, they generally manage to do the opposite, leading to greater stratification and separation of students by race and ethnicity across schools and programs. Since white, advantaged parents are more likely to get their children into the highest-status schools regardless of the school choice policy in place, we believed that more research was needed on how those parents interact with school choice policies and whether they would support changes to those policies that would lead to less segregation across schools. Our interviews with advantaged New York City parents suggest that many are bothered by the segregation but that they are concerned that their children gain access to the "best" (mostly white) schools. The contradictions inherent in their choices are reconcilable, we argue, by offering more diverse and undivided school options.

Throughout the history of American education, various school choice policies have been devised to accomplish different goals. For instance, prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, southern school districts implemented so-called freedom-of-choice and tuition voucher programs specifically to assure that schools remained racially segregated. Then, in the era of school desegregation, various school choice programs, including magnet schools and voluntary transfer plans, were created to do the exact opposite, namely, to promote racial integration and more diverse schools (see Wells 1993).

More recently, popular school choice policies, including charter schools, voucher plans, and open enrollment programs, have been enacted in most

states to foster greater competition for students among schools. These plans are designed specifically to infuse market-based principles into government-funded schools and thereby foster innovation. Interestingly enough, given the history of school choice in the United States, these newer school choice policies are not designed to specifically address issues of racial segregation (Wells 1993). In this way they are considered "colorblind."

Still, a growing body of research has documented a strong positive correlation between increasing racial/ethnic segregation in public schools and the growth in these popular so-called colorblind and more market-based school choice policies, which do not explicitly promote racial integration (see Mead and Green 2012; Mickelson et al. 2008; Wells and Roda 2008). In other words, mounting evidence suggests that when school choice policies are not designed to promote racial integration—which most newer school choice policies are not—they generally manage to do the opposite by leading to greater stratification and separation of students by race and ethnicity across schools and programs.

In a society with an increasingly diverse school-age population (now only 54% white, non-Hispanic [NCES 2010]), this pattern of choice-based racial segregation occurs—even when a growing number of parents say they want their children to attend racially diverse schools (Farkas et al. 1998; Orfield 1995; Wells et al. 2009). Meanwhile, the number of students participating in these colorblind, market-based school choice plans is on the rise (now more than 2 million), as is racial/ethnic segregation in K–12 education (CER 2010; Civil Rights Project 2011; NCES 2011;).

When trying to understand the segregative effect of these newer school choice policies, some researchers have focused on how parents make school choices (see Bell 2009; Glazerman 1998; Goldring and Phillips 2008; Kisida et al. 2008; Lankford and Wyckoff 2000; Schneider and Buckley 2002; Schneider et al. 2000; Sinkkink and Emerson 2007; Weiher and Tedin 2002). Others have also examined the relationship between parents with the most advantage in the system

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in terms of race, social class, education, and social networks and student access to the most coveted schools within an educational market (Holme 2002; Johnson and Shapiro 2003). Still others have considered how the policies themselves constrain the choices parents make. For instance, some researchers have argued that because the newer choice plans lack diversity goals, racial quotas or guidelines, outreach to different communities, and free transportation to and from racially isolated neighborhoods, they severely limit parents' choices. Therefore, when parents are choosing schools under these newer, more market-based policies, it is difficult for them to enroll their children in schools far from home, across race and class boundaries that divide communities and social networks the way school desegregation programs did (see Ni and Donahue 2004; Wells and Holme 2008).

There is also some evidence that the process of sorting students through choice polices leads to self-fulfilling prophecies of "good" and "bad" schools, as those enrolling the most students from advantaged families are automatically seen as "better" (see Bifulco et al. 2009; Holme 2002; Wells et al. 2009). Once those labels are established, upper-middle-class and affluent white parents often have greater access to the most exclusive schools (see Holme 2002; Johnson and Shapiro 2003). In this way, the newer, post-desegregation, and thus "colorblind," school choice policies and processes often exacerbate stratification and segregation (Wells and Roda 2008).

The school choice policy we studied is not a voucher or charter program, but rather a public elementary school choice plan operating within one of the community school districts, which we call District Q, in the larger New York City public school system. While there are important differences between District Q's school choice plan and more market-based plans, like vouchers and charter schools, there are some similarities as well. The central goal of the District Q program is to maximize parental choice, primarily through a kindergarten lottery system that provides parents with the possibility of enrolling their children in schools and programs outside their attendance zones. The aim of this program has never been to racially or socioeconomically diversify District Q schools. In this way, the kindergarten school choice program is "colorblind," letting school diversity chips fall where they may. Studying the processes by which parents make choices in contexts such as this one, therefore, is extremely helpful in explaining the demographic outcomes of many new laissez-faire policies such as charter school and voucher programs. In fact, because District Q's overall student demographics combined are extremely racially and ethnically diverse, the relationship between colorblind school choice policies and racial segregation is even more pronounced here than in other contexts. Our study allowed us to examine that relationship by interviewing parents about how they made sense of their kindergarten choices amid these racial distinctions across schools and programs.

Furthermore, although much of the recent school choice literature has focused on low-income communities and the impact of school choice policies, especially charter schools, on student outcomes, our focus instead is on the parents who have the most political power within the educational system and who often work within and around that system to make their school choices. Given that these more advantaged parents have the most knowledge and resources to navigate the school choice system (see Bifulco et al. 2009), they are more likely to get their children into the highest-status schools regardless of the specific school choice policies in place.

We believed, therefore, that more research was needed on these parents' interactions with the local school choice policies and how these parents make decisions about which schools are desirable within that policy context. While we knew that the choices of these parents often drive the school choice process by defining which schools are the "best," we knew little about how these parents make sense of the choice plans themselves and whether they would support any changes to those policies that would lead to less stratification and segregation across schools. We also knew that policy makers in large urban school districts have historically created "exclusive" and often racially isolated schools of choice, including those with programs for "gifted" students, in an effort to keep more white, advantaged parents in urban public schools (Borland 2009; Gootman 2009; Gootman and Gebeloff 2008; Sapon-Shevin 2003). The assumption behind such programs is that these parents both demand and require separate and unequal educational spaces for their children.

In fact, our interviews with white, mostly upper-middle-class parents suggest, somewhat contrary to these assumptions, that many of these parents are bothered by the racial and socioeconomic segregation within and among schools that results from these policies, but they are simultaneously anxious and concerned that their children win the "race to the top" of a highly competitive and stratified system. The contradictions between these two ways of looking at their local options are reconcilable, we argue, through alternative policies that local officials should consider.

Within the school choice literature, therefore, what has not been closely examined is how this cycle of social reproduction and resegregation occurs at the intersection of school choice policies and the process by which advantaged parents simultaneously weigh their choices, worry about their children's chances in a competitive and unequal educational system, and consider the benefits of racially diverse schools in preparing their children for a global society. We argue, based on our research, that many advantaged, mostly white parents contemplate all of these factors at once and struggle with the contradictions between their options, their anxieties, and their beliefs. Our goal, therefore, was to understand this tension within the individuals who, through their privilege, drive much of the stratification in the educational system and

thus to better understand this intersection of parents, possibilities, and anxieties. We conclude that there are several potential points of intervention in the school choice–school segregation cycle—if policy makers would only act on them.

As public school parents of older children in the New York City community school district we studied, our unique vantage point into this segregated system provided us with "insider knowledge" of the school choice options that the kindergarten parents in our sample were choosing among. Studying parental kindergarten school choice within this large "community" school district several years after our own children had graduated from kindergarten allowed us the unique vantage point of being unknown to our respondents and yet aware of their larger context.

Choosing Segregated Schools in New York City's District Q

To explore these issues, we interviewed 59 randomly sampled parents of different racial/ethnic backgrounds who participated in the 2006 kindergarten school choice process for both general education and gifted education within District Q. At the time of our study, District Q had implemented a new, centralized choice system with two options that parents could participate in if they were unhappy with their assigned zoned school: (1) a district-wide lottery system for general education programs (meaning those students not enrolled in the gifted and talented program) in which parents could rank up to six schools on the lottery application and then were randomly selected to attend one of the schools on their list and/or (2) a District Q gifted and talented (a.k.a. G&T) admissions process, involving a separate application decided by student's scores on the G&T test, preschool teacher recommendations, and space/capacity issues in each program. In fact, as we will show below, we found that many parents participated in both school choice options to increase their chances of getting their children into an "acceptable" general education or G&T program.

District Q officials asked us to conduct this research and thus provided us with the contact information of all parents who participated in the school choice lottery and/or G&T admissions program so that they could learn how satisfied parents were with the new centralized system. The aggregated student population of District Q's 18 elementary schools was, as we noted above, diverse: 38% African American, 35% Hispanic, 23% non-Hispanic whites, and 5% Asian (NYCDOE 2006). However, District Q's students are highly segregated by race and ethnicity across and within the school buildings, with white, non-Hispanic students consistently in the most coveted schools and G&T programs. Thus, even those schools that are diverse in terms of their

school-level enrollment are, more often than not, highly segregated within or across classrooms designated as "gifted" or "general" education.

In this article, we examine the contradictions between what advantaged parents say and what they do when confronted with segregated schools and school programs. Thus, we focus here on interview data from the 39 white, more advantaged parents interviewed as part of the larger study. In these in-depth interviews, we heard how advantaged parents made sense of their school choice options and how those options often clashed with their understanding of the type of education they wanted for their children. These parents said, as the vast majority of parents in national opinion polls do, that it is either "very" or "somewhat" important for their children to attend a racially/ethnically diverse school to prepare them for a global economy and society (Farkas et al. 1998). And yet, when it came time to choose schools for their children, white parents with economic means in District Q are drawn toward schools (and separate G&T programs within schools) that are predominantly white and thus far more racially homogeneous than the school district as a whole.

In order to introduce what we have learned from these interviews with white parents, we provide a conceptual framework of the school choice process within a racially segregated and increasingly unequal educational and social context (see Wells et al. 2009). As contradictory as these District Q parents' decisions may be, they are not surprising given the few "good" school choice options available and the parents' anxiety about helping their children "win" in the competitive scramble for the more prestigious educational credentials. Therefore, given the larger context of these parents' choices, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of how social reproduction is perpetuated through school choice policies and how policy makers could break that cycle.

The Social Context of Advantaged Parents' Choices in Education: Why Today Is a Different Time

Over the past 30 years, social scientists have documented two contradictory trends related to white parents' relationships to racially diverse schools. First, public opinion polls show that a growing number of white, non-Hispanic Americans, including parents of school-age children, embrace the concept of racial diversity in public schools (see Orfield 1995). According to one national survey, a majority (66%) of white parents said that it is "very" or "somewhat" important for their children to attend a diverse school. Only 16% of white parents said that racial diversity was "not important at all" (Farkas et al. 1998). Similarly, in-depth interviews with nearly 250 graduates of racially diverse public schools reveal that virtually all the white graduates thought that diverse public schools could better prepare their children for the twenty-first century

(see Wells et al. 2009). Yet, at the same time that opinion polls have traced whites' growing acceptance of racial diversity in public schools over time, the nation's schools have become increasingly segregated (Orfield and Lee 2007). In fact, according to national statistics, about 40% of black and Latino students attend hyper-segregated schools where 90%–100% of students are children of color, while white students remain the most segregated from other racial groups (Civil Rights Project 2011; Clotfelter 2004; Gandara 2010).

These two contradictory but simultaneous trends suggest that whites are saying one thing about school diversity and doing another when it comes to actually choosing and enrolling their children in schools. In fact, there is a small but growing body of literature documenting these contradictions between what parents say and what they do in relation to school-level diversity (see Smrekar 2009; Wells et al. 2009). Understanding this apparent contradiction—how white parents make sense of it and the policies that circumscribe it—is critical to exploring the limits and possibilities of future efforts to address educational inequality.

Social scientists have long grappled with how to make meaning of contra-dictions between what people say and what they do, and the tensions they embody as they make choices that are sometimes inconsistent with their beliefs or understandings of who they are or the kind of society they envision (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Lewis 2001). For instance, people are very dependent on fossil-fuel burning cars at the same time that they may strongly believe that alternative fuels would be better for the environment and the economy. While social science research often tries to ignore or control for these internal contradictions and tensions to reveal the "answer" and thus the "truth," some social theorists find studying the tensions helpful for understanding why social conditions change or not.

In considering the contradictions and tensions embodied within the New York City parents we interviewed, we found Bourdieu's concept of "fractured" or "cleft" habitus (Bourdieu 1997) most helpful because it demonstrates how social actors both embody and resist the social conditions in which they live their lives and educate their children. "Habitus" has been defined as the internalized embodiment of external social structures that shape a person's dispositions in relation to his or her own position, for example, social class, race/ethnicity, religion, educational background, geographic location (e.g., urban vs. suburban; East Coast vs. Midwest), and even generational identity. Habitus describes the ways we know who we are and "our place" within the larger social context; it also informs our political views and understandings. On a daily basis, however, we interact with social conditions that may challenge our habitus, which is not static, but constantly being molded and re-formed (Bourdieu 1984, 1986; Lareau 2003). Hence, concepts of "liberal" or "con-servative," for instance, are challenged and rethought as our dispositions in-

teract with specific policies and structures that shape the distribution of opportunities in education and other spheres. It is not unusual for people to feel conflicted regarding their dispositions about who they are and what they want and their actions within the existing opportunities.

Thus, many of the upper-middle-class, well-educated white parents we interviewed about kindergarten choice in New York City understood their relative class, race, and educational background privilege within the context of an urban school system. They often saw themselves as more open to racial diversity than their suburban counterparts, so they felt conflicted about the separate and unequal school choices that were available. That they could see themselves one way and make educational choices for their children another way is not surprising within the social conditions that envelop them, namely, a society increasingly divided between rich and poor, a high-stakes educational system and economy, and a set of educational policies that give them the choice of separate and unequal classrooms.

Applied to the current US context, the notion of fractured or cleft habitus helps explain how whites can simultaneously espouse a belief in "colorblindness" while making choices that explicitly maintain their own privilege in a racially divided society, such as choosing all-white or predominantly white schools (see Wells et al. 2009). This contradiction between what parents say they want (i.e., diverse public schools) and what they actually choose, including elite programs within public schools and private schools, is prominent in research on white graduates of desegregated schools. The white graduates spoke simultaneously about their desire to enroll their children in racially diverse schools, but given the lack of such options, they chose elite, exclusive, and segregated programs instead (Wells et al. 2009). Similarly, Winant (1997, 2004), who has espoused a theory of "white racial dualism," writes that since the 1960s, "white identities have been displaced and refigured: They are *now contradictory, as well as confused and anxiety-ridden*, to an unprecedented extent" (3–4).

One explanation for these contradictions is that people are context-dependent and their meanings of race are strongly influenced by living within structures of racial inequality, like housing segregation, and separate and unequal schools and classrooms (Powell 1997). Anderson (2003) writes that the social science literature on "whiteness" focuses almost exclusively on white identity and norms and not enough on these structural and institutional arrangements that allow racial inequality to continue. The central problem with this way of framing whiteness, according to Anderson (2003), is that it assumes that the problem of racism can be solved by white people changing their minds. While Anderson admits that confronting white racial prejudice is important, "unlearning racism" approaches alone will not dismantle the apparatus of racial power. School choice policies, grounded in somewhat faulty and overly

simplistic assumptions about what advantaged white parents want for their children, is, we argue, part of this apparatus.

In the current, post–Civil Rights era, when parents' concern about their economic security and their children's future runs extremely high, we should not be surprised that white parents display a fractured or divided habitus about racial diversity and segregation when making school choices. Thus, when white, advantaged parents network and interact, they foster a collective understanding about which schools are appropriate for children "like theirs," characterizing their common position in the social hierarchy, even when such schools symbolize the racial segregation they say they oppose (Mannheim 1936). Thus, for early twenty-first-century white, upper-middle-class parents, "common position," race, class, and a "fear of falling" in an increasingly stratified society are critical factors (Roberts and Lang 1985; Schuman and Scott 1989).

In the case of today's parents of school-aged children, most were born in the sixties, seventies, or eighties. Their so-called generational consciousness developed during the Civil Rights and early post–Civil Rights era, when white racial attitudes seemingly improved. Yet, at the same time, they became adults in the midst of a much more politically conservative era, when the policy focus in education has been on easily measured outcomes and school choice policies framed in terms of a market-based competition for the most coveted seats in a stratified system, all amid a political backlash against policies designed to further racial integration and equality (see Edsall and Edsall 1992; Wells et al. 2009).

Coinciding with the more conservative era in which this cohort of parents came of age, bought houses, and had children is the rapid rise in income inequality in the United States, as those in the top 5% of the income distribution experienced dramatic salary gains and the number of workers barely getting by grew rapidly (see Kopczuk et al. 2007; Lemieux 2007). In fact, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the United States held the distinction of having the greatest income disparities of any advanced industrial society (Dreier et al. 2004). This broader context of inequality has no doubt had an impact on those at the top of the increasingly skewed income distribution, making them more anxious about their potentially precarious economic position and concerned about how best to pass their relative advantage on to their children (Ehrenreich 1990; Levine 2006; Wells et al. 2009).

In thinking about today's upper-middle-class white parents in this more contextual way, it is important to remember that they do not approach the school choice process in a vacuum. In fact, as we describe below, our data from the District Q kindergarten lottery and G&T admissions process speak to these contextual and peer effects of parents. We also see how education officials respond to these parents' anxiety (or the perception of it) in a manner

that maintains and often exacerbates separate and unequal educational opportunities. In this next section, we present this broader policy context of the New York City parents we studied.

The Social Context of White Parents' Choices: The City, the System, and District Q

Looking at early twenty-first-century white and relatively affluent parents in the context of New York City makes this recent economic history all the more striking. Within so-called global cities such as New York, hourglass labor markets require both well-paid, highly educated, and mostly white professionals and poorly paid, poorly educated service workers, many of whom are black or Latino immigrants (see Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Sassen 2006).

To the extent that even a small percentage of these advantaged urban parents will choose public as opposed to private school for their children, gentrifying global cities such as New York are potential fertile ground for racially/ethnically and socioeconomically diverse public schools. Unfortunately, this vision of diverse, dynamic schools is not shared by New York City's school leadership.

The New York City Public Schools and District Q

At the time of our study, New York City's school chancellor, Joel Klein, took a colorblind stance when it came to student assignment policies, which means he did not promote policies that would purposefully create diverse schools. He did not, apparently, see racial diversity at the school or classroom level as a goal, a conviction he held even more strongly after the 2007 Supreme Court ruling in the Louisville and Seattle cases. In fact, Chancellor Klein once stated: "Almost three quarters of our students are African American and Latino. In an environment like that, a focus on racial balance seems to me to be not the way to solve the problem" (Goldstein 2007).

As of school year 2006–7, the New York City Public Schools' student population citywide was almost 40% Latino and 32% black. About 14% of the students were Asian, and the remaining 14% were white (NYCDOE 2006). While most of the 32 New York City community school districts have predominantly black and Latino student populations, the significance of studying community school District Q is due to the racially and socioeconomically diverse student body overall. In the context of one of the most racially and ethnically segregated public school systems in the country, for District Q, the student population stands out (see table 1), with more African American and

TABLE 1

Racial/Ethnic Makeup of Percent of the New York City versus District Q Student Population by Race/Ethnicity, 2006–7

	Latino (%)	African American (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	Free and Reduced Price Lunch (%)
New York City Public Schools	39	32	14	14	71
District Q	35	38	23	5	54

white students and fewer Latino and Asian students than the citywide school system. Meanwhile, although citywide nearly 71% of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, in District Q, only 54% of students are (NYCDOE 2006).

These demographics reflect the fact that District Q encompasses a mix of affluent neighborhoods, several public housing buildings, an enclave of recent Latino immigrants, and several subsidized or rent-stabilized residential buildings.

The overall diversity of District Q's student population is not reflected at the school level, however. Because of the supposedly "colorblind" student assignment policy supported by the chancellor and the NYCDOE, the racial/ethnic diversity within each of District Q's schools is far less than it could be (see table 2). For instance, almost all of the district's white elementary school students were enrolled in only six of the 18 schools. In fact, in a school district that is only 27% white, five of these six schools had, as of school year 2006–7, student populations that ranged from 23% to 67% white. Meanwhile, the remaining 12 schools enroll a disproportionate number of black and Latino students, with school-level demographics that ranged from 80% to 100% black and/or Latino. In fact, six District Q schools had a 95% or more black/Latino student enrollment (NYCDOE 2006).

In table 2, we break the racial/ethnic makeup of each District Q school enrolling elementary students down into three types: (1) neighborhood schools with G&T and general education programs, (2) neighborhood schools with no G&T program, and (3) district-wide choice or magnet schools with no attendance zone. Rows A, B, C, G, H, and R are schools with a disproportionate representation of white students, and the remaining rows are schools comprised disproportionately of students of color compared to the District Q overall enrollment. In addition, as is the general pattern in the United States, those District Q schools with the highest percentages of students of color also have the highest rates of poor students (NYCDOE 2006). Conversely, in the

TABLE 2

Students' Race/Ethnicity and Eligibility for Free and Reduced Price Lunch for Each "District Q" School by School Type

Public School Types	Total Students	% Black	% Hispanic	% White	% Asian	% FRPL
Type 1. Neighborhood schools with G&T and general education programs:						
A	524	13	31	48	7	30
B	632	27	47	23	3	50
C	615	20	27	48	6	29
D	656	16	73	6	4	75
E*	264	69	27	2	1	72
F	290	44	44	8	4	64
Type 2: Neighborhood schools with general education only:						
G	932	19	23	49	8	16
H	663	7	12	67	13	10
I[†]	484	32	61	4	2	94
J[‡]	201	67	32	0	0	90
K	762	31	48	14	6	56
L[§]	358	76	20	2	2	82
M	458	34	61	4	1	71
N[§]	419	78	21	0	1	76
O[§]	601	75	23	1	0	74
P[§]	301	79	15	2	1	71
Q	244	90	8	1	0	83
Type 3: Kindergarten to grade 8 school with selective admissions:						
R	712	23	23	45	8	17
Total (or average)	9,116	38	35	23	5	54

SOURCE.—All 2006–7 statistics are taken from the New York City Department of Education website, http://schools.nyc.gov.

NOTE.—All schools were renamed using alphabetical order to protect confidentiality and are kindergarten to grade 5 schools unless otherwise noted. G&T = gifted and talented program; FRPL = free or reduced price lunch.

* Kindergarten to grade 2 school.

† Recently started a G&T program.

‡ Grades 3–5 school that recently started a G&T program in conjunction with its sister school, E.

§ Kindergarten to grade 8 school.

schools with a disproportionate number of white students, between 10% and 50% of the students are poor (NYCDOE 2006).

These school-level segregation figures mask yet another layer of racial separation and inequality at the classroom level. Of the six District Q elementary schools with student bodies that are 22% or more white, three house G&T programs that separate "gifted" from "regular" (meaning nongifted) education students by classrooms. Thus, while these three schools may look somewhat racially balanced overall, their G&T programs maintain pervasive within-school segregation.

G&T Programs in New York City and District Q

Self-contained G&T programs within schools in New York City start as early as kindergarten and disproportionately enroll white, more advantaged students based on the result of a single standardized test that children take at age 4. Policy makers in New York and other cities have admitted that these G&T programs were created primarily as mechanisms to keep white, more advantaged families in the public schools by providing alternatives to neighborhood schools enrolling large numbers of low-income black and/or Latino students (see Borland 2003, 2009; Sapon-Shevin 1994, 2003). It is well known in New York that G&T programs were established in schools that were not attracting "neighborhood," especially white, more affluent families (Gootman 2009; Gootman and Gebeloff 2008).

These G&T programs operate in a parallel but separate universe from the "general education" classrooms within the same schools. At the time of our study in 2006–7, most students were accepted into the G&T programs based on scores on privately administered G&T standardized tests, costing more than $100, and preschool teacher recommendations (for those who went to preschool).

Given the relationship between race/ethnicity and income in the United States as well as the stubborn correlation between race/ethnicity and standardized test scores, the lopsided racial G&T enrollment data presented in table 3 is not surprising. While we do not have this racial/ethnic breakdown for G&T programs versus general education for District Q exclusively, we do know from site visits to many of these schools, as well as newspaper and advocacy reports and interview data, that G&T programs in District Q schools are almost entirely white, while the "general education" classes in the same schools are almost entirely students of color. A walk down the corridors of the three District Q schools with both separate G&T programs and more than a negligible white student population provides a jarring visual of the kind of

New York City Public School Kindergarten and First-Grade Students in Gifted and Talented Programs (G&T) by Race/Ethnicity, 2007–8

New York City Public Schools, Citywide	White (%)	Black (%)	Asian (%)	Latino (%)
Kindergarten and first grade:				
Total student population	18	25	16	41
G&T enrollment	52	16	20	9

SOURCE.—Kolodner (2008).

between-classroom racial segregation few would believe possible in "liberal" New York City in the twenty-first century.

In 2007, the New York City chancellor amended the G&T policy in an effort to expand low-income students' access to these coveted programs. While this new policy did not directly affect the parents we interviewed, the conditions spurring the change existed when these parents applied. Furthermore, as we note below in our recommendations section, the new policy actually exacerbated the inequality and racial segregation instead of alleviating it, because the criteria for admissions did not change, nor did of many of the other issues we raise below.

Our Study and the Choices of Parents in District Q

In 2005, we were asked by the administration of District Q to evaluate a new kindergarten choice lottery that had been created to help low-income parents of color gain more access to the most desirable schools. While every family that resides in District Q has a "zoned" or neighborhood school, the district also had a school choice policy allowing children to choose and attend schools outside their zone provided that seats are available. The 2005 version of this choice process was a centralized, district-wide lottery system. Meanwhile, gaining access to the coveted District Q G&T programs was a separate process, decided by the G&T test scores, preschool teacher recommendations, and space/capacity issues in each program. As we noted above, however, the overlap between the "general" education kindergarten choice lottery applicant pool and the G&T applicant pool is large, especially among the more advantaged white residents of the district.

As a result of all these layers of school choice and segregation and of the district's efforts to democratize the school choice process, the new school choice policy was implemented into a highly segregated and stratified system that was dictated mostly by the G&T admissions process. In other words, the lottery

changes did not change the kinds of racialized choices parents are faced with in District Q, choices defined by five racially and socioeconomically distinct types of schools:

1. Predominantly black, Latino, and low-income neighborhood or zoned schools, with or without G&T programs (Schools D, E, F, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, and Q in table 2).
2. Predominantly black, Latino, and low-income "general education" programs within schools that have predominantly white G&T programs (Schools A, B, and C in table 2).
3. Predominantly white G&T programs within these same schools (Schools A, B, and C in table 2).
4. Neighborhood, zoned schools that are predominantly white—or nearly so—because of demographics of their catchment areas (Schools G and H in table 2).
5. A racially diverse, thematic magnet "school of choice" with no zone or neighborhood catchment and no G&T program (School R in table 2).

Research Design

Our study included 59 parents randomly selected from a list of kindergarten lottery participants provided by the District Q administration. Normally, when doing this type of in-depth qualitative work, we would employ purposive sampling to assure diversity across interviewees in terms of key factors, such as parents' race, ethnicity, income, education levels, and so forth. Because we lacked such sampling information, we randomly sampled the participants within zip codes to assure we had a geographic mix of people across many distinct neighborhoods.[1] The larger percentage of white parents ($n = 39$) in our random sample is understandable because they disproportionately participate in the District Q kindergarten choice process, even though many of them end up enrolling their children in private schools. Since the district does not ask families their race and socioeconomic status on the choice application, we asked the parents for this information, as well as their immigrant status and languages spoken at home, in order to discern if families from diverse backgrounds experience the school choice process in different ways.

The 59 parents we interviewed were from different neighborhoods, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds, though the majority (83%) were mothers and 88% lived in District Q. Roughly two-thirds of the parents interviewed, or 39 out of 59, were white, one-third were black and Asian, and the rest were composed primarily of Hispanic, biracial, and multiracial families. The range of annual family income was quite wide across the interviewees, with

roughly 30% representing families making more than $150,000 per year (and many of these families making more than $200,000 per year); about half the parents said their annual family income was between $50,000 and $150,000, and one-fourth reported an annual family income of less than $50,000 per year. We also found the common correlation between class and race, with virtually all of the high-income families being white and all of the lowest-income families being black or Latino. In fact, only one white parent reported a family income of less than $50,000, while 21 of the 39 white respondents reported an annual family income of more than $150,000; for 16 of these families, the annual income was greater than $200,000 per year.

During the interviews, we asked parents open-ended questions about their assigned, zoned school and the reasons for participating in the lottery/G&T program, how they got information about the schools and the lottery process, on what criteria they based their final decisions, whether they were satisfied with their final school choice, and what they would change about the process. After the interviews were transcribed verbatim, we met to discuss how to code for themes and findings that were emerging based on the theoretical framework of our study (Merriam 2009).

The methodological steps for qualitative studies like ours can be thought of as inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher's positionality in collecting and analyzing data. At the time of our study, we both had children in the third grade in one of the general education programs in District Q. We decided not to disclose this information to the parents we interviewed so that it would not influence their responses. In fact, even though our perspective was probably biased toward our own positionality as parents within the system, we felt that the advantages of our "insider" status outweighed the negatives, since it provided us with knowledge of the school choice process and the segregated and unequal schools and school programs that parents had to choose from. Furthermore, it did not affect which parents were chosen or how parents responded to the questions since we randomly sampled parents, and we did not tell parents our status as fellow parents. Furthermore, because District Q is an urban school district in a densely populated city, we did not know any of our randomly selected respondents personally.

In this way, the kind of knowledge that was obtained from the interview data with the 39 white, relatively advantaged parents focused on how they made meaning (e.g., constructivism) of the social realities concerning their choice of school/program for their children's education in a constrained and segregated context. These parents are at the focus of our analysis here because, as we noted above, we were interested in how white, advantaged parents "display contradictory dimensions of their choice making" (Ball and Bowe 1996, 98), especially since they often exert more agency, power, and control in the school choice process.

White New York City Parents Choosing Elementary Schools: Where Diversity, Anxiety, Policy, and Possibilities Collide

The interviews with the white, advantaged parents yielded much evidence that school choice policies allowing for the creation of more diverse public schools would be welcome by many of the parents who tend to have the most choice in the educational system. Lacking such options, and faced with the choice between classrooms filled with mostly white and relatively affluent students versus those enrolling mostly black and Latino lower-income students, the parents we interviewed opted for the former, all the while lamenting the distinctions between the choices. Indeed, all but a handful of parents we interviewed articulated how and why they value more racially and ethnically diverse classrooms, with many citing the fact they were rearing children in New York City and not a lily-white suburb as evidence of their openness to living and educating their children in more diverse contexts, even as they were enrolling their children in racially/ethnically segregated schools.

After aggregating and analyzing how advantaged parents make meaning of their available choices in District Q, looking specifically at the contradictions in their choices, the following three themes emerged from the data: (1) Valuing Diversity but Facing Few Choices of Racially Diverse Schools, (2) Anxiety and Advantage: Getting White Kids into the "Best" Schools, and (3) Making Privileged, If Imperfect, Choices: The Social Construction of "Good" and "Bad" Schools. We describe each of these three themes and their overlaps and interconnections below.

Valuing Diversity but Facing Few Choices of Racially Diverse Schools

Echoing the national opinion poll data cited above and prior research (see Crozier et al. 2008; CURE 2009; Posey 2012; Wells et al. 2009), the majority of the white parents we interviewed in District Q talked about the value of diversity in public schools. In fact, a full 72% of the 39 white parents we interviewed said race was an important factor when choosing schools. When asked more specifically if they wanted their children to attend a diverse school, a full 80% of the white parents interviewed said yes. Only eight (20%) of the white parents said that they had not really thought about it before, but everyone said that "diversity" per se—at least in the abstract—was important at some level.

What is more, nearly all the white parents we interviewed said they were frustrated by how racially and socioeconomically separate and unequal the schools and classrooms in District Q are. According to one white mother, "One of the reasons that we live in New York City is so we can raise kids in

America that aren't racist, and it's even hard to do here." Despite the value that most parents place on diversity, their reality when it comes to diverse schools of choice in District Q is quite limited. As we noted above, only one of the neighborhood schools and the racially diverse magnet school will provide District Q parents with what they say they want in terms of school and classroom-level diversity. But these programs are not large enough to accommodate all who demand them, leaving most of the white parents to choose between the almost all-white gifted programs and the almost all-black and Latino general education classes. As one mother said when asked whether the racial or ethnic makeup was an important factor in her school choice decision, "It is ideally, but I didn't have a lot of choices so I went with a school that I felt had the best educational program even though I would like a school to be more diverse."

Caught in the middle of mostly unsatisfactory choices, many of the white parents we interviewed commented on their limited school choice options. One parent recalled his experience touring a school with both a G&T and a general education program: "It kind of turned us off because it really seemed like two separate worlds. There was the G&T and then everything else. . . . The curriculum, the kids, you know even just the color of the student's skin, really. I mean it was a much lighter-colored G&T program compared to the general population."

Another mother explained that across District Q there is a big difference between the G&T classrooms and the "general" education classrooms. She said: "I want real diversity. I don't want my daughter to be the only white kid in the class. I don't want her to be in a class with all white kids. I don't want either. I wanted it to be mixed and there's enough kids that it just should be mixed. . . . It's a messed up thing in her school, and she's like 'Why did they put all the white kids in one class?'"

Similarly, another parent noted that while her neighborhood school is very diverse at the school level, the G&T is not diverse, which turns people off from the public schools. She said that she knows a lot of people are put off by the fact that the general education classes tend to be mostly minority and the G&T tends to be mostly white. "It's something that every single G&T parent that I've met has had an issue with that. They wish it would be more diverse."

These and the majority of white advantaged parents we interviewed bemoan the lack of diversity at the school level and the segregated atmosphere of the G&T versus general education classrooms in several District Q schools, even when they have made the choice of a G&T classroom for their children. But it is clear from our interviews for this and other studies (see Brantlinger et al. 1996; Holme 2002; Posey 2012) that white parents want a critical mass of other white students in their children's schools and classrooms. This preference is related to the symbolic meaning of whiteness and the parents' habitus as

it is related to race and class. Given that the vast majority of school/program choice options in this district fall, as we noted, into category 1 above, meaning that they are predominantly black and/or Latino and low-income, the number of "acceptable" choices, as defined by white parents in this district, is quite small. As one white mother replied, "I don't want to be the minority. I want a comfortable place for my children."

Bourdieu (1997) noted that the extent to which habitus is "divided and contradictory" depends on the social conditions of its formation and exercise. White, high–social economic status (SES) parents who give at least lip service to the value of diversity when it comes to their children's education and are choosing among school choices available in the social context of District Q must be somewhat divided and contradictory. As we explain below, however, their sense of being divided or contradictory within themselves is partly due to the specifics of District Q's schools and programs and partly due to the larger context of educating children within and for the twenty-first century.

Anxiety and Advantage: Getting White Kids into the "Best" Schools

The findings presented above suggest that the majority of the white, upper-middle-class parents we interviewed value "diverse" schools and classrooms in the abstract and struggle with the racial/ethnic segregation they see in District Q. Yet, at the same time, these parents are raising children in the current era of inequality we described in our framework above. In fact, these economically successful white parents in particular have benefited more than most from recent economic developments. Furthermore, this privileged standpoint provides them with a relative advantage in terms of the resources and networks needed to do the work of school choice (Brantlinger et al. 1996; Goldring and Hausman 1999; Holme 2002; Lareau 2003; Moore and Davenport 1990; Willms and Echols 1993) and a heightened sense of the consequences of not winning the school choice competition (see Wells et al. 2009).

Indeed, our interview data suggest that these white parents' advantage strongly influences their anxiety about the school choice process. In fact, the backdrop to white parents' school choices is their sense of what is at stake in terms of their children's futures in a highly unequal society. This larger social context frequently causes them to make choices that contradict the value they supposedly place on diversity in public education, instead choosing schools and programs that are racially homogeneous, difficult to get into, and more elitist. The fact that their choices of truly diverse schools and programs are extremely limited within the District Q context pushes them to use their resources and networks to gain a relative advantage.

Our interviews with parents in District Q and related research (see CURE

2009; Wells et al. 2009) lead us to believe that the high levels of inequality in the United States promotes anxiety as more advantaged parents worry that their children are susceptible to downward mobility if they do not have the "right" educational credentials. This nervousness seems to have only worsened as educational policies have stressed outcomes and competition amid a highly unequal society (Jager-Hyman 2008; Lareau 2000; Wells et al. 2009).

In part because of their privilege, the parents interviewed for this article perceive the school choice process to be extremely high stakes. Thus, they work hard at it, invest a great deal of energy in it, and use their advantages in any way they can to make sure their children end up in the schools that are perceived by them and others in their social networks to be superior. Meanwhile, the kindergarten choice process in District Q clearly favors those who have the time and resources to make the system work for them.

As one parent explained, applying to and choosing an elementary school took "a lot of work." In fact, she said that when she and her spouse calculated the amount of time and energy it took them to attend all the public and private school tours, open houses, interviews, and so forth, it was "tantamount to each of us taking a month off of work . . . and then of course there's all the money involved with the application fees and to test and everything so it's a ton of work."

As another mother noted, the process works best for people who have the time and energy to commit to it: "There is someone I know that didn't get into the G&T that they wanted, and they campaigned to get the spot and . . . maybe that's fair because maybe then they will be very committed parents."

We were told in interviews about families going to extremes to get their children into the schools of their choice, including moving to new apartments (or at least signing leases on new apartments) in the attendance zone of one of only two desirable "neighborhood" non-G&T schools in the district (School G). It is clear that parents with resources will go to any length to make sure their children get into one of the "best" schools and that doing so requires a lot of work. Furthermore, we saw that their social networks both assist them in getting needed information and increasing their stress levels. This stress pushes them further away from making choices that reflect the value they place on school and classroom diversity.

In terms of how white, upper-income parents use their networks to their advantage, the parents we interviewed tapped into every available resource, such as their private preschools, their own education and/or expertise, and their personal and professional colleagues or friends. For instance, most of these parents talked about private educational or "kindergarten choice" consultants who gave talks at their children's private and often exclusive preschools. According to one parent whose child attended an expensive private preschool, the kindergarten choice consultant who worked with the parents

there e-mailed memos to them about the logistics of the school choice process. The parent reported, "She goes to these school board meetings and learns about what's going on and then reports out that such and such is going to happen next Friday."

Another parent noted that she made the initial choice of which schools to apply to based on a combination of factors, including online research of school websites and the New York City "Inside Schools" website, as well as valuable guidance she and her husband received directly from the directors of their children's pricey preschool. This parent noted: "At our preschool, every family had a one on one sit down with the director where she talked about the child and what places would be good fits and offered her opinion on where would be the best places and you know most appropriate places to apply, and that was an important source of information as well."

Yet, while parents in this school district, particularly those who are white and more affluent, state that while they certainly use the resources and institutional supports, they also rely a great deal on other parents for information. As one parent explained, her network of playground parents was critical in this school choice process saying, "It was all that anybody could talk about for awhile."

In fact, there was much consensus among these parents that close ties to other parents going through the same process at or around the same time was the most important resource. One parent noted: "Yeah, and you know conversations on the playground with parents from different schools. That I found more helpful than any information provided from the district." It was this "parental grape vine" or "playground chat" that taught these parents the most about the changes occurring in the school choice system, how to fill out the application, what the deadlines were, and the like. According to one father, the school choice process is "in the air that we breathe. . . . You meet people in the playground. Your friends have kids. You read articles in the paper. You find your way to websites, so I would say there's no one way that we found out."

No doubt many parents in District Q of all racial/ethnic backgrounds talk to other parents, albeit often parents of the same racial/ethnic backgrounds. However, there is also an understanding among the more advantaged residents of District Q that the high-SES, predominantly white parental social networks provide the most helpful information, and this thereby exacerbates the class and race advantage. When asked whether the new lottery system would be fairer than the system it replaced, another mother noted that she did not think it was ever going to be fair: "I think there's always going to be a situation that the people who have the most resources will be able to get the most benefit from the system because they'll know when to apply."

Thus, despite efforts to make the kindergarten choice process more egalitarian and less reliant on parents' private resources, these more affluent white

parents recognized that they have maintained their advantage when it comes to getting their children into the "good" schools and programs. Despite any changes to the lottery process, these parents had information and insights other parents lacked because of their powerful social networks. In this way, their networks become part of their habitus in which, as Bourdieu (1997, 64) was quick to note, "the past remains present and active in the dispositions it has produced." These social and highly stratified networks, therefore, continued to play a role in the parents' definitions of a "good" school or a "good" program. Yet, as we discuss more in the next section, this social construction of "good" schools was often based more on who was enrolled in each school as opposed to what was taught. In this way, these powerful high-SES and mostly white social networks of New York parents, much like those that Holme (2002) wrote about in her study of affluent parents, play a critical role in constructing the possibilities of what is worth choosing. This process echoes Mannheim's (1936) argument that people do not think or make decisions as individuals but rather as groups with a similar "*style of thought*" in response to "typical situations *characterizing their common position*" (emphasis added, 3).

Basically, what we learn from the high-SES, white District Q parents is that the kindergarten choice process and the decisions that these parents make about schools and programs allow more advantaged parents to co-construct, through their networks "style of thought" about "good" versus "bad" schools. For instance, many of the white parents with strong social networks spoke about the handful of G&T programs and general education programs that they heard were higher-quality choices. In fact, one father said he knew that there were basically "four or five public schools" that people he interacted with talked about and were happy with. When his child was not able to attend any of those programs, he opted for a private school.

As beneficial as these networks are in terms of the flow of information and the process of socially constructing desirable and undesirable schools in a way that simplifies the choice process, they simultaneously raise the parents' stress levels about the choice process because they limit the number of socially acceptable choices and they make the process much more public and less just about what is best for their children. In fact, knowing other similarly positioned parents who had chosen the same school was very important to these advantaged white parents. This pushes the white higher-income parents we interviewed in their "common position" further away from racially diverse schools. Thus, parents talk a great deal about schools' reputations among similarly situated peers. As one parent noted several times during her interview, she chose the "best school" for her daughter in terms of its "reputation" among her friends.

Such social constructions of "good" schools for high-status families and the process by which these rankings are perpetuated through class- and race-

defined social networks has been documented by other researchers (Brantlinger et al. 1996; Holme 2002; Johnson and Shapiro 2003). However, what has been missing in the literature is an explanation of how these processes interact with the specific policies that define the options available across a racially diverse school district such as District Q. In the last portion of this findings section, we discuss what happens when affluent white parents are caught in the middle of their social networks and their construction of good schools, their fear of falling from their high status economic positions, and their espoused beliefs in greater racial diversity in public schools. In other words, we discuss what happens when their habitus becomes fractured around issues of diversity and social status.

Making Privileged, If Imperfect, Choices: The Social Construction of "Good" and "Bad" Schools

The lack of viable racially diverse choices, combined with parents' "fear of falling" and the ways in which their social network feeds that fear, means that the kindergarten school choice process in District Q pushes advantaged, mostly white parents to make choices that they think protect their privilege. This means that these parents are pushed toward predominantly white and relatively affluent private schools, public school G&T programs, or two racially diverse schools deemed "viable" by their networks: one district-wide magnet school (School R) and one neighborhood school with a more diverse attendance zone (School G).

In fact, we found that 32% of the white parents we interviewed chose private schools, 32% chose G&T programs, and 29% chose either an out-of-zone regular public school (most likely School G) or the diverse magnet school. Not surprisingly, the majority of white, upper-class parents with annual family incomes of more than $200,000 a year chose private schools; most of the upper-middle-class white parents ($100,000–$200,000), meanwhile, chose G&T programs; the middle-class white parents ($50,000–$100,000) were about evenly divided between choosing out-of-zone schools or G&T programs for their children.

While we do not have detailed information on the racial/ethnic or SES makeup of the private schools or G&T programs these students ended up in, we do know that, for the most part, the private schools and the G&T programs have a much higher proportion of white and relatively higher-income students than the District Q population as a whole. Meanwhile, the zoned school options, as we noted above, are mostly either predominantly white (this is the case of one school, School H) or predominantly black and Latino. Only one of the zoned neighborhood schools (School G) and the district-wide magnet

school of choice (School R) are racially/ethnically diverse at the school and classroom levels.

Thus, even as parents voice frustration about the G&T classrooms and the segregation the G&T program produces, saying that they want diversity, the vast majority of parents we studied ended up choosing schools and programs based more on their perceptions of which schools are "good" than on which schools promote diversity. Those perceptions, in turn, are fed by their social network. As one white parent replied, "Yeah, I wanted a diverse school. You know, I wanted a school that wasn't all white. I didn't want my kid to be in the minority. Uh, but I also didn't want him to be a majority in an all-white school, except that it's not a perfect world." Therefore, as this and many other parents said, they would prefer a more "diverse" school (e.g., not all white or all black/Latino students), but when it came time to choose, they chose schools/programs that were disproportionately white and higher income.

To be fair, it is the case that these parents have extremely limited options to do otherwise. The diverse schools are too few and far between in this district—consisting of only the one magnet school (School R) and one zoned school (School G) really. Thus, the "problem" is in great part due to the lack of policies, opportunities, and choices provided by the district and the larger New York City School System. At the same time, however, the advantaged parents we studied do play a role in legitimizing and perpetuating the situation by buying into the use of race as a signifier of good or bad schools (e.g., automatically considering predominantly white schools and programs to be better in terms of academic rigor and challenge). In fact, one of the main themes that emerged from the parent interviews in this study, which is consistent with the school choice literature in general, is that race is central to the ways in which parents make sense of their school choices. (See Fiske 2002; Lankford and Wyckoff 2000; Lewis 2003; Saporito and Lareau 1999; Sinkkink and Emerson 2007; and Weiher and Tedin 2002.)

Rationalizations: Defining "Good" and "Bad" Schools Based on Race, Class, and Place

One way in which the white parents we interviewed dealt with the fracture of their habitus, or supporting diversity while enrolling their children in segregated programs and schools, was to try to simplify the school choice process even more, relying almost exclusively on their network information. Indeed, a small number of parents we interviewed did not even tour some of the schools that they listed on the kindergarten lottery application if they heard through their grapevines that they were good choices. More common, however, was that many parents did not tour their zoned school for the exact opposite

reason, because they heard bad things about it from their friends or family. One white mother described the reasons for not touring her zoned school: "I was told through quite a few people that it was not a good school for us. . . . I don't want to sound racist, I really don't, but it's a much more lower income school on a project block and the family diversity is not; we would have been a minority family."

Like the parent's quote above illustrated, we also found that the majority of zoned schools that parents were opting not to enroll their children in—whether they had toured them or not—had between 70% and 92% children of color. Some parents only applied to the G&T or lottery as a backup in case they did not get their children in a private school. One mother explained: "I was looking at private schools too, and I just wanted to make sure I had an alternative and see how I could do."

One popular argument from parents was in favor of making the "exclusive" G&T programs more widely available at every school. In fact, we found that even though many of them were bothered by the segregation between G&T and general education programs, they argued for more G&T programs based on the resources that the parents of "gifted" students (as opposed to other parents) bring to the schools, instead of wanting to widen access by admitting a more diverse student body. The implication appeared to be that G&T students and parents are "better" because they have higher test scores, volunteer more, and give more money, on average, than their counterparts in general education.

In fact, several of the parents we interviewed thought that there should be G&T programs at every school because they lift up the general education classrooms since there is extra money that is brought in by G&T parents. One father explained this sentiment as follows: "A rising tide floats all boats. The whole school benefits from having a successful G&T program . . . from having a family that's involved in a school." As one mother explained it: "By definition the kids that are in G&T, their parents have gone through the trouble to get them into the G&T, so they're at least sufficiently involved. . . . I just think it makes a big difference."

Another parent said she decided to participate in the lottery because "the zoned school was overwhelmingly Hispanic and black and again, it's a class and race issue and because of that I'm sure because there isn't as much parental involvement, the school isn't as good. And I know that in [a certain school] one of the reasons why it's such an excellent school is the level of parental involvement, and that has to do with it's in a good neighborhood with fairly affluent parents who have the time and money to do a lot."

Clearly, the parents we interviewed could see the obvious benefit of the resources that more "affluent" parents bring to a school, in terms of time, money, and fundraising ability, and the concentration of parents with those

resources seemed important. The question became, how great a concentration of such parents is needed in one school, and do the students of these involved parents need to be segregated into their own program? In addition, are there other contributions that nonwhite/non-G&T parents can, and do, make based on their backgrounds if their children are enrolled in schools with more parental involvement? In other words, when parental involvement opportunities exist within racially and socioeconomically schools, parents from all race and class backgrounds may get more involved. But when such opportunities are more segregated among schools, it is very difficult to reach parity, and the self-fulfilling prophecy of "good" and "bad" schools evolves.

The Lack of Really Good Choices

The three G&T programs (in Schools A, B, and C) that most parents talked about and put down on their applications were all highly segregated by race and class, and most of the students who were accepted were white, upper-income children. The contrast between these programs and most, but not all, of the other available options in terms of the racial and social class makeup of the students is striking. As we noted above, beyond these three popular G&T programs, there were, at the time, only two or three other schools in the district that were accepting more than a handful of choice students and were attracting white, advantaged students (Schools G, R, and sometimes K). Thus, the concentration of the 27% of white students in the district was remarkable, especially given the fact that the white residential population in the district is not highly concentrated but spread out geographically in higher-SES pockets interspersed with housing projects and lower-income housing. One mother replied: "I really get the feeling that whoever dreamt up this process in District Q did not actually go and talk to anyone because if they did they would have found out that there are basically three G&T programs that are very popular and the others are not, and everyone applied to the same three schools and that's why nobody got in. So, they're trying to make the process more egalitarian and the net effect was exactly the opposite."

Many parents said they had no choice because if they declined the spot they were offered in one of these coveted but highly segregated G&T programs, they were put at the bottom of the waiting list. They said there should be more quality schools: "If there were more choices, then we would have been able to have a better choice. The [popular] schools were oversubscribed, you know, the thing is you don't really have a choice." One mother noted: "Frankly I think they just need more schools, they need better schools and less crowded schools, and that's kind of the crux of it, then you wouldn't need so much, then you could kind of spread kids around a little bit, but I don't know.

Because people are either going into the gifted programs or private schools, and then what's left in the neighborhoods, which is not much." Echoing that sentiment, yet another parent noted: "I think more schools are needed—more actual schools, more physical buildings, more options should be available. It was a very stressful process that people had to go through." Furthermore, this same parent explained, "We're exclusive in our G&T and we don't let anybody that has any racial diversity in, and there has to be something in the middle."

More schools, more choices, more options, more equal distribution of the parents who have the most privilege and resources would, in many ways, calm even those parents who have a huge advantage in this process. Another parent summed it all up by saying, "It would be nice, I guess, if schools weren't so heavily one way or the other, if there would be a more even distribution of those different groups."

Policy Recommendations and Implications: If the DOE Would Build It, Some Would Surely Come

What is painfully clear about the findings to emerge from our study is that the way in which school choice policies are written, regulated, and implemented has huge implications for the kinds of outcomes they will foster, both in terms of their short-term effects on school-level racial diversity and their long-term effects on political support for public education. We do know that race-conscious school choice policies, while not perfect, are much more successful at creating diverse and high-quality public schools and a more balanced and equal educational system (see Holme and Wells 2009). We also know that attending racially and socioeconomically diverse schools benefits all students, including white students, and tends to result in higher academic achievement and attainment and foster other short- and long-term social benefits (see Civil Rights Project 2011; Mickelson 2011).

Thus, we argue, based on our research and our experiences as parents of public school students in District Q, for several policy changes. The first of these is the creation and promotion of more racially diverse, non-G&T schools, such as the highly popular district-wide magnet school, School R. In particular, like School R, these new magnet schools would have to draw from the entire community school district—that is, have no attendance boundary—in order to attract a diverse population of students since the residential housing segregation contributes to the highly segregated schools.

The irony of our analysis is that despite the fact that the city's public school system historically used the separate and unequal G&T programs to keep white, middle-class families from leaving the public schools, our interview data strongly suggest that more diverse and undivided options would ultimately

help keep more of these parents in public, as opposed to private, schools for kindergarten. Such an influx of families with a great deal of political clout in the city would be beneficial for the district and for the public school system as a whole.

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

In 2010, *New York Magazine* ran a cover story criticizing the city's G&T policy for testing children so young since IQ at this age is unstable and children's scores can change dramatically depending on the type of test used, how comfortable the child is with the tester, how much sleep the child got the night before, and so forth (Senior 2010). Parents of all racial and ethnic backgrounds whose children performed below the cutoff on the G&T exam applaud such critiques of the current system. More importantly, the critiques hit a sensitive nerve with "savvy" New Yorkers, especially white professional parents who were raised in affluent but racially segregated suburbs and who moved into the more "cosmopolitan" city to raise their children (see Wells and Ready 2012). These are the New Yorkers with "fractured" or "tormented" habitus, as Bourdieu (1997) would say, or the parents who bear "in the form of tensions and contradictions the mark of contradictory conditions of formation of which they are the product" (5).

Additional changes were made to the G&T admissions process for the 2011–12 school year, with talks of more changes in the future, none of which address the narrow criteria being used in selecting students or the racial apartheid that these programs create within schools that have them. We believe that public school officials in New York City and elsewhere could learn from our analysis of how white parents in District Q make sense of their school choices and how that meaning relates to race within seemingly "colorblind" school choice policies. Our findings illustrate the subtle, micro-level mechanisms that create, perpetuate, and exacerbate racial segregation and inequality in education. It is not surprising, given the lack of choices that the District Q officials have made available to them, that these parents, first, struggle with the choices they make and, second, given the options available, usually end up making the choice that protects their privilege and thus maintains the segregation and inequality.

It is clear to us that even small amendments to District Q school choice policies, shifting their goals and purposes away from the market-based model of school choice policy toward a policy with a greater focus on racial and social-class integration, could appeal to white parents' intuition about the importance of school-level diversity and work against some of the forces that continue to push the system toward more segregation. Those with the power to make change within District Q and thousands of school districts across this country with G&T programs must be open to learning from the parents we studied and their understandings of the missed opportunities for providing better choices for children within an increasingly diverse society.

As a result of this vicious cycle, such race-driven parental choices are logical at some level, given what we know about the relationships among racial segregation, educational inequality, and concentrated poverty. Despite this, when we examine parents' sense-making on the ground, we see the missed opportunities in school choice policies that could have tapped into parents' interest and demand for more diverse, equal, and challenging educational environments for their children. However, as we know from District Q and other literature on school choice, when policies designed to racially balance schools do not exist and parents are left to their own devices to navigate the racialized educational system, in this context, many parents, particularly white, high-SES parents, are conflicted over their blatantly race-conscious decision making in a system that relies on their colorblindness.

Note

1. After receiving the list of 782 District Q parents who participated in the school choice lottery and/or G&T program, we grouped the names by zip code and then every tenth person on the list was contacted by one of the researchers until time constraints forced us to stop.

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