

Explaining Away Inequality: The Normalization of Segregation
and Maintenance of White Privilege in New York City Public
High Schools

by

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Introduction

As a high school senior at The Beacon School, now the fourth most desired public high school in New York City,¹ I became involved in a heated battle with my administration over our admissions process. Many students were concerned that the number of low-income students and students of color admitted to our school had been slowly declining for years, and even more so since the process had become increasingly selective four years prior.² I began working with a group of concerned students, teachers, and parents to create awareness about this demographic change and urge our school community to critically examine our admissions process. After articulating our complaints in a letter to former New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein³ signed by many well-known professors and community organizations, Eric Nadelstern, the Chief Schools Officer, replied on the Chancellor's behalf, saying:

I need to express our commitment to the goals of access and equity that you have articulated. Toward that end, we have implemented a high school admissions process that is driven by student and family choice, and that has provided our students with more high school options than ever before. Beacon High School is one of our highest-performing high schools, and that attracts many more applicants than available seats. As a screened school, all applicants are expected to meet the same high standards for admission.⁴

¹Otterman, Sharon. "No Matches for Some on High School Decision Day." *The New York Times* [New York] 31 Mar. 2011. *NYTimes.com*. 31 Mar. 2011. Web. 4 May 2011. <<http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/no-matches-for-some-students-on-high-school-decision-day/?scp=4&sq=high+school+admissions&st=nyt>>.

² Beacon changed from Education Optional to Screened, requiring each applicant to create a portfolio of work, go through an interview, and produce two writing samples on site. (Gonzalez, Juan. "Manhattan Beacon School's Racial Hope Dims." *The Daily News*. 15 May. 2009. Web. <http://articles.nydailynews.com/2009-05-15/local/17923831_1_percentage-of-african-american-students-white-students-schools-chancellor-joel-klein>.)

³ The current Chancellor is Dennis Walcott, who came into office in April 2011.

⁴ Nadelstern, Eric. Letter to Concerned Educators. 3 June 2009.

I was perplexed by Nadelstern's ability to dismiss the increasing exclusion of students of color and low-income students without once mentioning race. Instead, he explained his commitment to equity as a commitment to "student and family choice," and invoked the seemingly undisputable goal of "high standards." In an era when integration and equality are also seemingly undisputable goals in the public sphere, how is it that the Department of Education (DOE) understands this as a sufficient explanation for possible racial exclusion in one of the city's top-performing high schools?

This racial segregation and the ambivalence it provoked were not confined to my high school and were not new issues. In 1955, following the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* that declared legally racially segregated education as unconstitutional, the New York City Board of Education⁵ critically examined their own school system, which did not use de jure segregation, but had 71% of its schools with 90% or more of one race.⁶ After an increased community demand for racial disparities to be addressed,⁷ the President of the State Board of Ed formed the Commission on Integration.⁸ In line with the ruling in *Brown*, the Commission was founded on the principle that, "separate educational facilities are

⁵ Now called the Department of Education after the 2003 recentralization

⁶ Swanson, Bert E. *The Struggle for Equality; School Integration Controversy in New York City*. (New York: Hobbs, Dorman, 1966), 14.

⁷ Citywide integrationist coalition started by Professor Kenneth Clark: Rogers, David. *110 Livingston Street; Politics and Bureaucracy in the New York City Schools*. (New York: Random House, 1968), 21.

⁸ Back, Adina. "Blacks, Jews and the Struggle to Integrate Brooklyn's Junior High School 258: A Cold War Story." *Journal of American Ethnic History* (2001).

inherently unequal,” and was charged with proposing policies that would address the de facto segregation in the school system.⁹

Yet while the Board of Ed. resolved to end school segregation in 1955, over fifty years later the issue has hardly been laid to rest. In 2011, eighteen of the twenty top performing public high schools in NYC were over 55% white and Asian/Asian American in a high school system that was comprised of only 26.5% white and Asian/Asian American students, while eighteen of the twenty lowest performing high schools were over 90% black and Latina/o in a school system that was 70% black and Latina/o students.¹⁰ This suggests that not only have the city schools persisted as separate, but they have also remained unequal. How is it that fifty six years after the Board of Ed. itself declared segregation to be inherently unfair to Black and Latina/o students, the schools remain in this state, virtually unchallenged? How has New York’s educational policy maintained this racial inequality despite its vocal commitment to integration and equity? In a post-civil rights era climate, where racial segregation and inequality is widely denigrated and denounced, how is this continued inequality understood and accounted for?

⁹ Swanson, *The Struggle for Equality*, 14.

¹⁰ This information comes from examining the racial demographics of the schools in the top and bottom “peer groups,” which are groups of schools created by the Department of Education in order to compare schools to others similar to them. Peer groups are decided by: “1) the average ELA and Math proficiency levels of the school’s students before they entered High School, 2) the percentage of special education students, 3) the percentage of self-contained special education students, and 4) the percentage of students who enter high school 2 or more years overage.” (New York City Department of Education. Educator Guide to the New York City Progress Report 2010-2011, 2011. New York, NY.) The racial demographics come from the NYC Independent Budget Office’s 2011 report on the public school system: (New York City Independent Budget Office. “New York City Public School Indicators.” 2011. <www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/2011edindicatorsreport.pdf>)

From Neighborhood to Citywide

In neighborhood and community school systems, in which students are assigned to schools based on their place of residence, contemporary scholars and the media have attributed the phenomenon of school segregation to residential segregation.¹¹ Scholars, journalists, and politicians therefore frame the issue not as the fault of the education system, but rather of other social factors that cause segregation in other parts of life. Furthermore, under a neighborhood system, racial disparities in school funding, resources, and performance are often explained using a class analysis. For example, in Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti's, *City Schools*,¹² the authors explain that schools are funded by the taxpayers in the area; if the area is low income and the tax base is small, the school will not be as well-funded as one in an upper class neighborhood.

While residential segregation and class inequality may largely account for racial segregation in many school districts across the country, neither of these explanations can explain the segregation in the New York City high school system because it is not a neighborhood system, but instead has citywide enrollment. This means that students may apply to any high school in the five boroughs, regardless of where they live. As the system currently stands, every eighth grader in New York City public schools must apply to high school, as there are no longer neighborhood schools in which they

¹¹ Robinson, Gail. "New York Schools: Fifty Years After Brown." *Gotham Gazette*. Citizens Union Foundation, 17 May 2004. Web. 2 Mar. 2011.
<<http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/iotw/20040517/200/981>>.

¹² Ravitch, Diane, and Joseph P. Viteritti. *City Schools: Lessons from New York*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000), 20.

can be placed automatically.¹³ Families of eighth graders are given a 500-page directory of all the high schools in the city, which lists their location, selectivity, special programs and resources that they provide, graduation and attendance rates and any other relevant information for the school choice decision. Many schools also provide open house events or school tours for prospective students to help inform their decision. In the late fall, students fill out an application, listing up to twelve schools in order of preference.

After students apply, the high schools then use various distinct processes to select the students they want, and the enrollment office compares choices to create matches. The schools select students by one of seven admissions processes, which I outline below:¹⁴

1. *Unscreened* programs do not review students, and admit them by lottery.
2. *Zoned* programs give priority to applicants that live within the zoned area around the school. Very few of these programs remain.
3. *Limited Unscreened* programs do not screen students but give priority to those who show interest in the school.
4. *Educational Option* programs choose half their applicants through screening and half through a lottery.
5. *Audition* programs focus on visual and performing arts and select students based on their demonstration of talent in these areas.

¹³ Abdulkadiroglu, Atila, Parag A. Pathak, and Alvin E. Roth. "Practical Market Design: Four Matches: The New York City High School Match." *American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings* 95.2 (2005): 364-67. *Kuznets.harvard.edu*. Harvard University Economics Department. Web. 1 Mar. 2011. <<http://kuznets.harvard.edu/~aroth/papers/nycAEAPP.pdf>>.

¹⁴ "High School Admissions Methods." *New York City Department of Education*. New York City Department of Education, 2011. Web. 24 Feb. 2011. <<http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/High/Admissions/Methods.htm>>.

6. *Screened* programs may review students in a variety of different ways, including report cards, test grades, extracurricular activities, interviews, portfolios, or writing samples.
7. *Test* programs refer to the 8 Specialized Science High Schools that select students solely based on their scores on the Science High School Admissions Test (SHSAT), a multiple choice test focused on reading and math, similar to the SAT

These different admissions processes have developed separately and at various moments throughout the past fifty years. Although a few selective high schools have existed since the beginning of the early 1900s, drawing elite students from across the city,¹⁵ this system mainly began in the years following *Brown v. Board of Education*. In response to the State-issued order to desegregate all de facto segregated public school systems in 1955, the city devised a “Plan for Integration.”¹⁶ In the following thirty years, the Board of Education consistently increased the number of de-zoned high schools, creating new methods of enrollment and expanding existing methods. In 2003, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein implemented a massive overhaul of the public school system, complete with a new matching system for high school admissions.¹⁷ In the report on the new matching system, the creators identify their goal as increasing the number of students who are matched with one of their choice schools, as in the prior years, one third of all eighth graders were not accepted to any of the schools they applied to, and were therefore placed in a school

¹⁵ The 3 original Specialized Science high schools, which are now regarded as the most prestigious schools in the city opened in the early 1900s: Stuyvesant in 1904, Brooklyn Tech in 1922, and Bronx Science in 1937: (“Timeline.” *The Campaign for Stuyvesant*. Web. 27 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.ourstrongband.org/history/timeline.html>>.)

¹⁶ Rogers, *110 Livingston Street*, 15.

¹⁷ Zeng, Jie. “The Unintended Consequences of Reorganization.” *The School Administrator* 66.5 (2009): 14-19. *Education Resources Information Center*. Web. 3 Mar. 2011.

arbitrarily.¹⁸ In contrast to the plans for de-zoning in the 1950s and 1960s, desegregation is not mentioned at all. Instead, the authors speak broadly of those who receive offers by schools and those who do not. They explain their objective as “increasing school choice,”¹⁹ having nothing to do with race or racial segregation. While the schools remain racially segregated and unequal, race is no longer a central consideration in policy decisions. This begs the question: If the New York City Board of Education began using choice as a means to rectify racial segregation, how is it that as school choice programs expanded, the process became completely deracialized? What does this mean for the state of equality in the high school system?

Tracing the Trajectory of a Racialized History

My project has two intertwining parts. The first is a historical analysis of the Board of Ed./DOE’s²⁰ policy shift from a system of neighborhood schools to a citywide admissions system, from the 1955 Plan for Integration to the present. In the 1955 plans for de-zoning high schools, race and desegregation were a central focus in the discussion.²¹ However, race was not once mentioned in the 2003 creation of a new high school matching system for admissions. The only slight allusion to goals of equality was a parenthetical comment noting (still without mentioning race) that one

¹⁸ Abdulkadiroglu, Atila, Parag A. Pathak, and Alvin E. Roth. "Practical Market Design: Four Matches: The New York City High School Match." *American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings* 95.2 (2005): 368-71. *Kuznets.harvard.edu*. Harvard University Economics Department. Web. 1 Mar. 2011. <<http://kuznets.harvard.edu/~aroth/papers/nycAEAPP.pdf>>, 365.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 364

²⁰ I use the two titles together to make clear that I am talking about the agency both before and after its name change.

²¹ The 1955 plans were directly addressing desegregation and the 1969 decentralization was in response to civil rights organizations and Black and Puerto Rican community groups who wanted control of their schools (Swanson, *The Struggle for Equality*, 6.)

of the benefits of school choice was making sure that “students who lived in disadvantaged neighborhoods” were not automatically assigned to disadvantaged schools.²²

Using documents from the municipal archives, as well as the New York Times archive, I trace the policy shift from integration and affirmative action to colorblind market-based choice, examining how an admissions system that began as an overt plan to solve the problem of racial segregation become almost completely de-racialized. Focusing on moments of controversy and the Board of Education’s attempts to address them, I delineate the highly racialized political and historical formation of the citywide admissions system, and evaluate whether or not the Board of Ed.’s various efforts to address inequality have had the proposed impact. Connecting the admissions system to larger national political trends, I argue that although the Board of Ed.’s attempts to create racial equity reflected dominant contemporary understandings of what constituted equality, they failed to substantially address the material inequality embedded in the social structure through centuries of white racial domination. While the Board of Ed. continuously expressed a commitment to racial inequality, in reality their efforts only succeeded in maintaining and protecting white interests.

My second focus is examining the DOE’s public discussion of the admissions system and their understandings of equality and inequality in the city’s high schools. While the admissions system has a racialized history, race is no longer used as the main category of analysis in understanding and addressing inequalities in the high

²² Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, and Roth, *Practical Market Design*, 364.

school system. In fact, efforts to bring up the question of race have been dismissed and even actively silenced. Using news articles, educational blog posts, school websites, selected interviews, and documentation from my personal experience at Beacon, I document and critically analyze the discursive shift towards colorblindness within the Department of Education and its elite schools, and the prominence of class-based explanations of racial inequality within a framework of market-based education that values “diversity.” I argue that cultural conditioning shapes and informs educational stakeholders’ understandings of what is equal and unequal, directly affecting their views of what constitutes appropriate action in attempts to create a just educational system. I also explore how dominant cultural logics and political projects have marked “merit” and “achievement” as neutral, colorblind forms of measurement, essential to the creation of an equal society. I examine the implications and consequences of this discourse and how it works to normalize segregation and systemic inequality.

My work focuses on two case studies: The Beacon School (which I attended from 2005-2009) and the Specialized High Schools that admit students through a single exam. I am choosing to look at a screened school and the test schools, because they are the most selective and desired schools in the city. In Susan Rakosi Rosenbloom’s study of the effects of the admissions process on those who are not accepted to any of their schools of choice and therefore placed in their zoned school, she refers to these students as *non-admits* and those who are accepted to their choices as *choosers*.²³ Rosenbloom focuses on the *non-admits*’ perceptions of their schools

²³ Rosenbloom, Susan Rakosi. "My So-Called Choice: The Trappings of School Choice for Non-Admits." *Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education* (42.1 (2010): 1-21), 4.

and other schools, clearly showing that the admissions process has had deleterious effects on these students. Non-admits all express negative feelings about their school and themselves for not being able to get into a “better” school, often referring to specific schools such as the Specialized High Schools. As we can see from Rosenbloom’s work, these schools are placed at the center of the admissions process as the object of desire of *choosers* and *non-admits* alike, and therefore are the sites of the most exclusion. I am choosing these schools in particular because not only are they well known and frequently discussed in the public sphere, but also because they have also recently had controversy over their admissions policies.²⁴ As the continued segregation and inequality in New York City high schools has largely been normalized and therefore not discussed, it is in the few moments when this normalization is challenged that we are able to observe the ways in which people make sense of the structure and its role in creating equality and/or perpetuating inequality.

Methodology

My project is interdisciplinary and uses both historical analysis and discourse analysis as main methods for examining the high school admissions process. The historical narrative that I construct of Board of Ed./DOE policy is based on extensive research both in the Board of Ed. files in the New York City Municipal Archives and

²⁴ Beacon: Gonzalez, Juan. "Manhattan Beacon School's Racial Hope Dims." Stuyvesant: Otterman, "New York’s Top Public High Schools Admit Fewer Blacks and Hispanics." Hunter: Chung, Jen. "Hunter College High School Drama Over Admissions Test." Web log post. *Gothamist*. 5 Aug. 2010. Web. <http://gothamist.com/2010/08/05/hunter_college_high_school_drama_ov.php>.

in the New York Times' online archives. For my discourse analysis, I used primary sources from the New York City educational blogs Gotham Schools and Inside Schools; The New York Times, The Daily News, and other mainstream news publications; and the DOE website, including their "Choice and Enrollment" page, and their archive of news and announcements. Furthermore, I used personal documents and emails from my time at the Beacon School in my discussion of the school as a case study.

As part of my research, I also conducted selected interviews with key actors in the admissions system to include voices from multiple points of entry into the process. Over the past year, I have spoken with two of the Deputy Chancellors from the Department of Education, one who is in charge of enrollment in the entire public school system, and the other who is charged with ensuring the realization of the DOE's goals of equity and access. Through these interviews, along with quotes from news articles, press releases, and public statements from the DOE, I was able to hear DOE officials' own understandings of and explanations for the continued segregation and inequality in the high school system, and their ideas about how it should or shouldn't be addressed. I had originally intended to speak to the principals or administrators of a number of selective high schools, but after repeatedly contacting many administrators and receiving only one response, I realized that in an environment of colorblindness, race in admissions was too difficult a subject to broach for city employees who often face public scrutiny. I was fortunate to be able to interview the principal of one screened school, which gave me a narrow insight into the admissions process from an administrators' view. My work was also informed by

interviews with a former teacher from my high school, and two education activists who have been involved in high school admissions, as well as informal conversations with many former New York City high school students and parents. All names associated with interviews, conversations, and my personal experience have been changed or left out, while names of public officials quoted in news sources have been cited directly and remain the same, as they are already public knowledge.

My analysis is primarily rooted in critical race theory, building off of the work of a number of key scholars that deal with race in sociology, anthropology, and critical legal studies. The central scholars in my piece and the ways in which I will engage with their work are laid out in the following section. This piece is also in conversation with the vast body of literature on school choice and other works within the field of education.

I enter this research as a former student in the New York City public school system and as a white upper middle class beneficiary of the city wide admissions system as it allowed me to attend one of the top schools in the city that far away my home. My interest in this work originated out of a deep desire to work towards a just and equitable school system, and better understand my own implication in the perpetuation of the current system and its severe inequities. This project looks to examine the ways in which racial segregation and inequality have been maintained within the New York City high school system, despite numerous efforts to address these issues, and destabilize the understanding of this segregation and inequality as normal.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory informs my work throughout my treatment of the New York City high school admissions. In Michael Omi and Howard Winant's groundbreaking sociological intervention in the field of critical race studies, *Racial Formation in the United States*, the authors recognize the second half of the twentieth century as "tumultuous" and transformative times in terms of the role of race in U.S. society. Accordingly, they work to assess the impact of such a politically and racially charged period on meanings and understandings of race in our country.²⁵ The authors explain that, throughout the majority of U.S. history, the dominantly accepted racial theories have been explicitly racist and based in biological deterministic understandings of race. However, since the end of World War II, for the first time dominant racial understandings have generally been rooted in ideas of racial equality.²⁶ While this represents an extremely important move away from biological deterministic and essentialist notions of race, Omi and Winant make clear that the shift by no means signifies the realization of a racially equitable society nor the diminishment of the importance of race and racial identifiers in personal and institutional relationships. On the contrary, the authors argue that race has been a "*fundamental* axis of social organization in the U.S.," and assert the necessity of a racial theory that places race at its center.²⁷ Critiquing the three contemporary paradigms of race, which they define as the ethnicity paradigm, the class paradigm, and the nation paradigm, Omi and Winant argue that these existing theories are insufficient for understanding the central

²⁵ Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formations in the United States*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 12-13.

role of race in our society, as all three treat race as epiphenomenal of other important social relationships and conflicts.²⁸

In response to the insufficiency of these three dominant racial paradigms, Omi and Winant put forth a new theoretical framework for understanding race in the postwar period. In their theory of *racial formation*, the authors define race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.”²⁹ As they argue, race is neither an immutable essence nor an illusion to be dismissed, but rather a social construct that is shaped and transformed by historical and political events and struggles, which has real effects on the material lives of all people living in the U.S. Racial categories are not static; they are constantly changing and being redefined by continuous political contestation and struggle. Omi and Winant define the ongoing political struggles and everyday personal interactions that work to create, maintain, or transform racial categories as *racial projects*.³⁰ They emphasize the importance of both social structure and cultural representation in racial formation, and argue that racial projects create the linkages between structure and representation, connecting “what race means in particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon their meaning.”³¹ In other words, changes in the way in which social structures are racially organized or how resources are distributed along racial lines also actively shape cultural understandings of race,

²⁸ Ibid, 13.

²⁹ Ibid, 55.

³⁰ Ibid, 56.

³¹ Ibid.

and conversely, projects that provide specific interpretations and representations of race affect the role of race in the social structure.

I will use Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation to delineate the course of racial politics within the New York City public high school system, and the process in which the State (in this case the New York City local government and its Department of Education) "shapes and is shaped in turn by the racial contours of society and the political demands emanating from them."³² Using this theoretical framework, the continuous political struggle for racially equitable schools in the second half of the twentieth century and the subsequent responses of policymakers, educators, and parents can be seen as racial projects. These projects have shaped both the way in which race is understood in the admissions system and the way in which the system is racially organized by simultaneously representing racial dynamics and working to "reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines."³³

Furthermore, I will use John Hartigan's work on ethnographic approaches to race in order to explore the actual workings of the cultural representation aspect of racial formation. Historically, race has been largely relegated to the discipline of sociology, while anthropologists have traditionally focused on "cultural" and "ethnic" groups.³⁴ Therefore, much of the literature that deals critically with the social and historical significance of race in the past century has come from the field of sociology. In his recent book, *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*, Lee

³² Ibid, 4.

³³ Ibid, 56.

³⁴ Baker, Lee D. "The Color-Blind Bind," in *Cultural Diversity in the United States: A Critical Reader*, ed. Ida Susser and Thomas C. Patterson. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 105.

Baker explores the formation of this “division of labor” within the social sciences.³⁵ He explains that while anthropology’s concept of race did emerge as an important idea during the twentieth century, it was “less reliable, slower to stabilize, and often more paradoxical than that of culture,” and could not compete with sociology, which had long been theorizing race.³⁶ Additionally, he argues that this division was reinforced through the distinct uses of research from these two disciplines in policy decisions. As anthropologists were views as experts on the culture of “out-of-the-way indigenous peoples,” their research and expert testimony influenced policy and law regarding U.S. colonial possessions, and Native Americans.³⁷ However, policy makers did not find anthropologists’ work as authoritative in issues regarding “in-the-way immigrant and black people,” instead it was sociologists’ research that influenced those decisions, which were largely viewed as a racial issues.³⁸ Furthermore, Faye Harrison explains in her delineation of the history of the role of race in anthropology that critiques of biological conceptions of race in the early twentieth century caused many anthropologists to assume a “no-race” position, and instead turn to ethnicity as their main analytic category.³⁹

While in the history of anthropology, race and culture have often been detached and conceptualized separately, in the past few decades anthropologists have revived a discussion of race and racism from a cultural perspective. Harrison explains that

³⁵ Baker, Lee D. *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 9 and 115.

³⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁹ Harrison, Faye V. “The Persistent Power of ‘Race’ in the Cultural and Political Economy of Racism.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1995): 47-74. *JSTOR*. Web. 23 Jun. 2012, 47.

questions of race and power have come to the forefront in recent conversations about the position and treatment of intellectuals of color in “anthropology and beyond.”⁴⁰ She contends that through these and similar discussions, “a number of anthropologists are coming to terms with the silence and subjugations that influence the discipline’s development,” including the silencing of scholarly investigation of race and racial discrimination.⁴¹ There have therefore been a number of recent anthropological studies that have specifically looked to investigate race and racial power structures through a cultural lens, or conversely to interrogate cultural logics through a racial lens, thereby bridging the two historically separated categories of analysis.

As a part of this revived interest, Hartigan – who is both an anthropologist and a well-established scholar of whiteness studies – calls for a specifically cultural analysis of race in the twenty-first century. He argues that culture is “the means by which we articulate our identities and establish important matters of social belonging and difference,” and is therefore central to the ways in which we interpret and give meaning to our own and others’ racial identities.⁴² Hartigan looks to illustrate the ways in which we “do race” in our everyday representations, interpretations, and understandings of ourselves and others. He contends that culture is at the heart of our understanding of race due to its ability to “make some things obvious and others difficult to recognize.”⁴³ This aspect of culture is specifically important in the beginning of the twenty-first century, when colorblind discourse has become dominant in public discussions and understandings of race.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 54.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Hartigan, John. *Race in the 21st Century: Ethnographic Approaches*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), ix.

⁴³ Ibid, 3.

Hartigan’s anthropological approach is important in understanding how the linkages between social structure and cultural representation actually function in the formation of racial categories. He uses cultural dynamics to illustrate “how ‘race’ both inflects and is shaped” by judgments we make and ideas we have about family, crime, intelligence, work, and comfort⁴⁴ – ideas which in turn affect decisions about social structure and the distribution of resources. In this project, a cultural approach allows me to explore how race has factored into the formation of the admissions process, even when it is not explicitly spoken about. Furthermore, using a lens of cultural dynamics is imperative to my project of destabilizing the normalization of continued racial segregation and inequity, because, as Hartigan points out, “culture, at its most fundamental level, is a means for establishing select ways of being, acting, and perceiving as ‘natural.’”⁴⁵

As racial formation is a sociohistorical process, any attempt to analyze and evaluate the racial projects which have shaped the New York City high school system must first acknowledge the history of racial domination in which they are situated. We cannot examine this contemporary and local process of racial formation without positioning it within the larger racial history of the United States. Omi and Winant argue that for the majority of its existence, the U.S. functioned as a racial dictatorship that decisively excluded non-whites from the political sphere.⁴⁶ They explain that from 1607 to 1865, almost all non-whites were excluded from voting and other rights of full citizenship. The formation of racial categories and relations in the U.S. has therefore been defined by histories of slavery, conquest, and exclusion from citizenship, legal

⁴⁴ Ibid, 21.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 33.

⁴⁶ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 65.

rights, and public resources, all of which have worked to solidify and maintain white supremacy.

Cheryl Harris demonstrates this history of white supremacy in her foundational piece, "Whiteness as Property." Coming from a legal perspective, Harris meticulously demonstrates the ways in which whiteness has been protected by the law as a "form of racialized privilege."⁴⁷ Tracing the legal formation of whiteness back to the very beginning of European settler colonialism and chattel slavery in the land now called the United States, Harris illustrates the ways in which the formation of property rights has been inextricably tied to histories of racial domination since the beginnings of our country.⁴⁸ She argues that "whites have come to expect and rely on" the benefits afforded to them due to such histories of domination, and that "over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law," thereby recognizing a property interest in whiteness itself.⁴⁹

In her theory of whiteness as property, Harris establishes how whiteness fits within both the traditional and modern legal and theoretical conceptions of property. She then demonstrates that whiteness meets the four critical characteristics of property: rights of disposition, right to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property, and the absolute right to exclude.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Harris argues that whiteness has evolved along with the meaning of property, even as both have changed over time. While the connection between whiteness and property may seem obvious in the context of slavery and legalized segregation, which overtly legally

⁴⁷ Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness As Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (1993): 1707-791. JSTOR. Web. 28 Jan. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1341787>>, 1745.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 1716.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 1714.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 1731.

limited property rights based on race, Harris argues that the abolishment of legalized segregation led only to the transformation and not rejection of the property interest in whiteness. She asserts that, in the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, "whiteness as property evolved into a more modern form through the law's ratification of the settled expectations of relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline."⁵¹ She describes this as the "new form" of whiteness as property, in which the law no longer legally protected white privilege, but also made no guarantees that it would be dismantled, and did not require any moves towards substantive equality as long as people of color were not openly marked as inferior.⁵² This left the property interest in whiteness that had been formed through centuries of white supremacy mostly intact, normalizing it as the natural and expected state of U.S. society.

My project is situated in the period after the transition to this new form of whiteness as property, during which, as Omi and Winant explain, dominant theories of race have posited a purported interest in racial equality. None of the racial projects that have shaped the New York City public high school admissions system between 1965 and present have had overtly racist goals, and in fact, most of the projects carried out by the Board of Ed./DOE itself have articulated racial equity as a central objective. Yet in light of Harris's explanation of new forms of whiteness as property, one cannot assume that these efforts have in fact diminished the prominence of whiteness as a protected expectation of privilege within the admissions system, regardless of intentions, or perceived changes in the role and importance of race in

⁵¹ Ibid, 1714.

⁵² Ibid, 1751.

the school system. Omi and Winant contend that a racial project “can be defined as racist if and only if it creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race.”⁵³ While the Board of Ed./DOE has consistently promoted a message of racial equity throughout the second half of the twentieth century, I argue that if we examine their programmatic and policy efforts to address racial inequality, the material effect has been a reproduction of existing structure of domination through the maintenance and protection of white property interests. Furthermore, I use Hartigan’s treatment of the cultural dynamics of whiteness to examine how this maintenance of white privilege has been normalized, causing it to receive little attention and criticism, even from those who have an interest in racial equality.

A Note on Terminology

In engaging in a critical discussion on race, it is essential to be careful and deliberate about terminology. Omi and Winant remind readers that how a person is categorized goes far beyond an academic exercise, or that person’s personal preferences, as “such matters as access to employment, housing, or other publically or privately valued goods; social program design and the disbursement of local, state, and federal funds; or the organization of elections...are directly affected by racial classification and the recognition of ‘legitimate’ groups.”⁵⁴ As race is so present and central in U.S. culture and politics, the racial classification of individuals and groups can have real-life material effects on treatment, inclusion, and distribution of

⁵³ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 71.

⁵⁴ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3.

resources. Furthermore, as the theory of racial formation makes clear, racial categories are constantly changing, and are shaped by historical and political processes. This implies that the terms used to describe such categories are anything but arbitrary, neutral classifiers, but rather sites of ongoing contention, which carry long histories of political struggle. It is therefore imperative to acknowledge the choices made in deciding what terminology to use within this work, and the implications of such choices.

Compiling demographic and journalistic data from a wide variety of sources poses a further issue in regards to terminology. Within the sphere of consistently contentious racial categories, researchers, journalists, politicians, and educational actors often choose to use differing terms, with varying consequences. In order to engage in a thoughtful and meaningful dialogue on race within the high school admissions system, I must clarify not only my own choices of terminology and racial categories, but also those of the sources that I choose to cite, and the fissures between the two. The New York State School Report Cards (or Accountability and Overview Reports), which the state releases yearly and which I cite readily, list “Racial/Ethnic Origin” as part of their demographic profile. Under this section, they list six categories: “American Indian or Alaska Native,” “Black or African American,” “Hispanic or Latino,” “Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander,” “White,” and “Multiracial.”⁵⁵ This list provides a wide range of possible identifying categories (although most definitely not *all* possibilities), although it also creates a slippage

⁵⁵ "New York State Report Cards 2011." New York State Testing and Accountability Reporting Tool.

between racial and ethnic categories, vaguely lumping them together as if they were interchangeable.

However, despite the fairly wide list of options presented by the state, those who cite these demographics (mainly news sources) almost always choose to use only a few of those terms. In their discussions on race, The New York Times, on which I rely heavily in my historical research and discourse analysis, generally use the racial categories of “black,” “Hispanic,” “Asian,” and “white.”⁵⁶ The use of these categories not only reflects deliberate choices about racial terms (using black over African American and Hispanic over Latino, for example), but also leaves out the categories of “Multiracial” and “American Indian or Alaska Native,” and collapses the category of “Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander.” I can only assume that “Multiracial” and “American Indian or Alaska Native” are excluded from public discussion because they each make up less than 0.5% of reported racial demographics in the public high school system,⁵⁷ although that leads to questions about reporting methods, especially in regard to multiracial individuals, in regards to how people are allowed to mark themselves and how they are counted.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the exclusion

⁵⁶ Medina, Jennifer. “At Top City Schools, Lack of Diversity Persists.” *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 5, Feb. 2010. Web. 1 Nov. 2012. <<http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/05/at-top-city-schools-lack-of-diversity-persist/>>.

⁵⁷ “New York City Public School Indicators.” New York City Independent Budget Office. 2011. Web. 20 Dec. 2012. <www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/2011edindicatorsreport.pdf>.

⁵⁸ In fact, in regard to Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders and multiracial individuals, both sources are out of compliance with federal regulation. The Office of Management and Budget’s 1997 “Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity” requires two separate categories for “Asian” and “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.” Furthermore, the revisions assert that when a list is provided for respondents for self-reporting of racial identification, that list “should not contain a “multiracial” category,” but should instead provide a method of reporting multiple races. (Office of Management and Budget. “Revisions to the Standards for the Classification

of Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders in the New York Times' use of demographic information leaves us unclear as to whether such individuals are being excluded from the data altogether or are being lumped in to a group with Asians and Asian/Asian Americans without differentiation. It seems that the latter would be the case, as the news source often uses statistics provided by the state and local government. My work does not address the role of Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islands, Native Americans, or multiracial individuals in the high school admissions system, as they are almost entirely left out in public discourse. The dismissal of these racial groups calls for further research on both their presence within and experience of the admissions system, and the ways in which they are written out of public debate. In both the State Report Cards and the New York Times, the provided racial categories leave out "Asian American," instead using the the categories of "Asian" and "Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander." These terms do not account for difference in generation and immigrant backgrounds within Asian and Asian American communities as "Asian" could include an international who is living in the U.S. temporarily, while "Asian American" generally refers to individuals of Asian descent who were born in the U.S., and may have had family in the United States for many generations.

Given these slippages and changes in racial categories between varying sources, it is important to recognize the limitations of statistical data within this project. While the most current data that I use comes from the New York State Report Cards, which therefore includes slightly more descriptive and clear categories, these

of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity." Executive Office of the President. 30 Oct. 1997. Web. 8 Apr. 2013. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/fedreg_1997standards/>.)

reports only began to be publically available online in 2008. Accordingly, to find information from before that date I had to rely on data from news articles, books, and other reports released by the government or non-profit organizations, all of which define racial categories in slightly varying ways. I do not say this to invalidate the very real inequalities that are made apparent by the existing statistical information, as regardless of small variations in group categorization, all of the demographic data that I came across categorically showed a clear history of unequal resource distribution along racial lines, and a clear underrepresentation of Black and Latino/a students in the city's most selective schools. I only mean to illustrate that this demographic data is not neutral, as it relies on racial categories that carry histories of political struggle, and involve deliberate choices to include or exclude certain groups or individuals. Furthermore, these categories do not tell us the entire story, as they often collapse multiple groups into one, and do not account for differences in ethnicity, immigration backgrounds, or national origin. Knowing this, I have deliberately chosen the terms that I will use, in an attempt to be as clear and accurate as possible in my use of racial categories, while remaining aware of the sociohistorical processes involved in the creation of each term.

While the New York Times uses the term "Hispanic" as one of their main racial categories, I choose to use the term "Latino/a." In reality, neither of these terms are racial identities, but are actually pan-ethnic categories to describe a large number of people with a wide variety of national origins and racial backgrounds. This is reflected in the U.S. census, which lists "Hispanic" as an ethnic category, then and asks respondents to mark whether they are "white Hispanic" or "non-white

Hispanic.”⁵⁹ However, in everyday categorization of people in the news media, the education system, the criminal justice system, and other institutions, “Hispanic” and “Latino” have been commonly used as analogous to racial terms such as “Black” and “white,” and Latino/as have been subject to many forms of racialized discrimination.⁶⁰ This poses a problem, as many demographic studies include people of many racial identities within the category of “Hispanic” or “Latino,” however the data is then used to refer racially to only non-white Latino/as, as it is placed in juxtaposition to a “white” racial category. This is evident in the data used in this study, as both the government studies and the news sources use “Hispanic” or “Latino” as a racial category. Yet it is unclear whether or not this category includes Black Latino/as or white Latino/as, or even individuals from Spain who would be considered Hispanic, but do not come from the same history of racialized conquest and colonial (and neocolonial) domination as individuals from Latin America with indigenous and/or African roots.

I choose to use the term “Latino/a” in line with the work of José Luis Morín in *Latino/a Rights and Justice in the United States: Perspectives and Approaches*. Morín explains that “Hispanic” is a term that has been imposed on people of Latin American descent by the U.S. government, rather than a point of self-identification, and that it has been increasingly viewed as “deficient and inaccurate” by Latino/a communities.⁶¹ He argues that the term overly emphasizes the role of Spanish colonial rule in Latin America, defining the current identity of people of Latin

⁵⁹ Morín, José Luis. *Latino/a Rights and Justice in the United States: Perspectives and Approaches*. (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2009), 7.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 9.

⁶¹ Ibid.

American descent in relation to the former colonizer, “rather than representing and validating their diverse racial and cultural characteristics.”⁶² Furthermore, Morín argues that this attention to a European colonial past makes “Hispanic” an “ahistorical term,” as it draws attention away from more recent histories of U.S. domination in Latin America and over Latin Americans in the U.S.⁶³ In response to these deficiencies, Morín explains that the term “Latino” has been increasingly used as a form of “self-definition, re-thinking, and empowerment on the part of Latinos and Latinas, particularly in response to a government-imposed classification.”⁶⁴ Hayes-Bautista and Chapa further argue that “Latino” more accurately describes a group that is actually geographically based but which has been consistently been treated as a racial group.⁶⁵ Following Morín, I furthermore choose to use “Latino/a” instead of “Latino” in order to acknowledge the gendered nature of the term and simultaneously include both male- and female- identified people.

As do most sources that I cite, I use the term “Black” to describe Americans with African descent. However, while most sources I use do not capitalize the term, I choose to do so, following the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw and Cheryl Harris. Crenshaw explains this usage as a reflection of the notion that Blacks, like other “minority” groups, “constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun.”⁶⁶ She furthermore calls on W.E.B. DuBois’s argument that a lowercase “n” was used in negro to mark Blacks as inferior and defend slavery.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 10.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 66.

⁶⁶ Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. “Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law.” *Harvard Law Review* 101.7 (May, 1988): 1331-1387. JSTOR. Web. 20 Mar. 2013. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1341398?seq=2>>.

Harris adds that, while “white” and “Black” have been demarcated as opposites, functionally, this is not the case. While “Black” refers to a specific cultural group, the category of “white” has been formed through a history of domination and defined by that which it is not.⁶⁷ I therefore do not capitalize “white,” as it is not denoted as a proper noun.

Lastly, when referring to those categorized by many sources as “Asian” I will use the category of Asian/Asian American. As the provided demographic data does not differentiate between recent Asian immigrants or Asian internationals living in the U.S., and U.S.-born Americans of Asian descent, I use this label as a reminder of the multitude of groups with highly differing histories and statuses that are accounted for in this one category. The category of Asian/Asian American includes people of many different ethnicities and national origins, who experience race and racial oppression in many different ways.

Road Map

I begin my project by bringing readers back to the origins of my interest in this topic. Chapter one uses a mixture of autoethnography and discourse analysis to examine the Beacon School and its admissions controversy as a case study. Using my own confusions and internal conflicts from my experience during the struggle over admissions as a jumping off point, I examine the strong aversions to discussions about race within the admissions system. I use Hartigan’s work to explain the normalization of this tendency towards colorblindness, calling upon his exploration of the dynamics of whiteness, and framing the defense of the admissions process within

⁶⁷ Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1710.

what Winant defines as the “liberal white racial project.” I argue that the dominance of colorblind language led both the defenders and challengers of the admissions system to couch the debate in terms of “diversity” and “multiculturalism” instead of equity and inclusion, causing an inability to address the real structural inequality which Beacon was only a part of. Through this framework, I explore teachers’ and administrators’ understandings of race as divisive and attacking, which caused them to attempt to “move beyond” race and look for solutions of equal opportunity across racial lines. I argue that, while these educators had the best of intentions, their defense of the admissions system can be classified as a racist white racial project, as it simultaneously blames students of color for their underrepresentation in top-performing schools, and works to maintain a structure that unequally distributes resources along racial lines based on this representation.

Chapter two frames this understanding of race and the admissions process within the local and national political context and the larger history of racial formation within New York City high schools. Tracing the trajectory of high school admissions from an almost entirely neighborhood system to a citywide choice system, I examine how the Board of Ed.’s understandings of racial equality shifted along with the dominant national political climate, from state mandated integration, to colorblind individual choice. Although the DOE currently uses a colorblind discourse in their explanations of and policies regarding the admissions system, I demonstrate that race has been a crucial component in the admissions system throughout almost the entirety of its formation. Using Harris’s critique of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and selections from the vast body of literature on school choice and marketized

education, I argue that while the Board of Ed.'s efforts to address racial inequality have followed contemporary dominant notions of educational equity, they have not in fact created any substantial form of equality. While the Board of Ed.'s commitment to integration in the 60s and 70s prevented schools from only accepting white students, the focus on quotas precluded any meaningful gains for students of color, as it did not guarantee quality education or equal distribution of resources. Similarly, while the Department of Education's current interest in individual school choice gives agency to students in their educational career, it also obscures the power that schools hold in admissions decisions, therefore placing the blame on students. Relying on a market-based understanding of inequality, which Omi and Winant explain is insufficient, the DOE's current attempts to address continued disparities do not take into account the particularly racial nature of the historical formation of the admissions process. As the choice process does not guarantee any form of equality, but only works to increase individual agency in school decisions, it continues to maintain the status quo in an admissions system that has protected white property interests since its inception, now placing the responsibility for this inequality on students of color.

My final chapter moves to what has been center of controversy within the New York City admissions system throughout the past half-century. As the most well-known and most selective schools in the city, the eight Specialized Science High Schools have long been placed at the center of all discussions on high schools, as the objects of both intense desire and extreme controversy. This chapter continues the historical narrative of the admission system, tracing repeated community outcries about the severe underrepresentation of Black and Latina/o students in the

Specialized Schools and the Board of Ed./DOE's continuous attempts to address them. I argue that while the Board of Ed.'s initial implementation of an affirmative action program did marginally increase access to the Specialized Schools for students of color, their subsequent efforts were thwarted by white political backlash and the rise of anti-affirmative action sentiment. Furthermore, although the idea of the entrance exam for these schools as objective is now a dominant understanding in the public sphere, I demonstrate that that argument can be traced back to the political struggle of white parents and educators to enshrine the exam into law, thereby protecting white interests in the schools. I argue that with the neutrality of the test written into law and normalized in public discourse, in the past decades the DOE has refused to consider the actual mode of evaluation in their proposed solutions to racial imbalance in the Specialized Schools. Instead, their recent efforts to address this imbalance have relied on what Omi and Winant describe as the class-paradigm of race, and have failed to deal with the issue in a meaningful way, causing the number of admitted Black and Latina/o students to continue to drop. In this chapter I also discuss the role of Asian/Asian Americans in the more recent Specialized High School controversies, arguing that while their increasing presence is significant, it does not signify a challenge to maintained expectations of white privilege in the Specialized Schools or in the larger high school system. Asian/Asian American students' presence in the Specialized Schools has been consistently questioned in the public sphere and met with a mixture of curiosity and resentment. Media representations of this shifting demographic have simultaneously represented Asian/Asian American as a racial threat to whites, and living proof of the success of

racial equality. Asian/Asian American students are consistently depicted as the “model minority” and described using racially essentialist stereotypes as somehow culturally predisposed to academic success. This portrayal is inaccurate and highly generalized, but is used in public discourse to implicitly and explicitly critique Black and Latino/a students for their underrepresentation in the Specialized Schools, implying that if Asian/Asian American students can succeed so can they. I argue that this treatment of Asian/Asian Americans in public discourse both provides a racist representation of Asian/Asian Americans and justifies the continued exclusion of Blacks and Latino/a students from the city’s most prestigious schools, thereby thwarting attempts to dismantle the status quo of expectations of white privilege.

I conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of my research, and suggestions for moving forward in the struggle for a just system of education. In this project I hope to destabilize the idea that the New York City high school system is already on a path towards racial equality, and instead suggest that we need to consider changing routes. I hope to demonstrate that previous and existing solutions to addressing racial equality in the school system have been insufficient, as they have failed to significantly challenge the maintained state of severe inequality. I therefore suggest that if the Department of Education and those who are invested in creating a just system are serious about our commitment to equality, then we must move towards a race-conscious analysis of the admissions system that seeks to *equalize* rather than provide equal opportunity. Without careful attention to the ways in which race and racial inequality have been essential aspects in the formation and maintenance of the high school system, and a concerted effort to directly address this

legacy, we will only continue to reinforce the status quo and perpetuate a system that keeps students of color at the bottom.

Chapter 1: Diversity not Equity: Naturalizing Segregation Through Colormuteness in the Beacon School

I think that diversity is important. But diversity shouldn't overtake the goal of high school, which is to prepare for college. Beacon is a prestigious school and obviously diversity is an important aspect to Beacon but then again [the school] wants to take the best students.

- Beacon Senior, May 2009⁶⁸

It was a sunny spring day in May 2009. I could feel a warm breeze through the front doors of the school. As I stood with my back against the wall, my shoulder an inch from the corner of the hallway, I plotted my next move. Could we manage to get into the cafeteria without anyone realizing what we were doing? My friend James stood next to me, scotch tape at the ready as I clung to my pile of fliers. I looked across the hall at one of our signs, which appeared non-descript amongst dozens of other fliers put up by our peers, advertising plays, art shows, and book drives. In plain black writing it asked: “Can we maintain academic excellence if we open up the admissions process?” inviting readers to discuss this and similar questions at an open forum on “Diversity, Equity, and Community in our school.” Although our sign looked at home next to advertisements for groups like Students Organizing Students and screenings of progressive movies, I knew that our poster’s wall-life would be short lived. The vice principal was only ten minutes behind us, tearing down everything that we put up. While it was rather exciting to feel like a rebel with a cause, I wondered why I had to be sneaking around my school to carry out the common student practice of voicing my views and promoting an event.

⁶⁸ Theater as Revolution Class, Spring 2009. *Diver-City: An Ethnodrama in Progress*. The Beacon School. May. 2009. Print.

I casually stuck my head around the corner, peering into the lobby. The coast was clear. I signaled to James and we began to cross the lobby with purpose, trying not to look too conspicuous. Unfortunately, our timing failed. At that moment, a small woman came marching around the corner of the opposite hallway – it was my Science teacher and one of the last people we wanted to see. She stopped in her tracks and stared at us suspiciously. “What do you think you’re doing?” she asked. We tried to maintain our composure. I knew I wasn’t actually doing anything wrong, but somehow I still felt like I had been caught red-handed in the middle of a sinful act. “Uh, walking across the lobby...” I replied, acting confused as I slid the fliers behind my back and out of view, “Is there something wrong Ms. Smith –”

She didn’t wait for me to finish, replying frantically: “I’m not stupid Cory. Look, you have to stop all of this nonsense. I know you love Beacon, but this forum is tearing it apart!” I could hear the near panic in her voice. She was not so much scorning me as begging me. “Why do you want to destroy our school?” she demanded. My mind twisted and turned, wanting to revert to feelings of guilt, but attempting to fight the impulse and instead, understand what was really going on. All we wanted was an open discussion about the admissions process. Why did that cause so much panic in my teacher’s eyes? How did her understandings of race and the admissions system cause her to view our attempts at discussion as destructive?

The Forum on Diversity, Equity, and Community was planned by students, parents, and teachers at the end of my senior year at Beacon in response to the continuing decrease in the number of Black and Latino/a students admitted to our school. The organizing group was concerned that the school’s admissions process was

working to exclude students of color, and sought to open up discussion about possible ways to address this issue. The time leading up to this forum was characterized by the school administration's and many staff members' intense efforts to stop the event and silence discussion about race and admissions in our school. Although I was part of a group whose ultimate goal was to change the admissions process, most of our battle lay in being able to discuss the issue. The avoidance and fear of talking about race in our own community was at times astounding, causing our fight to become one about language and speech, and preventing any actual policy changes from being proposed. Defenders contended not only that the admissions process should not be changed, but also that we should not even be talking about it in the first place. At the time, I often felt like I was drowning in a sea of words, just trying to formulate arguments strong enough to keep me afloat after being knocked down by wave after wave of purportedly more logical counterarguments.

Beacon had taught us to question everything, to critically analyze the situations in front of us, and to denounce and act against injustice wherever we found it. We had learned about countless historical struggles of resistance, analyzed social problems from the perspective of race and gender in literature, and spent a semester contributing to our neighborhoods through community service. I had written my 11th grade history project on the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee during the civil rights movement, my 11th English project on the detriment of hidden racialized power complexes in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and my senior project on the effect of the eugenics movement on immigration exclusion, all with the complete support of my teachers. Yet when this type of critical analysis, which they taught us

themselves and encouraged us to embrace, turned its focus to our own school and our implications in the perpetuation of injustice, the administration and many teachers Seemed to have a different understanding of what was going on.

While it was clear that almost every teacher and administrator that I talked to genuinely cared about making sure students of color and low-income students had access to Beacon, it was also evident they were unable or unwilling to consider the admissions process as a possible obstacle to that goal. Most teachers agreed that it was a problem that the number of students of color and low-income students were dropping, and a few of them suggested an alternative solution of doing outreach to help prepare these students for the interview and portfolio process. They offered their help in this endeavor, but implored us to stop talking about changing the admissions process. While these educators had good intentions and wanted to assure educational equality across racial and economic lines, they were not ready to interrogate the admissions process, as it would mean putting into question the merit-based logic that both the process and the entire school is based on.

Looking back at this period in my high school experience full of tension and conflict, a question begs to be asked: Why were such progressive and well-intentioned people, who would tell you without hesitation that racial equality was of utmost importance, so intensely reluctant to discuss racial disparities in relation to the admissions process? How did they understand and account for the increasing racial segregation, and how were these colorblind understandings normalized to the point that even those organizing against the admissions process at times internalized them? How did this shape meanings and understandings of race within our school and the

larger high school system? And what were the implications and consequences of this insistence on colorblindness on the racial organization of our school and the way in which resources were distributed along racial lines?

In this chapter, I use John Hartigan's ethnographic treatment of race in the twenty first century to examine the formation of understandings of race in one of New York City's most selective high schools from a cultural perspective. Examining the attempts to restore the status quo in a moment when the colorblind norm had been challenged allows a window into the ways in which various stakeholders in the school community made sense a system of evaluation that was generally seen as neutral. Framing the defenses of the teachers and school administrators within Winant's definition of a "liberal white racial project," I use Hartigan's work and other key ethnographic texts in whiteness studies to understand the ways in which the cultural dynamics of whiteness work to shape these almost entirely white stakeholders' interpretation and representation of race within the admissions process. I explain that the educators' understanding of race as an unsound concept that must be eliminated caused them to view our attempts at discussion as destructive and disruptive to their own visions of an equal and cohesive community. Furthermore, the difference in our understandings of equality caused a break in communication that prevented meaningful discussion about systemic inequality. Within admissions system defenders' framework of equality as equal opportunity for diverse individuals, the suggestion of changing the admissions process was seen as damaging to the educational services they provided to all students, including students of color. However, while they espoused a commitment to equality, I argue that the explanations

and solutions that these educators provided for the decrease in admitted Black and Latina/o students represented students of color as uninformed and unprepared for the high-quality education that Beacon seeks to provide. Going back to Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation, I argue that the defense of Beacon's admissions process can be classified as a racist white racial project, as this racial representation simultaneously upheld an understanding of people of color as inferior and affected the racial organization of the educational social structure, as it prevented any changes in the admissions system. Although defenders of the admissions system were acting on their understandings of fairness and equality, their actions worked against efforts to challenge the normalized expectation of white privilege in the stratified school system, thereby protecting white property interests within a highly desired school.

A Progressive Small School for the "Middle Student"

The Beacon School was founded in 1993 by two former middle school teachers.⁶⁹ It was one of many small alternative high schools that were created in the 1990s with support from community members and parents.⁷⁰ From the beginning, the school prided itself on its nurturing, family-like environment that included advisors that were assigned to the same group of students for their entire time at the school, allowing them to follow students' progress and development throughout the four years.⁷¹ The school gained exemption from the obligatory statewide exams (the New York State Regents, which set common standards of achievement in each subject

⁶⁹ "Who We Are." *The Beacon School*. Web. 14 Oct. 2012.

<<http://www.beaconschool.org/about/whoweare.php>>.

⁷⁰ "Beacon High School." *Inside Schools*. 2011. Web 14 Oct. 2012.

<<http://insideschools.org/high/browse/school/154>>.

⁷¹ The Beacon School, "Who We Are."

area), and became well-known for its progressive, alternative assessment model. While Regents were yearly multiple choice and written exams, Beacon's model, called performance-based assessment, consisted of yearly projects carried out throughout an entire semester in each subject area, and usually included both a research project and a creative component.⁷² This provided students who did not necessarily excel in a test taking environment or traditional schooling atmosphere an alternative way to demonstrate their understanding of subject material. This educational philosophy also aimed to foster a collaborative rather than competitive learning environment, and avoided numeric grades with which students could be ranked. The school instead chose to give students wide-ranging letter grades (A, B, C, D, or No Credit), accompanied by teachers' written "anecdotal" provided twice a year, for each individual student in every class.

Like many new, small schools, Beacon initially did not have any formal screening process. An educator who was present at the start of the school remembers: "When we first started...we took anybody that we could get. We were like 'please, come to our school!'"⁷³ Similarly, a member of the first graduating class described his entrance to the school as highly informal: "They invited us to I.S. 44 and...they just asked us why we wanted to come, and that was it."⁷⁴ This changed, however, a few years later, when the school adopted the Educational Options (Ed. Op.) admissions process – one of the various methods for high school admissions. In the Ed. Op. system, which will be discussed at length in chapter two, schools choose half of their applicants through screening and half through a computer-generated lottery, with the

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Theater as Revolution Class, Spring 2009. *Diver-City*.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

parameter that both halves must be 16% students with above average scores on their seventh grade reading test, 68% students with average scores, and 16% students with below average scores.⁷⁵ Beacon therefore became a deliberate mix of students with varying academic abilities. One teacher explained that Beacon has always described its goal as catering to “the middle student,” meaning to students that did fairly well in school but did not want to or could not get into the city’s coveted Specialized High Schools.⁷⁶ However, in 2003, Beacon changed its admissions process from Educational Options to an extensive screened process, moving away from its goal as a collaborative environment for students of diverse learning styles and towards a competitive and selective school for students that demonstrate a specific type of “merit.”

This screened process, which has continued to the present, took Beacon’s focus away from “the middle student,” and moved the school into the circle of New York City’s elite selective high schools. The minimum requirement for all applicants is an 85 overall grade point average in sixth and seventh grade and a three or four (on a scale of four) on the seventh grade standardized tests. Although students can still submit applications without these prerequisites, chances of admittance are slim to none. Furthermore, all applicants are asked to bring in a portfolio of their written work in both the science and humanities, as well as an essay written specifically for the school on a subject of their choice.⁷⁷ Applicants are invited to visit the school, where they are asked to write another essay in front of a proctor in order to

⁷⁵ "High School Admissions Methods." *New York City Department of Education*. New York City Department of Education, 2011. Web. 24 Feb. 2011.

<<http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/High/Admissions/Methods.htm>>.

⁷⁶ Beacon Teacher. Interview by Cory Meara-Bainbridge. 5 Sep. 2012.

⁷⁷ Somewhat like the Common Application essay for college.

demonstrate their in-class writing skills, and are then taken in for a ten to fifteen minute interview with a faculty member and a current Beacon student. This screening system is quite clearly looking for a different type of student than the Ed. Op. process. Whereas the Ed. Op. process purposely seeks applicants of varying academic abilities, the new system limits the applicant pool to the top-performing students in the city. Furthermore, Beacon is no longer differentiated from the Specialized High Schools as a less competitive or at least less competition-driven option, but is rather competing with them for the same limited group of applicants, as many students are able to get into both Beacon and a Specialized School and decide between the two. Whereas Beacon started as an alternative school for students who did not necessarily succeed in traditional forms of evaluation, it has now become a selective school for students who can demonstrate a specific type of intelligence and ability.

Word Wars

I was part of the second class to be admitted under Beacon's new screened admissions system, meaning that when I entered as a ninth grader, half of the school had been accepted by Ed. Op. (the eleventh and twelfth graders) and the other half had been screened. At that time, I was not aware of any difference between the grades. In fact, I was barely even aware that the admissions system had changed. But as time went on, my friends and I sensed that the classes that had graduated before us were somehow different from the classes below us. As we heard stories from teachers and alumni of how the school used to be, it seemed clear to us that Beacon had undergone a significant transformation. Not only was the school now more

competitive and selective, but it also seemed as if the racial and class demographics were changing, as we were aware from conversations with our peers and teachers that the neighborhoods that students were coming from had shifted.

In the middle of my senior year, I took part in the forming of a new Student Union aimed to address the perceived decline in diversity within the student body. Although we had no hard facts at the time about changes in race and class demographics for the previous years, we were aware from hearsay and from our knowledge of the backgrounds of our peers (it was a rather small school) that every year more and more students came from the Upper West Side and from my neighborhood, Park Slope, Brooklyn: both largely white upper middle class neighborhoods.⁷⁸ As our school became consistently more popular and selective, we were uncomfortable with this shift, as it meant that less and less students of color and low-income students were being admitted to an increasingly well-resourced⁷⁹ and highly-rated school. We decided to take on this issue through a path of awareness building, spending hours talking to students about diversity and student representation, and convincing them to check out our meetings.

Finally, in mid-May, it became clear that we were not the only ones who had seen the changes in the school when the *Daily News* published an article with the

⁷⁸ The 2010 census reported that 67.3% of the Park Slope-Gowanus population and 67.7% of the Upper West Side population were white while only 33.3% of the New York City population in white (<http://www.urbanresearchmaps.org/plurality/>). The median income in 2010 was \$88,564 in Park Slope (<http://parkslope.patch.com/articles/park-slopes-changing-face>) and \$92,562 in the Upper West Side (http://furmancenter.org/files/sotc/MN_07_11.pdf).

⁷⁹ Beacon's popularity has afforded it a number of educational grants, particularly in technology and arts. Furthermore, the increasing wealth demographic of the school meant a larger Parent Association budget. The Beacon Parent Association's annual budget in the 2012-2013 school year is \$285,000. (Beacon Parent Association. "Parent Association Meeting Notes." 27 Nov. 2012. Web. 6 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.beaconpa.org/beacon-pa/pa-minutes>>.).

headline: “Manhattan Beacon School’s racial hope dims.”⁸⁰ The previous week two relatives of Beacon students had written a letter to Chancellor Klein expressing their concern about the “small – and shrinking – number of Black and Latino students at Beacon as well as the small and/or shrinking number of male students, English Language Learners (ELL), low-income students, students with disabilities, and recent immigrants.”⁸¹ The article reported what we had inferred: there had indeed been a continuous decline in the number of Black and Latino students and low-income students at Beacon in the previous four years. From the 2004-2005 school year (the first year where students were admitted by the screened process) to the 2008-2009 school year, the percentage of Black students in the school population decreased from 19% to 15%, the percentage of Latino students decreased from 27% to 21%, and the percentage of students eligible for free lunch⁸² decreased from 21% to 15%.⁸³ Meanwhile, the percentage of white students rose from 46% to 57% and the percentage of Asian/Asian American students rose from 4% to 7%.⁸⁴

Following the publishing of the article, the apathy with which our actions had been met vanished, and everyone seemed to be on one side or the other. 150 students attended a meeting for those interested in figuring out why the school had been losing students of color and low-income students and how this could be reversed. However, this growing interest also translated into polarization. We were no longer just arguing

⁸⁰ Boyd, Ernest Leif and Andrietta Sims. Letter to Joel Klein. 8 May 2009. Print.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Meaning that their family is near or below the poverty level.

⁸³ United States. New York State Testing and Accountability Report Tool. Report Cards. *The New York State School Report Card: Beacon High School*. The New York State Education Department, 29 Jan. 2010. Web. 26 Feb. 2011. <<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb-rc/2009/24/AOR-2009-310300011479.pdf>>.

⁸⁴ While the number of Asian/Asian American students increased, they are still underrepresented at Beacon. (Ibid.)

with our principal and administrators. While many students and teachers had joined our side, many others had also begun arguing that the conversation must stop. Every school day was a potential word-war battleground. A new informal group of students, teachers, and parents was formed (myself included) to discuss and address the issues in the admissions process. We decided that the best thing to do was to have an open conversation with the entire school community in order to examine possible reasons for this decline and to discuss how it should be addressed. We therefore began organizing the Forum on Diversity, Equity, and Community for students, parents, teachers, administrators, and anyone else who felt they had a stake in the school.

It was in the planning of this forum that the most controversy ensued within the school community. As we continued to engage with our peers and teachers, there was a sudden strong silencing of any discussion of race in the admissions process. We first asked our principal if our group could host the forum in the school in conjunction with the administration. She said she would agree to it only if it was run by the administration and questions were preapproved. We decided against that route, and moved forward with the planning of the forum at an outside location, moderated by NYU Education Professor Pedro Noguera, whose son attended Beacon. Yet we continued to publicize within our school, having ongoing conversations with students and teachers, and covering the hallways with fliers advertising the event. The administration and many of the teachers did not tolerate our outreach. Our posters were torn down not ten minutes after they were put up, and those caught hanging them were threatened with suspension or expulsion. Our principal begged us not to have the forum and many teachers like Ms. Smith told us that we were harming the

school and that the best thing we could do was to call it off. We did not heed these threats, and the forum was a success. Close to 200 parents, teachers, and students attended. Out of the gathering, we formed a list of next steps, which we subsequently presented to the principal.

Three weeks after the community forum took place, I graduated from Beacon, moving on to the college world. Although I stayed connected and helped when I could, I was no longer directly involved in the day-to-day organizing of our diversity group. But the struggle continued, and I kept up with the blow-by-blow through email. Despite our success at the forum, the Beacon administration stood fast in their refusal to critically examine the admissions process, continuing to silence student efforts to create discussion. Out of all of our suggestions from the previous year, they only followed up on one. In the fall they created “The Outreach Club,” headed by Ms. Smith, and born with the objective of working with middle schools to let more students know about Beacon and become familiar with its application process. Organizing continued throughout that year but to little avail. Students continued to be threatened with disciplinary action, and denied spaces for open discussion. Eventually the momentum died down, and with the next graduating class few active students remained, leaving the admissions process unchallenged and untouched to this day.

Understanding Race Through Whiteness

Returning back to my hallway encounter with Ms. Smith from the beginning of this chapter, I am led to interrogate where this fear and intense avoidance of discussion about race in the admissions system comes from. In attempting to unpack

the defenders of admissions system's understandings of racial dynamics and racial equality/inequality, it is necessary to use a cultural analysis. Culture fundamentally constitutes the systems of beliefs through which one understands and makes sense of the world, and which establish "select ways of being, acting, and perceiving as 'natural.'"⁸⁵ Through common cultural conditioning, people make sense of what is expected from them in specific situations and what we can expect from others. This allows us to do social boundary work and mark anything or anyone that does not fall within those expectations as "not normal," or "different."⁸⁶ Hartigan makes it clear that race is not equivalent to culture, although it is often presented in that way, but rather, individuals' cultural understandings inform the ways in which they mark and unmark race and racial boundaries, and form notions of similarity and difference. Furthermore he argues that culture is not something that distorts or covers up the way things really are, but rather a cultural perspective sees culture as "the very medium of social relations."⁸⁷ While cultural analysis is crucial to an examination of colorblind discourse because of its ability to allow the scholar to see beyond what is actually said, it is important not to dismiss people's actual explanations. Following Hartigan's understanding of culture, I approach the defenses of the admissions process not as rationalizations used to cover up underlying racist sentiments, but as actual articulations of how the administrators and teachers in Beacon understood their surroundings.

In implementing a cultural analysis of the admissions controversy at Beacon, it is imperative to examine the cultural dynamics of whiteness and white racial

⁸⁵ Hartigan, John. *Race in the 21st Century: Ethnographic Approaches*, 33.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 34.

thinking. As explained earlier in this chapter, Beacon's student body has a white majority (57% in 2009 when I was a senior, 53% in 2011). While the white student population is three times larger than the percentage of white students in the entire public high school system (12.1%), Beacon has low numbers of all other reported racial groups in relation to citywide numbers. Therefore, within the New York City system, Beacon is a disproportionately white school. Furthermore, the vast majority of the teachers and both of the administrators (principal and vice principal) are white, and every one of the staff members who actively spoke out against student organizing around the admissions process was white. While this in no way means that all of these people had the same reasons or arguments for why we should not be talking about the admissions process, nor that they all spoke against our organizing solely because of their white identity (there were also many white people involved in the organizing group, including myself and multiple staff members), it compels me to explore how whiteness functions in these individuals' understandings of race and the admissions process.

Hartigan argues that whiteness is a crucial starting point for examining race, because it is often left out of such discussions, and because the concept of race in the U.S. began with the definition and protection of whiteness, which Europeans used to mark their differences from the rest of the world. He explains that while it is important to acknowledge that life experiences vary greatly among the many different groups of white people in the United States, white people also share a racialized experience that crosses those differences. He writes: "Whites share a racially conditioned perspective on the world, which reflects experiences in a variety of social

arenas where whiteness frames their interactions with others.”⁸⁸ In other words, while in many experiences and social arenas, other parts of people’s identities such as class or gender may frame their interaction with others, there are also experiences in which race stretches across those lines, providing a “racially conditioned perspective” of the situation.

Hartigan argues that the most distinctive and prominent part of this shared perspective of whiteness is that it “allows [white people] generally to avoid thinking about the racial dimensions of their lives and social circumstances.”⁸⁹ Because whiteness is unmarked and normalized (i.e. seen as non-racial), people who are perceived as white are generally not seen as racialized subjects. This allows white individuals to live their lives most of the time without thinking about race, which in our society amounts to a privilege since it is a subject that non-white, “racialized” subjects cannot ignore. Hartigan connects this to larger American cultural attachment to individualism, and the belief that we all experience the world in a unique manner.⁹⁰ He argues that the normalization of whiteness causes whites to view themselves first and foremost as individuals, while others are racially grouped. Furthermore, he explains that intense value placed on individualism in U.S. culture causes us to view anyone that is not “sufficiently or appropriately ‘individual’” as having something wrong with them.⁹¹

Highlighting the overrepresentation of white students at Beacon may have been disconcerting for white staff and administration, as it upset the dominant

⁸⁸ Hartigan, *Race in the 21st Century*, 87.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 90.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 3.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 20.

understanding of whites as racially unmarked individuals. While we spoke about racial inequality in class, the teachers often framed race as an issue for people of color. The organizing groups' questioning of the increasing number of white students at Beacon challenged this notion of race as the problem of people of color by recognizing the group status white people and the role of white students in the exclusion of Black and Latino/a students.

In Howard Winant's solo work, "White Racial Projects," he provides a more nuanced picture of contemporary strategies of racial navigation by white people, proposing three separate racial projects, each with varying political goals. Winant argues that U.S. racism has always been defined by anxiety about whiteness and its instability.⁹² However, he explains that in the postwar period when white supremacy has seriously been called into question (although not dismantled), a new kind of uncertainty about whiteness has emerged, coming "not from those who wish to preserve it, who seek to defend racial hierarchy and inequality, but rather from those who wish to overcome it, to transcend it, to forget about it, to abolish it."⁹³ Winant lays out the three dominant ways in which white people have come to understand race within this new racial order, which he defines as the "neoconservative project," the "liberal project," and the "new abolitionist project." The views expressed by the majority of the teachers and administrators at Beacon fit into what Winant describes as the liberal white racial project. He explains that participants in this project view race as a flawed concept in itself and accordingly work to eliminate its significance in

⁹² Winant, Howard. "White Racial Projects." *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. By Rasmussen Birgit. Brander. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001), 97.

⁹³ Ibid.

constraining “the ‘life-chance’ of racially defined minority groups.”⁹⁴ In other words, while those involved in the liberal racial project are committed to ideas of racial equality, they understand the path to equality as remedying the ways in which race has been negatively used in the past by moving “beyond” race and eventually eliminating it. Beacon teachers’ suggestion of doing outreach and providing tutoring services in Black and Latina/o schools reflect the ideas of the liberal racial project, as they seek to address ways in which they see race as affecting these students’ ability to compete as individuals in the admissions process, and provide them the equal opportunity to do so. Framing the attempts to silence our discussion of race within the liberal racial project, it is clear that our challenges to the admissions process on racial terms may have gone against the teachers’ and administrators’ own understandings of racial equality and how it should be reached.

Tearing the School Apart: Race as Divisive

Contextualizing Beacon teachers and administrators’ actions within the liberal white racial project, it is easier to understand their intense opposition to our organizing. Coming from an understanding of race as a problem to overcome and the individual as the fundamental unit in U.S. society, the organizing group’s efforts to discuss race in Beacon were viewed as divisive and destructive to the creation of a cohesive and equal community. On a sunny day in June, days before the forum would be held, I received an email from a fellow student alerting all the event organizers to a conversation that was happening on our school’s online public forum, which was available for all students, staff, and alumni to bring up topics of their choice for

⁹⁴ Ibid, 105.

online dialogue. Apparently a few teachers had begun to post about our organizing in an attempt to reach a wider audience and gain student support against us. I quickly logged on to find a number of posts already accumulating. The first one was from one of my own teachers. She wrote: “Whether intentional or not, the forum is creating a lot of bad energy around Beacon-- hate, accusations, sides. This is not what Beacon is about. The Beacon community is one in which we work together. The forum will turn out to be a bashing fest against Beacon's ‘racist’ policies.”⁹⁵ In a later email, another student described a similar interaction with a teacher in which the student brought up the possibility of critically examining into the admissions process and the teacher “cut everyone off and started going on about how we were wrong, [saying that] there was diversity in Beacon and all we want to do is ‘philosophize’ and make [the principal] cry.”⁹⁶ Such examples demonstrate that these teachers viewed our discussion of race as a concerted effort to cause difficulty and harm to the community.

In her ethnographic work on the silencing of racial discussion within schools, Angelina Castagno found that this kind of reluctance to talk about potentially controversial subjects is widespread. Castagno argues that race is not an accepted discourse in schools because many educators “attach individual action and feelings” to words that mark racial identity and racial inequality “rather than attaching meaning about structures and systems of oppression....As a result, the words become taboo.”⁹⁷ In other words, educators discourage and even actively silence discussions relating to

⁹⁵ Email to Cory Meara-Bainbridge from fellow student. 3 June 2009.

⁹⁶ “Draft of Letter to Vince Brevetti.” Email to Cory Meara-Bainbridge from fellow student. 27 Oct. 2009.

⁹⁷ Castagno, Angelina E. “‘I Don’t Want to Hear That!’: Legitimizing Whiteness through Silence in Schools.” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 39.3 (2008): 314-333. *JSTOR*. Web. 23 Jun. 2012, 319.

race because they view them as impolite or attacking personal comments, rather than critiques or remarks on larger systems of inequality. What seems evident in the online forum exchanges is that this type of attachment of feelings was taking place, as both teachers who posted perceived our arguments about race and the admissions system as geared towards individuals and their actions. They did not recognize possible structural issues in our critiques and instead described student organizers' goals as accusing individuals of racism and demonizing the principal. Furthermore, the use of quotation marks around the word "racist" by the first teacher aims to dissociate the inequalities within the schools' policies from racial inequities, sending the message "that race and racism are either nonexistent – figments, perhaps of the students imaginations – or unnecessary topics of thought and conversation – something students use to try to divert attention or stir up controversy"⁹⁸

In her research, Ruth Frankenberg also found that many of the white people she worked with saw race as divisive, and therefore found ways to talk about it that diminished the significance of racial power dynamics. In her ethnographic work on white women in California, Frankenberg interviewed thirty women in the San Francisco area, asking them about their childhood experiences in order to understand how they had formed their conceptions of the racial identities of themselves and others.⁹⁹ She found that these women used three different types of discourses to approach discussions of race. The one that was overwhelmingly common was a "color- and power-evasive" discourse, which comprised of "euphemisms and partial descriptions that skirt around dimensions of race that may cause the speaker to feel

⁹⁸ Ibid, 324.

⁹⁹ Frankenberg qtd by Hartigan, *Race in the 21st Century*, 92.

uncomfortable. Often these are used to express a desire to overcome interracial hostility.”¹⁰⁰ Almost all of the language used by defenders of the Beacon admissions process can be classified as color- and power-evasive discourse. This was especially clear in the teacher’s forum post, which denounces any critique of the school’s process by affirming that “The Beacon community is one in which we work together.” With this comment the teacher seeks to erase any fissures or systemic problems in the school in an effort to claim community and build commonality. In line with the liberal white racial project, she shows a desire to diminish the significance of race by creating a cohesive and unified community. Yet ignoring racial issues does not mean that they disappear. According to Hartigan, “the stress on commonality – certainly to be valorized over blatantly racist expressions – still needs to be examined in terms of its impact on whether or not we recognize or take seriously the power differentials engendered by race.”¹⁰¹ While the teacher’s statement seems to admirably bring the school community together across racial lines in the face of “bad energy,” the use of non-specific negatively connoted words such as “hate” and “accusations” are used to displace the terms of debate onto a personal plane and to ignore the issues that do threaten our community – mainly institutionalized racism – which may be much worse for some students than attending a school with “bad energy.”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 94.

¹⁰¹ Hartigan, *Race in the 21st Century*, 94.

Diverse and (Un)Equal

While silencing was the overwhelming response to our organizing, in the moments when we could break through the silence, our discussions were always framed through the lens of “diversity.” One afternoon during that spring, one of my close friends, who was involved in the organizing of the forum, sent a long email to the diversity group expressing his confusion after a conversation he had had with one of the Beacon teachers. They had spent the afternoon speaking about the admissions process and the changing demographics. The teacher had been at Beacon since its inception and stood firmly with the administration against our organizing and the type of dialogue that we had been creating. My friend explained that while he knew at heart that what was going on at Beacon was a problem, the teacher’s arguments about why the school was changing and why what we were doing was not effective had made sense to him, that now he wasn’t sure how to respond, or if we were even right in our actions.

All of the teacher’s arguments were well within a progressive framework that valued racial and economic equity. Yet somehow he argued that the declining numbers of students of color and low-income students wasn’t something that we should be getting angry about, since Beacon was still one of the most diverse schools in New York. He argued that we were criticizing a school that was actually doing good work. Hearing of this conversation from my close friend, I also felt confused about what we were doing. Looking back, I now realize that it was a problem of communication that gave this teacher’s argument such power, allowing him to so quickly dismiss the issue that we found so imperative. While both my friend and the

teacher had quickly agreed on the value and importance of “diversity,” neither of them had defined this term, and upon closer examination, it is clear that their understandings of this idea do not align.

Throughout the admissions controversy at Beacon, arguments from all sides were rooted in the importance of diversity, and whether or not our school was diverse or should be more diverse. This included those of us challenging the admissions process, and in fact the informal group of teachers, parents, and students who began organizing to change the process began calling ourselves “The Diversity Group.” We framed our main argument as an opposition to decreasing racial and economic diversity in our school, as the understanding of racial equality that we had learned was based in a multicultural framework that recognized the presence of many different racial groups together as a sign of equality. The notion of “diversity” is compatible with the dominant cultural tenet of individualism in the U.S., as it affirms and values the uniqueness of each individual without placing them within a larger systemic context in which advantage and disadvantage are assigned based on group membership.

Teachers and administrators responded directly to our language, catching us in our non-specificity. When a student tried to bring up the issue of diversity in the newly formed “Outreach Club,” the club advisor stopped him, sharply responding: “There is diversity at Beacon, even if you don’t think there is.”¹⁰² Another teacher posted on the forum: “Give Beacon and its director some credit for the diversity they have fostered and the superior education they have provided for thousands of students

¹⁰² “Draft of Letter to Vince Brevetti.” Email to Cory Meara-Bainbridge from fellow student. 27 Oct. 2009.

from all walks of life.”¹⁰³ Because of the lack of specificity in the term “diversity,” it was impossible to win an argument about whether or not the school was diverse. In the absence of a common definition of what diversity actually looks like, our conversations continued in circles, cutting off productive discussion about systemic inequality. As there is no set definition or image of what a successfully “diverse” school looks like, the teachers and student organizers talked past each other, as we were both speaking truth to what we observed and how we perceived our school. The teacher’s description on the online forum of the school as having students from “all walks of life” suggests an individualistic understanding of diversity and equality, as it positively highlights the diverse individual experiences of Beacon students, without acknowledging these individuals membership in groups with specific histories of oppression and privilege. By this definition, Beacon is in fact a diverse school – racially, economically, and in various other aspects – as there are indeed students from many (all though definitely not all) “walks of life.” Compared to schools in other parts of the country that are almost completely white, or in other parts of the city that are 80 or 90% Black and Latina/o, Beacon can be said to have a large diversity of students, racially and otherwise.

However, while Beacon fit these teachers’ definition of “diverse,” it did not fit ours. In retrospect I can see that, despite the fact that it was our word of choice, we were not actually trying to talk about diversity. As it was what we had been taught through years of “diversity days” and programs valuing “cultural competence” in our schools, camps, and afterschool programs, we defaulted to the language of multiculturalism, falling into the trap of conflating lack of diversity with inequality.

¹⁰³ Email to Cory Meara-Bainbridge from fellow student. 3 June 2009.

While we found ourselves scrambling to hold our ground with arguments about diverse learning environments, when we spoke amongst ourselves, it was clear that the real issue had to do with questions of access and exclusion. Although the white student population at Beacon was only about 50% of the student body, hardly constituting an overwhelming majority, in a high school system that is only 12.1% white students, this constitutes a serious overrepresentation. Furthermore, only 18% of Beacon students were eligible for free lunch¹⁰⁴ (and therefore living below the poverty line), in comparison with 67% of the entire high school system.¹⁰⁵ So while the school may have been considered a diverse learning environment, as a selective and high performing school it was not providing equal access to high quality education for students of color and low-income students.

The discourse of diversity centers the conversation on the current students in the school, rather than the greater school system. It focuses on whether or not the school is integrated and mixed enough to create a “stronger and more heterogeneous learning community” as Deputy Chancellor Eric Nadelstern explained in a letter to a Beacon alum. Yet while having a heterogeneous learning community is important, this type of discussion ignores the school’s role in the larger system, and the sociological processes at play around and within it. Regardless of how Beacon’s racial and economic demographics affect the quality of education, the more important issue is that its admissions process helps perpetuate unequal access to the high-quality

¹⁰⁴ United States. New York State Testing and Accountability Report Tool. Report Cards. *The New York State School Report Card: Beacon High School*. The New York State Education Department, 29 Jan. 2010. Web. 26 Feb. 2011. <<https://reportcards.nysed.gov/files/2010-11/AOR-2011-310300011479.pdf>>.

¹⁰⁵ "New York City Public School Indicators." New York City Independent Budget Office. 2011. Web. 20 Dec. 2012. <www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/2011edindicatorsreport.pdf>.

schooling that they provide. This situation is much more dire considering the hierarchy of schools in which Beacon fits very close to the top. A discussion focusing on “diversity” did not allow us to see that Beacon and other schools like it may very possibly be actively excluding students of color and low-income students without intending to. Regardless of the teachers and administrators’ expressed commitment to equity, their individualistic understanding of equality prevented them from recognizing the structural issues at play, thereby causing them to defend a system that protected and maintained white privilege.

Students of Color as Uninformed and Unprepared

Beyond understanding our school as being already diverse and therefore equal, the defenders of the admissions process also made clear that any decline in Beacon’s diversity was not the fault of the admissions process. As I continued to read the lengthy online forum discussion, another post caught my attention. A Spanish teacher had written the following, recounting an experience of hers:

I was working at Open House tonight and out of a few hundred people that I met, there were about 5 African-American students that visited my room. What does that mean? It can mean that it has NOTHING to do with the Beacon selection process but rather with whom [sic] is applying. It is a great idea that we should be reaching out to more middle schools and introducing them to Beacon and tutoring them on the selection process. To make this happen, I encourage the students to work with administration and be part of a team to achieve change in a positive and productive way that we can all feel good about as part of the Beacon community.¹⁰⁶

In this post, the teacher seems to agree that the decline in the number of students of color (or at least Black students) that are admitted to Beacon is a problem. Yet she assures us that this can’t possibly have to do with the actual admissions

¹⁰⁶ Email to Cory Meara-Bainbridge from fellow student. 3 June 2009.

process, based on the fact that she did not see many students of color at the informational event that the school hosted for perspective students. Despite not having any information about the actual number of students of color that applied to the school, the teacher is quick to jump to one solution: outreach to better inform and prepare students of color to apply to Beacon.

The teacher's story reminded me of multiple letters we had received from DOE officials in response to our complaints about Beacon's decreasing number of students of color and low-income students. Similar to the teacher's post, almost all of the officials responded to our concerns by laying out a plan of action based on outreach. In a letter to an Beacon alumna, then Deputy Chancellor Eric Nadelstern informed the concerned student that, "Principal Ruth Lacey has worked with our Office of Student Enrollment to extend the school's outreach efforts as a means of maintaining and building on the diversity that currently exists."¹⁰⁷

During the entirety of the conflict, the only plan of action that was accepted as a possibility by the school administration and the Department of Education was expanded outreach to middle schools with underrepresented students. As their sole proposal, this suggestion was based on little to no evidence regarding the racial demographics of the applicant pool, as the principal continually told us that they could not use race at all in the admissions process and that they did not have statistics on who was applying. I followed up on this question with the Deputy Chancellor in charge of school enrollment when I interviewed him for my research, and he was unaware of whether such information even existed. While in the Specialized High Schools, the DOE and news media use census data to estimate the racial

¹⁰⁷ Nadelstern, Eric. Email to former Beacon student. 20 Jan. 2010.

demographics of the applicant pool, similar information is not part of policy decisions at the city or school level regarding screened schools, and is not publically available. Knowing this, the Spanish teacher's claim that "it" (lack of diversity/lack of students of color at Beacon) has to do with who is applying can only be seen as guess work. Her suggestion of increased outreach, echoed by Nadelstern, while very possibly a useful suggestion, is therefore based on non-existent data. While it is certainly feasible that there are a lower number of students of color and low-income students applying to Beacon, we do not actually have any way of knowing that. Which leads to the question, why were so many educators and city officials so quick to jump to outreach as the most desirable or only solution?

To understand this we must return to the idea of the defense of the admissions system as a part of the liberal white racial project. As previously explained, Winant defines the liberal white racial project as an attempt to get "beyond race" through an equal opportunity strategy. While this strategy acknowledges the continued effects of racial discrimination on people of color, therefore necessitating the recognition of group membership of non-white people, it does not require the recognition of whiteness. Winant explains that in order to work towards the elimination of race as socially significant, participants in the liberal racial project must "strenuously resist any concept of whiteness that equated it with preservation of 'a sense of group position,' much less with the maintenance of racial privilege."¹⁰⁸ Hartigan argues that it is the cultural dynamics of whiteness that allow for this denial of privilege. Referring to Peggy McIntosh's essay on the pervasiveness of white privilege, Hartigan reminds us of what he describes as a "commonsensical realization," pointing

¹⁰⁸ Winant, "White Racial Projects," 106.

out that, “*if race disadvantages some, it necessarily advantages others.*”¹⁰⁹ This means that in order to create a situation in which race does not *disadvantage* any one group – as is the goal of the liberal white racial project – we must also create a situation in which race does not *advantage* any one group. Hartigan goes on to explain that this condemnation of racial discrimination without recognizing racial privilege is possible precisely because of culture’s ability to “simultaneously make some things obvious and others impossible to see.”¹¹⁰ For the defenders of the admissions process, the cultural dynamics of whiteness made the disadvantaged group status of Black and Latino/a students obvious, making outreach a logical solution. On the other hand, the cultural formation of whites first and foremost as individuals made the group status of white students difficult to recognize. While they were aware that histories of racial discrimination had caused disadvantages to students of color, they failed to recognize that those histories had also privileged white students, and had shaped the school and its admissions process in a way that maintained that privilege.

This focus of racial disadvantage without acknowledging racial advantage paints a picture in which students of color are responsible for lifting themselves up to the level of white students who are seen as having gotten into this high-performing school on entirely their own merits. I was repeatedly told during my time at Beacon that I deserved to be at Beacon on account of my own hard work, and not because of my social positioning. On the other hand, the outreach action plan relied on an imagined idea of a racially defined group of students who are unable to fully realize

¹⁰⁹ Hartigan, *Race in the 21st Century*, 91.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

their potential as individuals as I was, and therefore are in need of our help. The teacher's suggestion on the online forum that current Beacon students tutor students from "more middle school" (read: middle schools with more Black and Latina/o students) and inform them about Beacon suggests that our school is perfect the way it is, and the only problem is that students of color are either not well-informed enough to apply, or not capable enough to get in.

This representation of students of color as not prepared enough to be admitted to or succeed at Beacon was furthered in the worries of teachers and administrators that changes in the admissions system would degrade the educational quality of the school. Further than understanding our concerns with the racial demographics of Beacon as unfounded, as our school already fit their understanding of a "diverse" school, defenders of the admissions process also saw our calls for changing the process as a threat to the school itself. As it was the selective admissions process that gave the school its prestige and reputation as a high-performing school, many defenders of the process argued that changing the admissions system would diminish the quality of education that Beacon provided.

As I readied to start the research for this thesis, I tried many times to contact my former principal and vice principal, but received no response and was not able to speak with any members of the Beacon administration. One of the questions that was in the forefront of my mind as I contemplated that possible conversation with them was why Beacon had decided to switch to a screened process from Educational Options, as I had never heard any reasoning behind the change. Although I was not able to hear it from the decision-makers themselves, a Beacon teacher I was able to

get in touch with gave me his perspective as someone who had witnessed the process and spoken with those in charge of the change. Recounting that moment, the teacher relayed that, “there was a feeling among some of the staff and all of the administration that we were failing to educate the kids with low skills and weren’t fully pushing the kids with higher skills. So they decided that the kids with low skills would be served better elsewhere.”¹¹¹ In other words, Beacon felt that they were not succeeding in educating students with varying academic abilities, and therefore decided to focus their efforts on a smaller category of learners.

The most important part of this explanation, if it indeed accurately represents the rationale for the change, is that although it seems to have the “low-skilled” students’ needs at its center, it makes an obvious choice between the two groups of students. While the staff explain that they were having trouble adequately educating both groups of students, the school only decided to focus on how to better serve one. The administration did not decide to focus on how to best meet the needs of low-performing students and give them the best education they could. They did not suggest that high-performing students could be better served elsewhere, even though there are a fair number of other schools that are specifically dedicated to high-performing students who choose such a track. The Beacon administration suggested that “low-performing” students could be better served elsewhere, but the location of this elsewhere remains unclear. What schools are dedicated to serving the needs of “low-performing students”? What schools set their target audience as students who have been labeled as “low-performing” or “low-skilled” and offer to give them an

¹¹¹ Beacon Teacher. Personal interview conducted by Cory Meara-Bainbridge.

education that's right for them and will help them succeed, as Beacon has ostensibly done for high-performing students?

In my interview with the Deputy Chancellor in charge of student enrollment, he also alluded to the idea of a “right” kind of school for high-performing students and a separate kind for low-performing students. He described his job responsibility as making sure that the system has “the right cocktail” of school seats: “We want to make sure there are enough screened spots, enough unscreened spots, etc. so that there are not a ton of really high-performing students without choices, or a ton of low-performing students without choices.”¹¹² The Deputy Chancellor’s description of the school “cocktail” that he mixes, as well as the teacher’s explanation of Beacon’s reasoning for the change in the admissions process, paint a picture of a system of schools that are all valid and quality choices, where school choice decision just depends on students’ individual needs and preferences, almost similar to the choice between an arts school or a science school. This portrait completely erases the existing hierarchy among New York City high schools, and the fact that most students labeled “low-performing” are in schools also labeled as “low-performing,” which have low graduation rates, over-crowding, few resources, inexperienced teachers, and bad reputations.

In her dissertation on the political economy of the New York City high school admissions system, Madeline Pérez describes the system as a process “during which 100,000 eighth graders vie for spots in eight elite high schools and 500 other high

¹¹² Sternberg, Marc. Personal interview by Cory Meara-Bainbridge. 24 Aug. 2012.

schools.”¹¹³ In a system where the application rates of the schools that are dedicated to high-performing students greatly surpass those of all other schools,¹¹⁴ the broad notion of choice that Sternberg talks about does not hold up, as it is not a matter of preferences between programs, but rather a vying for spots in the very few schools which are seen as successful. It is therefore clear that while Beacon’s reasoning for the admissions change may be well-intentioned, in reality their decision only put one more school out of reach for students deemed “low-performing,” relegating them to a promised, more appropriate “elsewhere” that does not exist. While the privileging of high-performing students and selective admissions is widely accepted in the college admissions process, the high school system differs greatly in that it not only guarantees access to a high school education but in fact mandates it. If schools like Beacon dedicate themselves to a select few, who is responsible for the mandated education of those students labeled as “low-performing?”

The privileging of the idea of high standards is not exclusive to the DOE or Beacon’s administration, which is what allowed them to easily invoke it as a logical explanation for the switch to screened admissions. Even within our organizing group, the same type of language was used in our defense. The flier for the forum that we got in trouble for distributing during my senior year in high school now hangs in my thesis carrel, asking the question, “Can we maintain academic excellence if we open up the admissions process?” I remember that when we created these fliers, we wanted to put up some of the main questions that people had been asking us over and over

¹¹³ Pérez, Madeline. “Two Tales of One City: A Political Economy of the New York City Public High School Admissions Process.” Diss. The City University of New York, 2011. Print. 1.

¹¹⁴ Otterman, "No Matches for Some on High School Decision Day."

again, and that we knew were on the minds students and teachers alike. This flier in particular brings to memory many heated conversations, mostly with teachers, where, attempting to defend my position in an onslaught of criticism, I assured them that we were not trying to “lower our standards,” and that we too wanted to maintain Beacon’s “academic excellence,” arguing that since it was such a great school for us, we just wanted it to be available to others. I was not exempt from cultural conditioning, and the ideas of “high standards” were normalized in my mind as well.

I realize now how caught up we ourselves were in the school system’s language, both because we did not understand the political and theoretical work that was being done with that discourse, and because we were also completely personally intertwined in the world that that language created. For most of us, that system had worked. The normalization of the high value placed on high standards and individual achievement spelled out success. We were at one of the top performing schools in the city, ready to go to some of the top performing colleges in the country, and the language used by the Department of Education and the people in our school implied that we had achieved it, that we deserved it, and that we had choice and control of our lives. We loved our school and we were being told that it was only because of the current admissions system that we had been able to receive the education that we so treasured. As we had no other experience to compare our education to, how could we have argued against that? Looking back at those discussions, I realize just how serious an impact those statements can have when deployed against a young person’s budding understanding of systemic inequality. What appears to be an attempt by teachers to assure that their students have the best education possible really carries a

fear-inducing message that their sense of justice might eventually work to their disadvantage, and that learning with and being around lower achieving students harms them and their education. When this is heard as a response to a call for racial and economic diversity in the school, “low achieving” students becomes synonymous with low-income students and students of color, sending the message that learning with low-income students and students of color prevents you from getting the best education you can get.

Conclusion

While the teachers, administrators, and DOE officials that defended the Beacon admissions process in 2009 were attempting to create a racially equitable system through their own understandings race and equality, their arguments against changing the system and their proposed alternative solutions removed focus from the role of the school in larger systems of inequality, and reproduced representations of people of color as uneducated and therefore responsible for their own exclusion from high-quality education. Their insistence on colorblindness and attempts to move beyond race to an understanding of equality as the inclusion of diverse individuals kept the defenders of the admissions system from recognizing the role of white students in the exclusion of students of color, and the fact that the disadvantage of some necessarily signifies the advantaging of others. As the high schools system is built upon maintained expectations of white privilege, and the decrease of students of color at Beacon was accompanied by an increasing majority status for white students, we cannot address the continued inequality in the school without acknowledging whites

as a racially marked group. This inability to recognize the group position of whites caused the defenders of the admissions process to work against an attempt to challenge the maintenance of white privilege in the school. Therefore, their defenses not only presented racist representations of people of color as academically incapable, but also effectively maintained a school structure that privileged white students. Through their silencing of discussion and insistence on maintaining “high standards,” defenders of the admissions system prevented efforts to reverse the increasing overrepresentation of white students in one of the city’s most prestigious high schools, thereby protecting white interests in the school.

Chapter 2: From Integration to Marketization: Choice as a Tool for (In)Equity

I think the first thing to understand is that all the schools are great and you just have to be able to say which one you really want.

- Deputy Chancellor Dorita Gibson, October 2012

It was my first interview and everything was going wrong. My tape-recorder had stopped working on the trip there and I was struggling to shove in new batteries that I had purchased minutes earlier in hopes of remedying the situation. On top of that, I had forgotten the notebook I usually used and could not even seem to find my pen. When Deputy Chancellor Marc Sternberg stepped out of his office I was a nervous wreck. I was therefore relieved when he began making small talk, asking me about where I was from and my school history. “You’re from Park Slope? I just moved there!” he exclaimed. “Oh really?” I replied with enthusiasm, feeling a little less nervous and hoping that this point of connection would create more ease in the interview. “Yeah,” he continued, “you know my kid is almost at kindergarten age and P.S. 10¹¹⁵ is the school to be at these days.” It took me a moment to put together that he was telling me that he had moved to my expensive, mostly white neighborhood for the deliberate purpose of gaining access to a popular elementary school in the area. “What high school did you go to?” he asked. I told him I had attended Beacon. “That’s a great school,” he replied, “you made a great choice.” I agreed with him, but was left wondering about the choices that each of us had made.

¹¹⁵ “P.S.” stands for public school and is used to mark all elementary schools in New York City.

Sternberg's choice of where his child would attend elementary school was quite obviously facilitated by financial means. As elementary schools in New York City are still assigned by place of residence, where a family lives affects the type and quality of school that they will attend. P.S.10, whose website boasts multiple hefty grants for computers and science and art resources, is a zoned elementary school exclusively for students that live within a designated area of Park Slope.¹¹⁶ Therefore in order to decide to send his child to this popular and well-resourced school, the Deputy Chancellor had to have the ability and resources to move to the neighborhood. My choice, on the other hand was part of the citywide high school admissions system, and was therefore seen as an option open to all students. The current system, in which all students have the option to attend any school they desire, regardless of their place of residence, is meant to address the obvious inequity in the neighborhood system by providing the same options to all students regardless of race or class. Instead of the Department of Education controlling students' school career, the citywide system allows students to choose their own schools based on their interests and desires. This idea of individual, student-driven choice has been at the center of both policy and discourse pertaining to the high school admissions system for the last twenty years. It is one of the foundational tenets of the process, and has been supported as a means to provide agency to all students in their school decisions, limiting structural control from the DOE and assuring that such agency is not only reserved for those who have the resources to relocate, as Sternberg did.

¹¹⁶ P.S.10. "About P.S.10." 2012. <<http://www.ps10.org/about>>.

Yet as I thought about our respective school choices (mine as a student and his as a parent), I wondered if they were really so different. Sternberg's praise of my choice implied that it had been an accomplishment on my part: an intelligent decision and an impressive display of capability. But looking back, my attendance at Beacon was highly mediated by my social position and economic resources. My family's position as white, upper middle class professionals allowed us to live easily and comfortably in the neighborhood that Sternberg had just moved to. Although we did not move there for access to elementary school, our residence in Park Slope facilitated my attendance to the neighborhood middle school, which in turn acted as an informal feeder school to the Beacon School. Despite the hour-long commute between my neighborhood and Beacon, about 10% of the incoming class at Beacon in 2006 had attended my middle school, and by the following year that number increased to almost 20%.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, throughout the admissions process, my parents had taken off time from work to take me on tours, used their knowledge gained through experience with college admissions processes to help me perfect my essays, and paid for a private test preparation class. No one would tell Sternberg's son that he had made a "good choice" of elementary school, since his attendance there would seem to be obviously due to his father's determination and resources. Yet while I personally wrote "The Beacon School" on my high school application form, is it anymore accurate or appropriate to congratulate me on this choice?

¹¹⁷ These are informal numbers from personal experience, but are based on actual counts. As many parents from my neighborhood were constantly talking about how to get into specific high schools, there was ongoing conversation about which schools accepted what students. My freshman year we counted that at least 25 students in my grade had attended my middle school (out of 250), and the following year, almost 50 of the incoming freshman came from that Park Slope school.

“School choice” – a term used to describe any programs that provide alternatives to residentially-assigned schools – for the most part began in New York City in direct response to State-mandated desegregation, and was used as a tool to achieve racial integration within a highly segregated school system. Over forty years later, the DOE still recognizes school choice as part of their ongoing efforts to address educational inequality, but through the expansion of individual choice in a marketplace of schools rather than through city-controlled integration. Framing students as empowered agents within their own education, the DOE promotes an egalitarian image of the high school admissions system in which, as Deputy Chancellor Gibson explains in the epigraph above, “you just have to be able to say which [school] you really want.”¹¹⁸ However, as the New York City system has a clear hierarchy of schools in which some are ranked very highly, and some are labeled as “failing,” the choice is not so simple. After my conversation with Deputy Chancellor Sternberg I was left with the question: If my attendance at Beacon was due to my “great choice” as Sternberg put it, does that mean that a student who attends a failing school is only there because of a “poor choice”? While giving agency to students and families allows them more control over their own educational careers, the DOE’s focus on this agency obscures the control that the schools still have in the choice process, thereby placing blame on those who end up at the bottom in a system still rife with inequality.

In this chapter I will examine the use of school choice programs and policies in the New York City high school admissions system, both historically and currently. I will lay out the historical trajectory of high school admissions from the first moves

¹¹⁸ Gibson, Dorita. Personal interview conducted by Cory Meara-Bainbridge. 15 Oct. 2012.

away from a neighborhood system in the Plan for Integration in 1955, tracing the transformation to a completely citywide system. I will furthermore examine the discursive shift in the Board of Ed./DOE that accompanied this transformation, from a discourse of integration to a colorblind discourse of individual choice. Lastly, I will analyze the Department of Education's current understanding and use of student choice in the admissions process, unpacking the political and social processes that have shaped it at both a local and national level and examining some of the implications of the centrality of choice in the admissions process.

I argue that the Board of Ed./DOE's strategies for addressing inequality and their use of school choice programs have been situated within the contemporary political and legal climate. As these strategies have been in accordance with dominant political trends, they have received little challenge, regardless of their actual ability to affect change and create equality. However, such efforts have in reality done little to dismantle white privilege, allowing New York City high schools to remain segregated and unequal until present day. Following the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the New York City Board of Education denounced the segregation and inequality in their schools and sought to address it in the manner that the court decision called for: integration. However, I use Cheryl Harris's critique of the decision in *Brown* to argue that the city's Plan for Integration did not in fact require or lead to any substantive forms of equality for students of color, and in fact led to their exclusion from some of the most popular high schools. Similarly, the DOE's current understanding of equality, which consists of colorblind, student-empowered choice and school competition, directly correlates to a larger

trend of marketization and privatization of U.S. education, as well as a move towards neoliberal politics in both domestic and foreign policy. Yet while the privileging of student choice fits into current dominant understandings of equality as expanded individual agency, this policy has also failed to create meaningful moves towards material racial equality. It instead has obscured the structural power of the schools, taking responsibility for inequality away from the DOE and placing it on students of color. While both of these policies – city controlled quota-based integration, and student-driven citywide choice – prohibit the deliberate exclusion of students of color and low-income students from quality educational resources, neither of them have guaranteed access to such resources, and therefore have ultimately maintained white privilege in New York City high schools.

Choice as a Tool for Integration

As discussed in the introduction, 1955 marked the implementation of the New York City's Plan for Integration. Before this moment, which forced the city to assess and revise their system, the vast majority of New York City high schools were neighborhood schools.¹¹⁹ Although the original three Specialized High Schools have existed since the beginning of the 20th century, drawing elite students from across the city,¹²⁰ and many vocational were present in the first half of the century,¹²¹ the majority of students went to their zoned school, assigned to them based on their place

¹¹⁹ New York City Board of Education. *Directory of New York City Public High Schools, 1964-65*. 1964. Print, 4.

¹²⁰ The 3 original Specialized Science high schools, which are now regarded as the most prestigious schools in the city opened in the early 1900s: Stuyvesant in 1904, Brooklyn Tech in 1922, and Bronx Science in 1937 ("Timeline." *The Campaign for Stuyvesant*.)

¹²¹ New York City Board of Education. *Directory of New York City Public High Schools, 1964-65*.

of residence. This means that there was no choice involved in school assignment. Unless a student decided to attend a specific program due to a special interest, they would be assigned to the high school in their neighborhood, no applications necessary.

For the most part the citywide system began to form as a part of the Plan for Integration. At the moment of inception, the Plan proposed an Open Enrollment program, which would allow students of color to enroll in schools outside of their district if they found their own school inadequate, and high school dezoning, which would start the process of uncoupling high school admissions with residential zones, allowing all students to attend high schools outside of their neighborhood.¹²² However, although non-zoned options began to increase with the addition of these special programs, such options continued to be exceptions to the norm and the majority of students remained in their zoned schools.¹²³

Most of the admissions programs created in the coming years continued to have the explicit purpose of racial integration, or explicitly listed race as a factor in the process. Rather than creating new policies for the entire system, the Board of Ed. worked on a case-by-case basis, creating plans for specific areas and schools that were defined as “exclusively minority” (i.e exclusively non-white students) in an attempt to integrate them.¹²⁴ For example, in the case of Andrew Jackson High School, a predominantly Black high school in Queens, the Board of Ed. implemented

¹²² Swanson, *The Struggle for Equality*, 6.

¹²³ New York City Board of Education. *Directory of New York City Public High Schools, 1974-75*. 1974. Print.

¹²⁴ United States Court of Appeals, Second Circuit. *Parent Association of Andrew Jackson High School v. Ambach*. 738 F.2d 574. 16 Jul. 1984. Web. 10 Nov. 2012. <<http://ftp.resource.org/courts.gov/c/F2/738/738.F2d.574.83-7704.83-7670.553.677.html>>.

a series of strategies in a maintained effort to integrate the school. They first allowed students from the school's attendance zone to attend other high schools in Queens. They then extended the Andrew Jackson's mandatory assignment zone into a white area, thereby assigning white students to the school.¹²⁵ In 1976, when none of these plans had shown any success, the Board of Ed. moved away from integrating the school – a seemingly impossible task – and focused instead on giving its students other options. They felt they had failed to adequately racially diversify the school, which remained almost entirely Black, leaving students in an educational setting that had been deemed inherently unequal by the Supreme Court. They therefore created the Choice of Admissions plan (or the Controlled Rate of Change Plan) for both Andrew Jackson and Erasmus Hall¹²⁶ – another “exclusively minority” high school - allowing Black and Latina/o students within the attendance zone of the schools to attend any school in the city with over 50% white students, and allowing white students in the same attendance zone to attend any school in the city with less than 50% white students.¹²⁷ This plan created much controversy, leading to a lawsuit from the Andrew Jackson's Parents Association, which accused the Chancellor and the State Education Commissioner of de jure segregation, as while this plan provided

¹²⁵ United States Court of Appeals, Second Circuit. *Parent Association of Andrew Jackson High School v. Ambach*. 598 F.2d 705. April 17, 1979.

<<https://law.resource.org/pub/us/case/reporter/F2/598/598.F2d.705.78-7308.78-7307.78-7274.362.365.html>>

¹²⁶ “To provide for expansion of the Choice of Admissions program and for opportunities on a long-range basis for interracial educational experiences for students of all races residing within the Erasmus Hall and Andrew Jackson attendance zones.” (“Ed. Board Expands Admissions.” *Home Reporter and Sunset News*, 23 Jul. 1976. Print.)

¹²⁷ United States Court of Appeals, Second Circuit, *Parent Association of Andrew Jackson High School v. Ambach*, 23-24.

alternative options for Andre Jackson students, it left those who remained in the school in a situation of intense segregation.¹²⁸

The Board of Ed. continued to use similar plans for other schools and areas deemed “exclusively minority,” allowing many students to choose schools other than their zoned schools for the first time. In response to a federal court order to integrate Franklin K. Lane High School in Canarsie, Brooklyn,¹²⁹ The Board of Ed. created another Choice of Admissions program for both Franklin and Canarsie High School.¹³⁰ Furthermore, many other Academic-Comprehensive schools in Brooklyn were included in a new Open Admissions Program, allowing students to choose between any of the participating schools based on availability of seats.¹³¹ By the 1981-1982 school year, the High School Directory listed twenty-one Open Admissions and Choice of Admissions programs across the city, now collectively referred to as High School Optional Programs.¹³² In 1984 the number of High School Optional programs rose to twenty-six, and the High School Directory still described the goal of the program as to “bring about improved integration, where possible, and/or give eligible students a wider choice of high schools.”¹³³ These programs were a direct response to the Plan for Integration, and the continuous increase in the number of such programs illustrates the Board of Ed.’s ongoing use of school choice as a tool for racial integration. However, while student school choice was continuing

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Gershowitz, Mike. "High Schools May Be Rezoned to Deal with 'Problems'." *L.I. Press*, 19 Dec. 1974. Print.

¹³⁰ The New York City Board of Education. "High School Memorandum." 11 Jun. 1976.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² New York City Board of Education. *Directory of New York City Public High Schools, 1981-82*. 1981. Print.

¹³³ New York City Board of Education. *Directory of New York City Public High Schools, 1984-85*. 1984. Print. 12.

to be used as a method of integration, it was also beginning to be recognized as useful for other purposes.

The number of schools that admitted students through choice programs increased rapidly in New York City in the 1970s, including some new selective ones that did not admit students solely based on racial demographics, but instead evaluated students based on academic records. Around the same time as the Choice of Admissions program was created, the Board of Ed. introduced the Educational Options (Ed. Op.) program, which also allowed students to apply outside of their residential zoning, but without the explicit goal of racial integration. An admissions process that still exists, Ed. Op. began as a very different program than it is today, starting as an admissions process used in a few small programs within small schools. The 1974 high school directory described it the implementation of the first Ed. Op. program: “Several academic-comprehensive high schools are developing one or more special programs or schools-within-the-school, each with a major curriculum concentration.”¹³⁴ These programs were created to improve student achievement through small interest-oriented clusters that were thought to foster group identification between the students, and the 1974-1975 High School Directory lists “availability of seating, ease of transportation, ethnicity, and student motivation toward the program” as the criteria for admission for the eleven new choices.¹³⁵ Whereas all of the previous programs had racial integration as their sole objective, here it is not listed, although ethnicity, which is often incorrectly used

¹³⁴ New York City Board of Education. *Directory of New York City Public High Schools, 1974-75*. 1974. Print.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

interchangeably with race, is listed as one of multiple factors taken into account in admissions.

A few years later the admissions process for Ed. Op. programs was changed to ensure the admission of students with varying levels of demonstrated academic achievement. Although the schools were allowed to select the students for their program, their admitted class must be within the parameters of 25% students who were functioning above grade level, 50% students who were functioning at grade level, and 25% students who were functioning below grade level.¹³⁶ These percentages still exist within the Ed. Op. programs under the current system.

The Ed. Op. programs were highly desired in the years following their creation, and the Board of Ed continued to expand them, creating more and more specialized programs within large zoned schools. Eventually entire schools used the Ed. Op. admissions process. In 1979 the Board's committee on High School Programs and Admissions recommended that they, "expedite replication of educational options and vocational programs that students find attractive."¹³⁷ By 1980, twenty one schools had Ed. Op. programs,¹³⁸ and by 1989 there were 156, accounting for 39% of all the city's high school programs.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ New York City Board of Education. *Directory of New York City Public High Schools, 1984-85*. 1984. Print.

¹³⁷ New York City Board of Education. Meeting Minutes: Board Meeting December 5, 1979. 5 Dec. 1979. Print.

¹³⁸ New York City Board of Education. *Directory of New York City Public High Schools, 1980-81*. 1980. Print.

¹³⁹ Green, Richard R. "Memorandum to Members of the Board of Education, Re: Effect of High School Admission Policy on Schools and Draft 'Resolution Authorizing the Chancellor to Implement Certain Policies and Procedures With Regard to High School Admissions, Integration, and Quality Education.'" The New York City Board of Education. 9 Mar. 1989. Print.

Integration or Exclusion?

Although the Board of Ed. created expansive plans and spent an extended amount of time and resources on working to racially integrate schools throughout the 1960s and 1970s, this strategy was largely unsuccessful in eliminating racial inequity in the high school system. While the end to legal segregation and the court mandate for school integration in *Brown v. Board of Education* is generally considered a major success for racial equality, Cheryl Harris begs to differ. In her careful demonstration of the ways in which whiteness legally functions as a form of property, Harris argues that while that the decision in *Brown* did mark a significant change in the way in which whiteness was viewed, the property interest in whiteness remained intact. Referring to *Brown*'s "mixed legacy,"¹⁴⁰ she explains that although the decision prohibited overt exclusion and discrimination, it also failed to guarantee inclusion and equality for children of color. While the Court acknowledged that segregation was "inherently unequal," it also "assumed that the problem of inequality would be eradicated by desegregation."¹⁴¹ They refused to continue legally recognizing whites' right to exclude students of color from their schools, but also remained "unwilling to acknowledge any right to equality of resources."¹⁴² This created a legal precedent in which the government had no legal obligation to eradicate inequalities in educational resources, as long as they were not actively working to further those inequalities. Harris argues that in this failure to address the existing racial disparities that were entrenched through centuries of white domination, the Court established this state of

¹⁴⁰ Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness As Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (1993): 1707-791. JSTOR. Web. 28 Jan. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1341787>>, 1757.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 1754.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 1751.

inequality as a “neutral state,”¹⁴³ and an “acceptable base line.”¹⁴⁴ While the State were no longer allowed to further the project of white domination, they were not required to actively work to dismantle the material inequality already in affect, or the many existing privileges afforded to white people.

The consequences of Harris’s critiques are visible in New York City’s experience with integration, as while the DOE assured that students of color could attend schools that had previously been almost entirely white, this did not greatly increase these students’ access to high quality schools. In 1985, the advocacy organization Advocates for Children of New York (AFC) made evident the Plan for Integration’s failure to meaningfully address inequality in a report critiquing the high school admissions system. The report specifically focused on programs that were not zoned for students from specific neighborhoods (unzoned programs), almost all of which had been created in the thirty years prior as part of the city’s effort to racially integrate schools.

Among other things, the report, titled “Public High Schools: Private Admissions,” found that some of the selective unzoned programs had acceptance rates as low as 5%, and that students from neighborhoods with high numbers of people of color were accepted to these programs at “drastically lower rates” than students from predominantly white areas.¹⁴⁵ While students of color now technically had access to this educational opportunity that was previously unavailable when all

¹⁴³ Ibid, 1715.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 1753.

¹⁴⁵ Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. "Public High Schools: Private Admissions - a Report on New York City Practices." 1985. Web. 17 Oct. 2012. <http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/public_hs_1_of_3_1985.pdf?pt=1> , 3.

students attended neighborhood schools, in reality, the resource was not guaranteed and they were still being excluded. This was due to a number of factors. First of all, Advocates for Children found that while the city's High School Division worked with the unzoned schools to choose which selection process they would use (screened, unscreened, or Ed. Op.), within the basic model chosen with the Board of Ed., the school could choose whatever criteria they wanted with little to no oversight.¹⁴⁶ This meant that screened schools and Ed. Op. schools could use a multitude of criteria in their admissions decisions, chosen entirely at their own discretion.

AFC's investigation found that criteria were not standardized across schools, and that some criteria were highly subject to bias on the part of the selectors. Within the parameters of each basic selection process, the report found that schools almost always chose the students with the best grades and attendance records possible. As these schools were now open to all students due to the implementation of school choice, and the Board of Ed. actively promoted them as viable options for students of color who were in highly segregated schools, the city had fulfilled their legal obligation to integration. There were in fact some students of color in the selective schools, and others were encouraged to apply. Yet the school-specific selection processes used to admit students to these schools allowed them to maintain white-dominated schools while claiming to be open to all. As long as students of color supposedly had equal access to desegregated schools, the Board of Ed. was not obligated to ensure that they actually received equal educational resources.

Advocates for Children further reported that the quotas in the city's integration policy itself were causing such schools to favor white applicants, and in turn deny

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

spots to Black and Latina/o students.¹⁴⁷ The Choice of Admissions Plan in 1976 indicated that students transferring from their zoned school could only be given seats in schools that were over 50% white.¹⁴⁸ The Board of Ed. fixed the 50% mark at the time of the plan's creation as the supposed "tipping point" at which white families would begin to flee public schools.¹⁴⁹ This stipulation assured that a certain number of schools would remain mostly white. At the time of adoption, this quota more or less constituted a reflection of citywide racial demographics, as 49.4% of New York City school students were white.¹⁵⁰ However, by 1986, the white population in the public school system had dropped to 24%. This meant that there were actually very few schools that non-white students could attend, and schools were pushed to accept white students over others as to not fall below the 50% "tipping point."¹⁵¹ Although it appeared that students zoned for all Black and Latina/o schools could always choose to go somewhere else, in reality only ten out of New York's 117 schools contained over 50% white students and therefore fit the racial criteria that would allow Black and Latina/o students to attend.¹⁵² Because the racial demographics of the system had shifted significantly, the city's integration policy had in fact been impeding racial integration and excluding non-white students from the more desired and higher performing schools. The quotas created at the time of the Plan for Integration no

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 14-20.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 25.

¹⁴⁹ "New York City Considers Ending Its High School Integration Plan" by Neil A. Lewis (August 17, 1988). <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/17/nyregion/new-york-city-considers-ending-its-high-school-integration-plan.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

¹⁵⁰ Tobier, Emanuel. "Schooling in New York City: The Socioeconomic Context." *City Schools: Lessons From New York*. Ed. by Ravitch, Diane and Joseph p. Viteritti. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 23.

¹⁵¹ Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., "Public High Schools: Private Admissions."

¹⁵² Ibid.

longer applied as a school with 50% white students now constituted an overrepresentation. Since white students were needed at most schools in order to reach the policy's definition of an integrated school, the selective schools were more likely to choose them to maintain their racial balance.

The effects of these quotas are a clear illustration of Harris's critique of integration as a means of addressing racial inequality. While the quotas implemented in the Choice of Admissions Plan did in fact create racial integration as required by the decision in *Brown v. Board of Ed*, they did little to substantially address the deeply engrained inequality of resources in the New York City high school system, and in fact ended up working against that goal. It is clear within this example that using integration as a singular strategy without examining the system as a whole and discerning what is needed to equalize resource distribution is wholly ineffective. Furthermore, this case demonstrates the Board of Education's acceptance of white privilege as a neutral state, as the choice of the 50% mark for white students accepts the validity of whites' expectations of certain schools as reserved for them, thereby literally protecting their right to 50% of the schools that white families chose to attend.

In 1986, in response to Advocate for Children's report, the Board of Ed changed the system for Ed. Op. programs, retracting some of the schools' decision-making power in the process. The required percentages of students of varying levels remained, but within that format, the schools were now only allowed to hand-select 50% of the students that were admitted. The other half would be selected at random

by a computer.¹⁵³ In 1989 the Chancellor's Task Force on School Integration reported that the change from complete school autonomy to random computer-run assignment had indeed increased access to Ed. Op. programs for students of color, indicating that the Ed. Op. schools' choice biases had in fact been excluding them.¹⁵⁴ The following year, the Board of Ed. adopted policies that prohibited unzoned schools from using locally administered tests, interviews, and parental interest as criteria for screened admissions in a further effort to prevent such discrimination.¹⁵⁵

An End to Formal Integration and a Move Towards Choice

In its denunciation of continued racial segregation, AFC's report also led to a critique of the integration plan itself. In 1988 the Board of Ed. moved to reevaluate the integration policy that served as the basis of the High School Optional Programs and zoning procedures. Rather than moving away from integration, the review was meant to address continued segregation, and figure out how to create more significant racial integration in a larger number of schools. In a quote for a *Newsday* article, then President of the Board of Ed., Robert F. Wagner explained, "We are pro-integration as a policy but I have a fear that the way we're now doing it doesn't promote meaningful integration."¹⁵⁶ Wagner referred to the same argument that Advocates for

¹⁵³ Memorandum: to Members of the Board of Education, from Chancellor Richaard R. Green, Re: Effect of High School Admission Policy on Schools and Draft 'Resolution Authorizing the Chancellor to Implement Certain Policies and Procedures With Regard to High School Admissions, Integration, and Quality Education'" (Mar 9, 1989)

¹⁵⁴ Green, "Memorandum to Members of the Board of Education, Re: Effect of High School Admission Policy on Schools."

¹⁵⁵ Green, Richard R. "Memorandum to Members of the Board of Education, Re: High School Admissions Policies." The New York City Board of Education. 15 Aug. 1988. Print.

¹⁵⁶ Sachar, Emily. "Board to Review Race Quotas: Minority Isolation Targeted." *Newsday*, 13 Jul. 1988. Print.

Children had made, explaining that the policy was actually preventing Black and Latina/o students from accessing many schools.¹⁵⁷

Although the Board did not eliminate High School Optional programs, they drastically changed their focus and priority, quickly moving away from quota based integration. Until then the number of High School Optional programs had consistently grown. However, after the 1988-89 reevaluation the numbers quickly began dropping, with only sixteen High School Optional programs available in the 1990-1991 school year¹⁵⁸ and with only three remaining by 1995.¹⁵⁹ While the Board of Ed. still spoke in terms of what would provide the most access for Black and Latina/o students, the reevaluation saw a sharp move away from explicit integration policy, as they resolved that, “The highest priority governing admissions to the City High Schools shall be the need and commitment to ensure quality educational services to all students in all schools.”¹⁶⁰ They also expressed a “commitment to educational options programs and other unzoned programs in the city’s high schools,” as student choice was seen as a “desirable means to foster competition and program excellence throughout the City’s high schools in order to increase student attendance and improve academic performance.”¹⁶¹ Finally, The Board of Ed. decided that while many zoned schools would no longer use race as a deciding factor of admittance, unzoned programs (specialized programs which required special applications) would not consider race or

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ New York City Board of Education. *Directory of New York City Public High Schools, 1990-91*. 1990. Print.

¹⁵⁹ New York City Board of Education. *Directory of New York City Public High Schools, 1995-96*. 1995. Print.

¹⁶⁰ Green, “Memorandum to Members of the Board of Education, Re: Effect of High School Admission Policy on Schools.”

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

ethnicity at all.¹⁶² This signals a decided shift towards colorblind choice as a main priority and strategy to address inequality as opposed to race based quotas. Furthermore, it alludes to the beginnings of an understanding of the school system as a market place in which choice works to “foster competition” between schools. While the policy is still openly attempting to fight racial segregation, integration is now articulated as an end, while choice is the means.

While the Board of Ed. continued create new programs at a fast pace throughout the second half of the century, their discourse mostly remained centered around the zone school. The 1984-85 High School Directory advertised the zoned, or academic-comprehensive school, as “the backbone of the system,”¹⁶³ explaining the variety of things they offered and encouraging all students to visit and apply to their local school. However, by the 1995-96 school year, zoned schools had taken more of a back seat within the admissions process, as the High School Directory focused on the forty new small “alternative” schools that were now available to all students citywide,¹⁶⁴ in addition to the newly categorized *screened* schools. The new screened schools admitted students through a variety of selective criteria such as grades, attendance, test scores, entrance exams, and interviews. Zoned schools were still presented as an option to students, but were now only one of many equally weighted (or perhaps even superior) possibilities. However, it was clear that school choice had not yet become completely citywide, as readers were reminded at the end of the application instructions that, “Students scheduled to attend high school in the fall and

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ New York City Board of Education. *Directory of New York City Public High Schools, 1984-85*. 1984. Print.

¹⁶⁴ Beacon being one of them.

not accepted in special programs have a place available for them in their local (zoned) academic-comprehensive high school.”¹⁶⁵ This comment highlights the growing dominance of choice within the admissions process, as zoned schools were no longer positioned as the center and backbone of the system, but rather as last resort schools reserved for students who were not accepted into choice programs.

In 2003, zoned schools disappeared entirely and the dominance of school choice became absolute when Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein implemented a massive overhaul of the public school system, replacing the thirty four year old community controlled districts with ten mayor-controlled regions, each with a superintendent.¹⁶⁶ Along with this recentralization came the creation of a new matching system for high school admissions, which required all 8th graders to apply to high school, regardless of whether they wanted to attend their neighborhood school or not. Each student was allowed to rank a list of twelve schools, and was matched to one school instead of allowing some students to receive multiple offers, as had previously been possible. All zoned programs were dismantled or converted to other admissions processes, and there was no longer a fallback if a student was not admitted to a special program. The choice system had officially become citywide.

In the report on the new matching system, the creators identify the goal of the change as increasing the number of students who are matched with one of their choice schools, as in the years prior to 2003, 30,000 applicants (one third of all who applied) were not accepted to any of their schools of choice, and were therefore placed in their

¹⁶⁵ New York City Board of Education. *Directory of New York City Public High Schools, 1995-96*. 1995. Print, 20.

¹⁶⁶ Zeng, Jie. "The Unintended Consequences of Reorganization."

zoned school or another school with openings.¹⁶⁷ The neighborhood school, once the backbone of the system, was now framed as a last resort, and a place to avoid at all costs. In contrast to the majority of decisions regarding admissions up until the 1990s, desegregation as a goal or possible outcome is not mentioned at all. In fact race is not mentioned once. Instead, the authors speak of those who receive offers by schools, and those who don't, and explain their objective as "increasing school choice."¹⁶⁸

After nearly forty years of explicit attempts at racially integrating high schools by means of admissions programs, race and integration were not even a consideration in one of the largest admissions overhauls in the entire half century. Yet the schools are hardly more integrated than they were then. In 2011, eighteen of the twenty top performing public high schools in NYC had over 55% white and Asian/Asian American students in a high school system that was comprised of only 26.5% white and Asian/Asian American students, while eighteen of the twenty lowest performing high schools had over 90% black and Latina/o students in a school system that was 70% black and Latina/o students.¹⁶⁹ It is the most exclusive at the top, as in 2011 Stuyvesant High School, the most famous and highest performing public school in the city, admitted only twelve Black students (5% of their admits) and thirteen Hispanic

¹⁶⁷ Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, and Roth, *Practical Market Design*, 365.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 364

¹⁶⁹ This information comes from examining the racial demographics of the schools in the top and bottom "peer groups," which are groups of schools created by the Department of Education in order to compare schools to others similar to them. Peer groups are decided by: "1) the average ELA and Math proficiency levels of the school's students before they entered High School, 2) the percentage of special education students, 3) the percentage of self-contained special education students, and 4) the percentage of students who enter high school 2 or more years overage." (New York City Department of Education. Educator Guide to the New York City Progress Report 2010-2011, 2011. New York, NY.) The racial demographics come from the NYC Independent Budget Office's 2011 report on the public school system: (New York City Independent Budget Office. "New York City Public School Indicators." 2011. <www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/2011edindicatorsreport.pdf>)

students (6% of their admits). The number of Black and Latina/o students admitted to Specialized Schools has been consistently dropping for over ten years.¹⁷⁰ This shows that not only have the city schools remained separate, but have also remained unequal. Now more than fifty years after New York City created its Plan for Integration, not only are the schools not integrated, but racial integration is no longer on the agenda.

The Marketization of U.S. Education

In tracing the trend towards school choice in New York City in the last few decades, and the overhaul that ultimately created a complete citywide choice system, we cannot divorce these local processes from the larger social and political context of education in the United States. In the past thirty years there has been growing interest in and implementation of various types of school choice programs in the U.S., accompanied by a prolific amount of literature debating the benefits and consequences of such programs. These programs include vouchers to private schools, open enrollment plans, charter schools, and magnet schools among others. Throughout its existence, school districts have used school choice for a variety of purposes. Following desegregation, school vouchers were used in some instances by white parents to avoid integration.¹⁷¹ On the other hand, in many cases, such as in New York, choice has been proposed as a means of achieving racial integration, and providing access to well-resourced schools for students of color. The 1965

¹⁷⁰ Otterman, Sharon. "New York's Top Public High Schools Admit Fewer Blacks and Hispanics."

¹⁷¹ Ryan, James E. *Five Miles Away, a World Apart: One City, Two Schools, and the Story of Educational Opportunity in Modern America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. Print, 217., (Fuller & Elmore, 1996)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) - which has been reauthorized every 5 years since 1970 and in 2001 was modified to become the No Child Left Behind Act – included an entire section detailing a commitment to magnet schools as an important tool for racial integration. The first finding of the section concludes that, “magnet schools are a significant part of the Nation’s effort to achieve voluntary desegregation in our Nation’s schools.”¹⁷² Similarly, as illustrated in the previous section, during the second half of the twentieth century, the New York City Board of Education similarly employed various choice programs as a means of achieving racial integration.

However, while school choice has been used for purposes of racial integration, many of the arguments supporting such programs frame them within market principles, contending that increased choice leads to increased academic achievement of individual students, as well as a general improvement in the quality of schools. Such arguments suggest that the expansion of choice causes increased competition between schools, thereby incentivizing school improvement, as they are forced to compete for students.¹⁷³ Originally proposed by Milton Friedman, the market-based argument for choice is a result of the application of “elementary principles of classical economics” on school systems, transforming them into markets.¹⁷⁴ Within this model, consumers (i.e. students) have complete choice within the market, causing competition for their business, which leads to improved services on the part of

¹⁷² United States Department of Education. *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. 11 Apr. 1965. Web. 28 Feb. 2013. <<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg65.html>>

¹⁷³ Friedman 1955, Howell and Peterson 2002, Witte, Weimer, Schober and Schlomer 2007, Tuttle et al. 2010

¹⁷⁴ Manski, Charles. “Educational Choice (Vouchers) and Social Mobility.” *Economics of Education Review*, 11.4 (1992): 351-369. *Science Direct*. Web. 25 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0272775792900422#>>.

schools. While proponents of such arguments also often contend that increased choice particularly benefits students of color, it is through a lens of increased school quality as a result of competition rather than racial integration.¹⁷⁵

This market-based argument for choice can be placed within a larger national trend of marketization and privatization of public education. In “The Marketization of Education: Public Schools for Private Ends,” Bartlett et al. argue that the rise of neoliberal economic and political ideas and policies in the 1980s and 90s intensified the “injection of market principles such as deregulation, competition, and stratification into the public schools.”¹⁷⁶ This change has manifested itself in policies of increased standardized testing and other forms of accountability practices, increased allocation of public resources to privately run institutions (charter schools and voucher programs), involvement of businesses and corporations in public education, as well as a newfound view of education as a means to increase the competitiveness of the nation. The authors delineate the promotion of such principles by the federal government, beginning with the Reagan administration’s release of the widely circled publication, *A Nation at Risk*, which blamed public schools for the U.S.’s decreasing competitiveness in the global economic stage.¹⁷⁷ Less than a decade later, President George H. W. Bush put forth his America 2000 proposal, which called for increased standardized testing, the creation of national education standards,

¹⁷⁵ Pérez, Madeline. "Two Tales of One City: A Political Economy of the New York City Public High School Admissions Process." Diss. (The City University of New York, 2011), 19.

¹⁷⁶ Bartlett, Lesley, Marla Frederick, Thaddeus Gulbrandsen and Enrique Murillo. “The Marketization of Education: Public Schools for Private Ends.” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 33.1 (2002): 5-29. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Feb. 2013.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/3196125>>, 5.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 9.

mandatory report cards on the progress of schools and districts, and federal support for private school vouchers.¹⁷⁸ President Clinton continued President Bush's work, passing the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, imposing national standards for public education.¹⁷⁹ President George W. Bush then furthered a similar market-based educational agenda in the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, which supports standards-based education reform, promoting student choice, school accountability, and private management in the case of failing schools.¹⁸⁰

Bartlett and her colleagues argue that while market influence on education clearly arose from a specific political project, it has now become normalized and is part of the dominant rhetoric on education policy and reform. They explain that a complex linkage of a variety of political and economic factors, along with intensive lobbying and work on the part of conservative groups and research institutions permitted the resurgence of market logic in educational policy and circulated it widely until it “came to hold the status of ‘common sense.’”¹⁸¹ Through their ethnographic research in five counties in North Carolina, the authors observe that these macrolevel discourses have affected microlevel policy creation and decision-making in local education systems.¹⁸²

The New York City public high school system is clearly implicated in the national trend of marketized education, as market principles are present in both the

¹⁷⁸ New York State Department of Education. “Federal Education Policy and the States, 1945-2009.” New York State Archives. Web. 1 Mar. 2013.

<http://www.archives.nysed.gov/edpolicy/research/res_essay_bush_ghw_amer2000.shtml>.

¹⁷⁹ Bartlett et al, “The Marketization of Education,” (10)

¹⁸⁰ United States Department of Education. *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. 2001. Web. 3 Mar. 2013. <<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>>.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 7.

¹⁸² Ibid.

structure of the system, and the discourse used to describe and discuss it. Many of these market principles were implemented or expanded during Joel Klein's tenure as School Chancellor. Klein, who is responsible for the creation of the current high school admissions system, does not come from an education background, and this perspective shows in his policies. Trained as a lawyer, before becoming Chancellor Klein started and ran his own private practice, and then later served as the United States Assistant Attorney where he became known for his antitrust work.¹⁸³ After his resignation in 2011, he entered the business world as an executive vice president of the News Corporation.¹⁸⁴ His background in business has been evident in his education work.

During his time as Chancellor, Klein solidified already emerging market principles in the high school system through a number of policies. In the 1990s, there was a spike in school privatization in New York City. In 1993 the Board of Ed. began creating a number of small high schools with the idea that they would better serve struggling students than the existing large, neighborhood schools. Many of these new schools were funded by private grants from the Diamond and Annenberg foundations, bringing private funding and interests into the new public schools.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, in

¹⁸³ Hemphill, Clara, Thomas Jacobs, Kim Nauer, and Helen Zelon. "The New Marketplace: How Small-School Reforms and School Choice Have Reshaped New York City's High Schools." Center For New York City Affairs. *The New School*, Jun. 2009. Web. 15 Oct. 2012.

<http://www.newschool.edu/milano/nyc affairs/documents/TheNewMarketplace_Report.pdf>.

¹⁸⁴ Newman, Andy. "Hearst Official to Replace Klein at Helm of City Schools." *City Room*. *The New York Times*, 9 Nov. 2010. Web. 4 Mar. 2013.

<<http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/09/klein-steps-down-as-schools-chancellor-to-be-replaced-by-cathie-black-publisher/>>.

¹⁸⁵ Jennings, Jennifer L. "School Choice or Schools' Choice? Managing in an Era of Accountability" *Journal Sociology of Education*, 83.3 (July 2010): 227-247. SAGE. Web. 25 Feb. 2013. <<http://intl-soe.sagepub.com/content/83/3/227.full>>.

light of the increasing popularity of charter schools, in 2001 Mayor Rudy Giuliani set aside \$60.8 million for a move towards private management of the city schools deemed “worst-performing.”¹⁸⁶ During his time as Chancellor, Klein doubled the rate of creation of small high schools, overseeing the opening of over 200 in his eight years in the DOE, forty-three of which were funded by the Gates Foundation, and others which were funded by the Carnegie Foundation and the Open Society Institute.¹⁸⁷ This created a large increase in competition among schools, followed by the closure of over twenty-one large neighborhood high schools, which Klein saw as necessary to break up the monopoly they had on the system.¹⁸⁸ The decisions about school closings were based on school progress reports (often referred to as report cards), which rated the progress of schools each year, providing a letter grade to indicate how much improvement they had made. The DOE began producing progress reports in 2007, both in an effort to provide more information for families in the choice process, and to determine which schools needed to undergo changes or close. The grades are based on assessments of school environment, student performance, and student progress (i.e. how much student performance has improved).¹⁸⁹ In the DOE statement accompanying the release of the first reports, they explain that schools that receive an A “will receive additional funding in exchange for serving as a

¹⁸⁶ Wyatt, Edward. “City Receives 14 Proposals to Privatize Its Failing Schools.” *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 19 Aug. 2000. Web. 4 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/19/nyregion/city-receives-14-proposals-to-privatize-its-failing-schools.html>>.

¹⁸⁷ Jennings, “School Choice or Schools’ Choice?”

¹⁸⁸ Hemphill et al, “The New Marketplace.”

¹⁸⁹ New York City Department of Education. “Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein Release First-Ever Public School Progress Reports.” News and Speeches, 5 Nov. 2007. Web. 5 Mar. 2013. <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/mediarelations/NewsandSpeeches/2007-2008/20071105_progress_reports.htm>.

demonstration site for other schools,”¹⁹⁰ while schools that received a D or F will be required to submit “action plans” detailing how they will improve, and may be subject to leadership change or closure.¹⁹¹ This use of progress reports is in line with the stipulations of the No Child Left Behind Act, which requires local education agencies to monitor yearly progress of schools, rewarding those that flourish, and taking “corrective action” on those that do not.¹⁹²

Lastly, Klein’s 2003 overhaul of the high school admissions system was also based on market principles. The move to a completely citywide system brought all schools into the competitive marketplace for students, as all eighth graders were now required to choose their high school, and the abolishment of zoned schools meant that no students would automatically be placed in any school. The new system was meant to create competition between schools for the best students, with the idea that better schools would flourish and poorly performing schools would eventually close.¹⁹³ Furthermore, Klein and Bloomberg contracted three economists to create the new system, bringing an economic vision and background to the design. The creators placed choice at the center of their model and listed it as their ultimate goal. Whereas choice-based admissions in New York City had begun with clear principles of racial integration, it was now firmly based in market principles choice and competition. DOE policy had become officially colorblind, no longer acknowledging students as members of racial groups, despite the continued existence of severe racial inequalities within the high school system.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² United States Department of Education. *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.

¹⁹³ Hemphill et al, “The New Marketplace.”

Market Discourse

In my research, the prevalence of market principles in high school admissions was evident in the discourse that the Department of Education used to describe the system. Both in interviews and in newspaper articles, DOE officials spoke about the admissions system using market terms and compared the system directly and indirectly to a marketplace. In my interview with Deputy Chancellor Sternberg, the first thing I asked was what the purpose of his office was. In response, he explained: “We largely deal with the question of [whether or not] the seats that we have in New York City provide the kind of return on investment that we want them to. If they don’t, we seek to reform them. We hope that the consumers are happy because they get their choice.” Sternberg’s opening description of his job is very telling of the current climate in the Department of Education and its approach on school reform. His comment frames students and parents not as recipients of public services but as “consumers” of a product of their choice. His description of his job as ensuring “return on investment” places the goal of education in economic terms, suggesting a specific and quantifiable desired outcome. The casual use of these terms within the Deputy Chancellor’s job description – a description that he likely provides routinely – is an example of the dominance and normalization of market discourse outlined by Bartlett and her colleagues. The normalization of this discourse became even more evident to me when I realized that I myself did not find Sternberg’s terms surprising; it was only later, when I was going over my notes, that I began wondering what this choice of words indicated about the DOE’s viewpoint on the admissions system.

Madeline Pérez encountered similar market-based discourse in the high school admissions process in her ethnographic research. Pérez worked in two middle schools in the same school region in Manhattan, following students' and parents' experience of the entire admissions process in real time. As part of her participant observation, she attended multiple high school fairs, where students were able to meet representatives from many different high schools in order to collect information before making their application choices. In her description of these events, Pérez comments; "The metaphor of consumers and the market was prominent in my research. A retired DOE administrator I interviewed described the fairs as 'a meat market! Schools are just there to market themselves.'" Another DOE administrator explained that the fair was "like an advertising campaign."¹⁹⁴ The first administrator's comment directly categorizes the admissions system as a market, while both acknowledge open competition between schools as they vie for students' interest. While Pérez refers this as a use of metaphor, I would argue that these administrators are in fact actually describing the market-based characteristics of the system. We can see in these comments that schools not only must assure high rankings and quality education to attract students, but also are expected to engage in advertising to make their school appear desirable to prospective applicants (consumers) regardless of actual school quality. School administrators are therefore positioned not only as educational leaders who espouse and uphold the school's philosophy, and assure quality education and student safety, but also as sales people who must market their product.

¹⁹⁴ Pérez, "Two Tales of One City," 21.

Choice As The Ultimate Goal

Within the DOE's market-based framing of the high school system, as within the ongoing marketization of education on a national level, school choice is a central element. In fact, it is one of only two fundamental tenets. The "High School Admissions Process" page on the Department of Education website has a short paragraph at the top of the page describing the system. The first sentence states: "The high school admissions process is centered on two principles: equity and choice."¹⁹⁵ The selection of these two words as the defining principles of the process highlights the DOE's understanding of choice as a means of achieving equity, but also positions choice as a goal in itself, as the process is centered around equity *and* choice, not equity *through* choice.

The centrality of choice as a foundational principle of the process was evident in my conversations with two of the Deputy Chancellors. When I asked Deputy Chancellor Sternberg what he saw as the pros and cons of having a citywide admissions system, he did not pause before responding, "For pros, choice. Yeah definitely, I would say choice." Furthermore, he explained that, "Today in the Bronx, not every school is perfect, but now students can choose from 100 different options, whereas before when I was teaching there, they had no choice but to go to their zoned school, which had a very low graduation rate."¹⁹⁶ In this statement, Sternberg frames increased choice as the ultimate goal of the new admissions system. As he does not

¹⁹⁵ New York City Department of Education. "High Schools: Admissions Process." Choices & Enrollment. Department of Education, 2013. Web. 4 Mar. 2013. <<http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/High/Admissions/default.htm>>.

¹⁹⁶ Sternberg, Marc. Personal interview conducted by Cory Meara-Bainbridge.

explain the actual effect of this increase in choice, it seems that the “pro” of the system that he offers is choice itself. We do not know if the students he is referring to have gained access to more *high quality* schools or just *more* schools, but because they have more choices, this change is framed as positive without further explanation. Within this context, choice is understood as an inherent good and a goal within itself, rather than a means to an end.

If we understand Sternberg’s explanation through a market lens, it is clear why choice is a “pro” of the system: the market-based argument for school choice suggests that increased choice leads to increased student achievement and school improvement.¹⁹⁷ Yet while many theoretical arguments have been made to this end, empirical research examining such theories has not consistently found them to be true. In recent work on the effects of competition and accountability on student achievement, Daniel Long and Catherine Doren trace the large amount of empirical research that has been conducted on the topic, arguing that the very wide range of results by no means demonstrate clear positive correlations between choice and competition, and student achievement.¹⁹⁸ The authors explain that many of the contradictory results are due to researchers’ methods of selection, and they accordingly address this by adapting their own statistical model in an attempt to provide more generalizable results.¹⁹⁹ They conclude from their own research that the effects of choice, vouchers, and accountability are “spurious,” and that the statistical

¹⁹⁷ Doren, Catherine and Daniel Long. “Educational Markets from a Global Perspective: The Role of Choice, Vouchers, accountability, and Testing.” 2.

¹⁹⁸ Doren and Long, “Educational Markets from a Global Perspective,” 7.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 9.

evidence does not support the argument that such methods will increase student achievement.²⁰⁰

Apart from its use as a means to improve achievement, it is also not clear from existing empirical evidence that choice is effective as a tool for social and economic equity. Many proponents of school choice have argued that it is especially beneficial for low-income students and is an important tool for closing the achievement gap, as it allows more opportunities for low-income students to go to higher performing schools and improves all schools, affecting low-income students disproportionately. Deputy Chancellor Sternberg exemplifies this argument in his previous comment, as he explains that students who were previously assigned to schools with low graduation rates now have alternative options.²⁰¹ While some studies have obtained results in support of this argument, many others have obtained opposing results.²⁰² There is therefore no overwhelming empirical evidence for such claims. This lack of definitive evidence proving the positive effects of choice further demonstrates the hegemonic status of market discourse within educational reform, as the market-based logics of choice, competition, and accountability as beneficial and equalizing forces are largely accepted without firm evidence of their validity.

Whose Choice Is It?: The Role of Schools in the Matching Process

Beyond empirical evidence, the argument that the market-based admissions process is a social equalizer does not necessarily hold up on a theoretical level. Assuming that the high school admissions process does function as a competitive

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 39.

²⁰¹ Manski, "Educational Choice (Vouchers) and Social Mobility," 354.

²⁰² Ibid, 368.

market, we still cannot assume that all actors have the same access to that market. In a 2009 report on school choice and small-school reforms, released by the Center For New York City Affairs (titled “The New Marketplace”), Kim Sweet, executive director of the nonprofit Advocates for Children, comments on citywide choice: “They’ve created a marketplace...Who does well in a marketplace? A savvy consumer. School choice is biased toward informed and active parents.”²⁰³ While the idea of a market allows the consumer to choose and therefore take power over their future, in a market, not all consumers have the same buying power. A person’s choice depends on what they can afford, and some consumers are much more powerful than others. In Pérez’s research, she found that families’ varying political economies and access to resources greatly dictated their approach to navigating the school and DOE bureaucracy and intervening in the application process. These drastically varying experiences with the admissions process – which split largely along class and race lines, as well as language and immigration histories – greatly impacted their ability to gain access to the city’s most highly-rated and highly-resourced schools. Similarly, the role of families’ social and economic capital in determining their buying power in the educational market was evident in my own experience with the high school admissions process. My parents’ ability to spend time and money on the arduous process, as well as their possession of previous knowledge about school admissions processes facilitated my entrance into one of the most highly desired educational goods on the market.

Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that the high school admissions system actually functions as a market. While the Department of Education describes the

²⁰³Hemphill et al. “The New Marketplace.”

admissions process as “student-driven”²⁰⁴ (or consumer-driven), likening it to a market, their focus on the student’s choice obscures the role of the schools in the matching process. In their interviews, both Deputy Chancellors stressed the idea that the citywide choice system gave more agency to parents and students. In his explanation of the importance of the citywide system, Deputy Chancellor Sternberg commented that, “The system is empowering families to make choices.”²⁰⁵ Deputy Chancellor Dorita Gibson echoed Sternberg’s enthusiasm about the increase of choice in the past decade, also citing it as a positive and emphasizing students’ power and control in the process: “you should make a choice. It’s *your* choice. And we didn’t have that 10 years ago. You really had to go to [the school you were assigned to]...So that’s a *huge* change and that’s a great change”²⁰⁶ (emphasis hers). While it is true that the expansion of school choice has given a significant amount of agency to students and families in high school admissions, it is important to remember that they are by no means the sole actors in these decisions. There are two additional key players: the school to which you are applying, and the enrollment office, which is in charge of the matching system.

While students’ school decisions are an extremely important part of the choice process, the constant emphasis on student choice often allows us to forget about the schools’ admissions decisions. In “School Choice or Schools’ Choice?” Jennifer Jennings reminds us of the many varying factors that go into high schools’ admissions decisions. Through her ethnographic research in three newly-founded small schools in New York, Jennings found that principals’ understanding and

²⁰⁴ New York City Department of Education. “High Schools: Admissions Process.”

²⁰⁵ Sternberg, Personal interview conducted by Cory Meara-Bainbridge.

²⁰⁶ Gibson, Personal interview conducted by Cory Meara-Bainbridge.

interaction with the choice system varied greatly and was conditioned by their own professional biographies and worldviews, as well as the information, cues, and support that they received from their peer networks.²⁰⁷ She explains that these factors all interact with the “environmental demands,” imposed by the larger educational structure, which in this case consisted of an accountability policy that rated the schools on student performance.

Jennings found that two out of the three principals that she worked with actively worked to control their schools’ populations in order to reach specified target numbers in student attendance and performance. While neither of these principals viewed such numerical markers as true indicators of student progress or school quality, they recognized the need to adhere to such expectations as necessary for their own job security and the survival of their schools, as if they were marked as low-performing they would be subject to “corrective action.”²⁰⁸ These principals therefore developed strategies to assure a student population that would allow them to reach performance expectations. These strategies included sending signals to prospective families about what kinds of student were a “good fit”; excluding English-language learners, students in special education, and students with high numbers of absences; building relationships with selective junior high schools; and transferring “problem students” out of the school.²⁰⁹ The principals’ choices of who to admit, which were based on the demands placed on them by the DOE, worked to actively exclude many students who possessed undesirable traits in relation to their goal of reaching performance targets. In a system where schools need the best possible return on

²⁰⁷ Jennings, “School Choice of Schools’ Choice?”

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

investment in order to maintain their reputation (or survive), it is much less appealing to accept students who do not promise that return (i.e. students with low test scores, low attendance, failed classes). In “Making White Right”, Michael Apple argues that “poor and working class students, students of African descent, and other ethnically ‘different’ children are not valued commodities” in a marketized education system as they are not predicted to have high test scores which will help the school be seen as “good.”²¹⁰ When schools are put in competition, the students are also evaluated on how much they can return on the investment in order to keep the school in the game. In a system where racial inequality has been established as the accepted norm, this often implies the exclusion of students of color from selective schools. This exclusion is encoded in the strategies used by the principals from Jennings’ research to ensure the competitiveness of their school. The active exclusion of English Language Learners can easily be read as an exclusion of students of color, as the majority of English Language Learners in New York City public schools are not white. Furthermore, the creation of relationships with selective middle schools already privileges white students, as the middle school system is not exempt from the inequalities faced by the high school system, and many selective middle schools have overrepresentations of white students. This strategy was exemplified in the clear connection between Beacon and my middle school that funneled students from my neighborhood into the selective high school.

Adding the role of schools within the choice system reframes the lens with which we view the agency of students within the process. It is true that if a student is

²¹⁰ Apple, Michael W. "Making White Right: Race and the Politics of Educational Reform." Ed. Lois Weis, Linda Powell Pruitt, and April Burns. *Off White: Readings on Power, Privilege, and Resistance*. Ed. Michelle Fine. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004. 74-85), 77.

labeled as a “high-performing student” (i.e. has high grades, test scores, attendance records, etc.), that individual can choose their school of choice. But as schools often chose the highest performing students, this is only true for a very small portion of applicants. The rest of the students actually have a much smaller pool of reasonable choices based on their grades and test scores. In my interview with Deputy Chancellor Gibson, she repeated the same phrase multiple times throughout the conversation: “you can go to *any* high school in NYC that you want to.”²¹¹ Taking into account the large amount of control that most schools have over their admissions processes, we are forced to question who it is that she is speaking to. Although this rhetoric of boundless opportunity and complete student agency is consistently repeated and is used to talk about all students, in actuality it only applies to the top-performing students in the city.

Conclusion

School choice programs have been the New York City Board of Ed./DOE’s main tool for addressing inequality in the high school system since desegregation. While their use and understanding of choice have transformed along with dominant national political changes, choice programs have remained as an essential element of school reform. Yet despite this long-term commitment to school choice has produced few results. In 2013, school choice policies no longer directly address race, or identify racial equality as their main purpose. However, the high school system remains almost as segregated as it was fifty years ago, and still rife with racial inequality. Integration policy failed to adequately address the existing state of material inequality

²¹¹ Gibson, Personal interview by Cory Meara-Bainbridge.

created by centuries of white domination, thereby accepting the maintained state of white privilege as an expected norm. This set the stage for the next fifty years of admissions policy, as the Board of Ed./DOE only moved further and further away from the recognition of the advantages afforded to whites as a group, instead embracing an individualistic understanding of equality that views students as independent actors in a marketplace of schools. This transformation did not involve a discursive shift, but also a policy shift that sought to embed market principles in the school system, placing schools in competition with one another for student “business.” While the DOE understands this market-based model as an equalizing tool, as it provides increased agency and opportunity to students, this view of equality does not acknowledge the ways in which race and class affect students’ buying power within the educational market. Furthermore, the emphasis on the choice of the student obscures the important role of the schools in admissions decisions.

Chapter 3: Maintaining “High Standards” at the Top: Merit, Race, and Class in the Specialized High Schools

These schools are the true gems of our system. We have to make sure they're open to all of our students.

- Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott, August 2006

As I sat in the grand, circular lobby of the Tweed Courthouse, home of the Department of Education for the past decade, I felt small among the endless action around me. The hall was bustling and on every side there were people moving: walking to meet colleagues transferring papers to other offices, vehemently gesticulating while talking at small tables throughout the room. I looked up at every person who passed by, trying to guess which one was coming to meet with me. The Deputy Chancellor for Equity and Access, Dorita Gibson had been the only member of the Chancellor's office that didn't have her picture displayed along side her description. Finally I turned around and saw a woman walking with purpose right towards me. “Hi, Cory? It's so great to meet you! Thanks for coming down here.” She was full of energy, and after shaking my hand and sitting down, she began talking immediately, before I even had time to glance at my list of questions. “I first just wanted to give you this,” she said as she passed a thin booklet across the table, with the title “Guide to the New York City Specialized Science High Schools” printed in big letters across the front. Opening it to the middle, she embarked on a thorough explanation of the eight different Specialized Schools, the application process, and common problems student have while applying. Pointing to the box where students can list their school choices on a sample application, she explained: “So this is the process by which you select. What kids don't always do is they don't always list all eight schools. But you should, because you could get into any one of

them.”²¹² As I clung on to every word, my mind had transferred back to eighth grade, receiving advice on the complicated process in the hopes that if I followed it to a tee, I could win one of those coveted spots. Suddenly I snapped back to reality. This is not what I had come to talk about. I thanked the Deputy Chancellor for her explanation and turned to my first question, emphasizing again that I was interested in the entire high school system, not only the Specialized Schools.

Almost every time I have told someone that I am writing about the New York City public high school admissions system, they have asked me if I am writing about Stuyvesant, “the Science Schools,” or “those crazy special schools.” Regardless of where they are from, be it Ohio, California, or even another country, if they have any knowledge about New York, they know about the Specialized Schools. New York City’s Specialized High Schools (or “Science High Schools”)²¹³ are the most well known schools in the city and are some of the most prestigious and desired public high schools in the country. Often written about in the New York Times and other major newspapers, their reputation goes beyond the city limits, and has granted them rankings from various national media sources in lists of “Top US High Schools.”²¹⁴ This fame and prestige places these eight schools at the center of New York’s citywide high school admissions system, as every year, thousands of eighth graders

²¹² Gibson, Dorita. Personal interview conducted by Cory Meara-Bainbridge. 15 Oct. 2012.

²¹³ Technically, Fiorella H LaGuardia High School for the Arts is also a Specialized School, but it is the only one that does not use an exam for admissions (it admits students by audition). In the press “Specialized High School” is often used to describe what are really the Specialized Science High Schools, excluding LaGuardia, and I will be using the term in the same way.

²¹⁴ The Specialized Schools have been featured in various national “Best High School” lists in the following news sources: The Washington Post, US World & News Report, Worth Magazine, The Wallstreet Journal, and The Daily Beast. Although the three original Specialized Schools have received the most attention, almost all of the eight schools has been featured in at least one list.

dream of receiving an acceptance letter. My middle school teachers would often attempt to motivate my classmates and I to do our homework with the promise that if we worked hard, we could go to Stuyvesant or Brooklyn Tech.²¹⁵

The beginning of my interview with the Deputy Chancellor illustrates this centrality, as when I explained that I wanted to talk about the high school admissions system, she assumed that I must be focusing on the Specialized Schools. Seeing as these are only eight of the city's 400 schools, and they are the only schools that are not part of the single citywide matching system, it seems strange to start with an explanation of this particular process, which is an exception to the system. Yet it is that exception that makes the schools an object of intrigue and desire. They are "Specialized" schools, and therefore are "special" and exceptional, making those who are in them special and exceptional. Every year more than 25,000 students vie for only 5,000 seats in the Specialized Schools in a test-based admissions process.²¹⁶ While other selective public schools use a variety of factors to determine admission, such as grades, standardized test scores, portfolios of work, and personal interviews, the Science High Schools admit students according to their score on a single exam: the Science High School Admissions Test (SHSAT).

However, the Specialized Schools' renown is not only a result of their stellar reputation and academic prestige. For decades the Specialized High Schools and their admissions process have been a site of racial controversy. Throughout their history,

²¹⁵ Conversely, we were warned that if we did not work hard, we would end up going to the high school up the street, a school that was later marked as a failing school and split up into 3 smaller schools. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/04/nyregion/reinventing-john-jay-high-amid-charges-of-exclusion.html?scp=1&sq=John+Jay+High+School+Brooklyn&st=nyt>). The school was made-up of almost entirely black and Latino/a students.

²¹⁶ "How to Apply." Inside Schools, 2012. Web. 1 Nov. 2012. <<http://insideschools.org/high/how-to-apply>>.

the schools have enrolled disproportionately low numbers of Black and Latina/o students. Over the past few decades, these numbers have consistently decreased. In 2012 only 14% of accepted students to all eight schools were black and Latina/o, even though Black and Latina/o students make up 70% of all New York City high school students.²¹⁷ Endless newspaper articles, blog posts, and press conferences, have focused on the racial demographics of the Specialized High Schools, and a large amount of resources have been deployed in efforts to increase the admission of Black and Latina/o students. Yet despite these efforts, the number of admitted Black and Latina/o students has continued to drop,²¹⁸ and every year education policy makers are left asking the same question: how can we better prepare students to pass the exam?²¹⁹

In this chapter I will examine the ongoing controversy over the exclusion of black and Latina/o students from the Specialized Schools. I will outline the consistent demands from communities of color and others that the admissions process be altered from 1965 to present, and the Board of Ed./DOE's efforts to address these demands. Program. While the Board of Ed. was initially open to changing the admissions

²¹⁷ New York City Independent Budget Office. "New York City Public School Indicators." 2011. <www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/2011edindicatorsreport.pdf>

²¹⁸ Otterman, "Top Public High Schools Admit Fewer Blacks and Hispanics."; Medina, "At Top City Schools, Lack of Diversity Persists."; Gootman, "In Elite N.Y. Schools, a Dip in Blacks and Hispanics."; Hernandez, "Racial Imbalance Persists at Elite Public Schools."

²¹⁹ "Jack Zarin-Rosenfeld, a schools spokesman said, 'we also must ensure students taking the exam are receiving a high-quality education in elementary and middle school, so more of them can access our specialized high schools.'" (Otterman, "Top Public High Schools Admit Fewer Blacks and Hispanics"); A DOE statement commented, "Students need a strong background in math, verbal and critical thinking to succeed on the exam, and we continue to work to ensure every student receives the instruction required to develop those skills.'" (Medina, "At Top City Schools, Lack of Diversity Persists"); Deputy Chancellor Gibson suggested, "I guess the challenge that we as a city school system have is how do we make sure that all of our kids are prepared?" (Gibson, Personal interview.)

criteria in the 1960s and 1970s, their ability to implement changes was limited by the accepted expectation of white privilege, which Harris argues was established as the status quo in the ruling in *Brown*. Political struggle on the part of white educational stakeholders succeeded in writing the controversial entrance exam into state law, thereby legally protecting whites' expectations of the right to exclude – one of the critical functions of whiteness as property. The enshrining of the exam into law functioned as Omi and Winant's definition of a racist white racial project, as it maintained a social structure that continued unequal resource distribution along racial lines. With the entrance exam protected by law and therefore untouchable, the Board of Ed./DOE attempted to address the underrepresentation of students of color in the Specialized Schools by implementing supplemental programs to increase Black and Latina/o enrollment within the existing structure. Their initial efforts, which admitted a percentage of students who hadn't passed the test and provided them with extra support, succeeded in increasing the number of Black and Latina/o students in the schools if only slightly.

However, in the increasingly anti-affirmative action political climate of the early 1990s, the Board of Ed. abandoned this program, shifting instead towards a solely class-based analysis of racial inequality. I argue that their subsequent efforts, which have been explained through testing-centered discourses that focus on economic inequality, have been insufficient in their exclusive focus on class, and have produced few results, as the number of Black and Latina/o students admitted to the Specialized Schools has continuously declined for the past two decades. The DOE's current insistence on the entrance exam's objectivity, and their inability and

refusal to critically examine the exam in their attempts to address the underrepresentation of Black and Latina/o students has not only continued the exclusion of these students from some of the most high quality educational resources in the city, but has also obscured the city's responsibility in perpetuating this inequality. The construction of the entrance exam as a neutral measure merit hides the human decisions involved in the evaluation, which are shaped by the decision makers' racial and cultural background. With the illusion that there is no one involved except for the student and the test, students of color are left with no one to blame but themselves for their underrepresentation in the Specialized High Schools.

Lastly, I discuss the role of Asian/Asian American students as the majority group in the Specialized High Schools. While for most of their existence, the Specialized Schools were almost entirely white, in the past few decades there has been a large increase in the number of Asian/Asian American students. I argue, however, that this does not signify an attainment of racial equity or a dismantling of expectations of white privilege. The increased presence of Asian/Asian Americans in the selective schools has simultaneously been viewed by whites both as a racial threat and as evidence of Black and Latino/a students' responsibility for their own underrepresentation in the schools. Students and parents often suggest that the Specialized Schools have become "too Asian," revealing an expectation of white entitlement to majority status within the city's most prestigious schools. On the other hand, many of the media representations of Asian/Asian Americans in the Specialized Schools seem to extol them for their success. On closer examination, these seemingly positive representations consistently use racially essentialist portrayals of

an imaginarily unified Asian/Asian American “culture” to explain the demographic shift, and blame Black and Latino/a students for their continued exclusion from the schools.

A History of Exclusion

The Specialized high schools date back to the beginning of the twentieth century. While five of the Specialized Science Schools were only defined as such in the early 2000s, the label of “Specialized School” have been cultivated as a prestigious group for more than half a century through the reputation of the original three schools. Founded in 1904, Stuyvesant High School was the first to open its doors. Beginning as a manual training school for boys,²²⁰ the school officially became labeled a “Science High School” in 1920, when it restricted admission based on elementary school academic achievement. In 1929, admission became even more selective when the first system of entrance exams was implemented.²²¹ As a selective magnet school within a system of unscreened neighborhood schools, Stuyvesant was a clear outlier. In 1922 Brooklyn Technical High School joined Stuyvesant as the second Science High School in the city. A math teacher opened Brooklyn Tech (as it is often referred to) with the dream of creating a better-trained technical workforce by providing paths to either college or a technical career. In 1937 Bronx Science opened, also joining the ranks of the Science Schools and taking a quarter of its faculty from

²²⁰ “History of the School.” *Stuyvesant High School*. Web. 1 Nov. 2012.
<http://stuy.enschool.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=126631&type=d&pREC_ID=251657&hideMenu=1>.

²²¹ “Timeline.” *The Campaign for Stuyvesant*.

Stuyvesant.²²² For the next sixty-five years, these three schools remained the only Specialized Science High Schools, becoming the three most prestigious public schools in the city. They soon streamlined their admissions to one singular test for all three schools, further solidifying their selectivity.

For almost the entirety of their existence, the Specialized Schools' admissions process has been a site of controversy. In the mid 1960s, criticism began to arise concerning the exclusivity of the schools, and the Board of Ed. considered abolishing them entirely.²²³ In 1965, a Board of Ed. committee headed by Executive Deputy Superintendent Bernard E. Donovan reported that the lack of Black and Latina/o students in the Specialized Schools was a serious problem, and urged the principals of the three schools to begin accepting some minority students outside of the examination process.²²⁴ The Specialized Schools therefore implemented "Discovery Programs," through which they admitted a small amount (usually around 10% of the incoming class) of "economically disadvantaged"²²⁵ students who had not passed the

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Tolchin, Martin. "Call for Abolishing New York's Four Specialized Elite Schools Stirs Dispute; Concern is Felt For The Gifted; Champions of Institutions Says That Top Students Need Top Programs." *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 16 Jan. 1964. Web. 26 Mar. 2013.

<<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F3091FF6385C147A93C4A8178AD85F408685F9>>.

"Students Urge Retention of Special High Schools." *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 28 Dec. 1965. Web. 28 Mar. 2013.

<<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F60C16F83B591B7A93CAAB1789D95F418685F9>>.

²²⁴ Hechinger, Fred M. "Educators Warn on School Change." *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 29 Dec. 1964. Web. 26 Mar. 2013.

<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F0061EFA3F5F107A93CBAB1789D95F408685F9>>.

²²⁵ Chambers, Marcia. "U.S. Inquiry Into Bias Is Opposed At Prestigious New York Schools." *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 7 Nov. 1977. Web. 28 Mar. 2013.

<<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F60B17FD3C5E167493C5A9178AD95F438785F9>>.

admissions exam, but showed motivation and talent.²²⁶ Eligible students were required to present a letter of recommendation from their schools and attend preparatory classes throughout the summer before joining their peers in the fall.²²⁷ Although the programs were technically available to students of all racial backgrounds, as they were based on economic class, they were created out of a specific call to identify talented racial minorities, and almost all of the students admitted through them were Black and Latina/o.²²⁸

While this program acted as an affirmative action policy for Black and Latina/o students, it did not affect the entrance test itself, which activists and educators continued to criticize. In 1970, Alfredo O. Mathew Jr., Superintendent of the then predominantly Black and Puerto Rican District 3 in Manhattan, publically charged the test as discriminatory.²²⁹ In response, Schools Chancellor Harvey B. Scribner formed a 26-member special committee to look into the charges and closely examine the Specialized High Schools' admissions process for any possible racial discrimination.²³⁰ However, the possibility of changes to the admissions process caused an uproar among parents, current and former students, and administrators from the schools. The New York Times reported that the angered group consisted of,

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Berger, Joseph. "Excellence and Equality: A Conflict?" *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 4, Mar. 1987. Web. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/04/nyregion/excellence-and-equality-a-conflict.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>>.

²²⁸ And specifically mostly Black and Puerto Rican, as Puerto Ricans were the largest national origin group from Latin America in New York at the time. (Chambers, "U.S. Inquiry Into Bias Is Opposed At Prestigious New York Schools.")

²²⁹ Buder, Leonard. "Board Asks Defeat of a Bill Retaining 4 Specialized Schools' Entrance Tests." *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 17 May. 1971. Web. 27 Feb. 2013. <<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=FB0A11FA355F127A93C5A8178ED85F458785F9>>.

²³⁰ Ibid.

“particularly, but not exclusively, white parents,” who view the Specialized Schools as “a last resort (some say ‘refuge’), the alternative to sending their children to private schools.”²³¹ Responding to families’ and administrators’ fears that the entrance exam would be altered or abolished in order to admit more Black and Latina/o students, a number of white State Assemblymen proposed a bill that would prohibit the Board of Ed. from changing the admissions criteria for the Specialized Schools. The bill further proposed limiting the number of students admitted through the Discovery Program.²³² While proponents of the bill argued that it was, “necessary to protect the status and quality of the specialized schools,” and was only meant to assure continued “high standards,”²³³ there was a clear racial divide between opponents and supporters, and minority members of the Assembly argued that it was “an attempt by whites to guard against increased numbers of Blacks and Puerto Ricans” in the schools.²³⁴ After long and emotional debates, the bill passed through the assembly, and went on to pass through the Senate with little dissent.²³⁵ At the will of politically influential white parents, alumni, and administrators, the entrance examination was enshrined into law,²³⁶ as it remains today. Six months later, Chancellor Scribner’s special committee released their recommendations, declaring that the entrance exam was indeed

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Clines, Francis X. “Assembly Votes High School Curb; Limits City Board’s Power to Ease Entry Into 4 Specialized Schools.” *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 20 May 1971. Web. 28 Mar. 2013.

²³³ Buder, “Board Asks Defeat of a Bill Retaining 4 Specialized Schools’ Entrance Tests.”

²³⁴ Clines, “Assembly Votes High School Curb.”

²³⁵ Farrell, William. “Legislature Retains Admission Test for City’s Four Specialized High Schools.” *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 25 May 1971. Web. 24 Mar. 2013. <<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F20D1EF83954127B93C4AB178ED85F458785F9>>.

²³⁶ New York State Law 2590 – Section G (The Specialized High Schools Student Handbook 2011-2012)

discriminatory, and urging the Specialized Schools to adopt multiple criteria for their admissions decisions.²³⁷ However, these recommendations were powerless against newly-minted state law, and the exam remained as it was.

Although the test could not be altered, the Discovery Program continued with some success. While the bill passed, the Senate amended it to remove the limit on the number of students accepted through the Discovery Programs. In the more than twenty years that these programs were in place, Black and Latina/o enrollment did in fact increase in the Specialized Schools, if only marginally. In 1969, only 10% of students at Bronx Science were Black and Latina/o,²³⁸ but by 1987, that number rose to 23%.²³⁹ It was only after the disappearance of these programs in the late 1980s²⁴⁰ that the Specialized Schools began to experience the long, continuous decrease in Black and Latina/o students that leads us to today.

Throughout the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, the number of Black and Latina/o students accepted to the Specialized Schools steadily declined. While in 1975, 12.9% of students at Stuyvesant were Black (already much lower than the percentage of black students in the system then), by 1995 that number dropped to only 4.8%. Furthermore, only 4.3% of students were

²³⁷ Buder, Leonard. "New Entry Policy at 4 Special Schools Is Urged." *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 24 Nov. 1971. Web. 28 Mar. 2013. <<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=FA0610F93D591A7493C6AB178AD95F458785F9>>.

²³⁸ Malcolm, Andrew. "Bronx Science School Undaunted by Radicals' Moves." *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 29 Apr. 1969. Web. 20 Mar. 2013. <<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F70813FE3D5C137A93CBAB178FD85F4D8685F9>>.

²³⁹ Berger, "Excellence and Equality: A Conflict?"

²⁴⁰ I was not able to find an exact date for the ending of the Discovery Programs. The above quoted article from 1987 demonstrates the ongoing presence of the program at that time, while articles from the early 1990s make clear that it no longer existed by then.

Latina/o, while 40% were Asian/Asian American, 40% were white.²⁴¹ Seeing the racial data, then Schools Chancellor Ramon Cortines suggested that lack of teacher preparation and socioeconomic pressures in predominantly Black and Latina/o middle schools were the reason for the drop.²⁴² There was no acknowledgment that the Discovery Program had been in place in 1975, and had only recently been abandoned. The Chancellor's explanation of the decline instead relied on dominant common understandings of racial inequality as an expected and accepted norm. It is unlikely that socioeconomic pressures in predominantly Black and Latina/o middle schools were significantly lower in 1975, as racial inequality was just as present then. However, the Chancellor is able to cite this continued state of educational inequality as reasoning for the exclusion in the Specialized High Schools with little explanation. As Harris explains, the failure of the Supreme Court to substantially address the material inequalities created by centuries of white domination in *Brown v. Board of Education* established the existing state of inequality as the accepted neutral baseline. Therefore forty years later, Chancellor Cortines was able to easily dismiss the increasing exclusion of Black and Latina/o students from high quality schools, as this type of inequality is the expected state of things.

After abandoning the Discovery Programs, the Board of Ed. adopted a new tactic, moving from an equal results approach to an equal opportunity approach in a time when affirmative action programs were under attack. Chancellor Cortines created a summer institute specifically with the goal of training Black and Latina/o

²⁴¹ Newman, Maria. "Cortines Has Plan to Coach Minorities into Top Schools." *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 18 Mar. 1995. Web. 7 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/18/nyregion/cortines-has-plan-to-coach-minorities-into-top-schools.html>>.

²⁴² Ibid.

students to pass the Specialized High School admissions exam. Cortines explained that this solution would avoid creating quotas, which were under challenge in other cities, and commented that he was not “offering any free rides.”²⁴³ In 1995, 350 seventh and eighth graders were admitted.²⁴⁴ The institute continued to grow throughout the next two decades, and as complaints continued about the ever-declining number of Blacks and Latina/os accepted to the schools, the Board of Education continued to look to the test preparation program as the answer.

Between 2002 and 2006, the number of Specialized School seats increased significantly when Chancellor Klein added five new schools to the list, making them a part of the exam-based admissions process. Brooklyn Latin, the High School for Mathematics, Science and Engineering at City College, the High School for American Studies at Lehman College, Queens High School for the Sciences at York College and Staten Island Technical High School all joined the original three schools on the Specialized High School application.²⁴⁵ Although these schools were seen by many as second tier in comparison to the nearly 100 years of prestige of Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Tech, and Bronx Science, they quickly gained status, opening up many more seats in elite high schools.²⁴⁶ Many of these new schools were very racially diverse, and were seen as one way to deal with the increasing exclusion of Blacks and Latina/os from the original Specialized High Schools. However, within a few years of their opening, many of them experienced large drops in the percentage of Black and Latina/o students in their student population. For example, the Queens High School

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Medina, Jennifer. “At Top City Schools, Lack of Diversity Persists.”

²⁴⁶ Ibid

for Sciences opened in 2002 with a student body that was 30.1% Black and 13.6% Latina/o. By 2006 these numbers dropped to 19.7% and 10.1% respectively.²⁴⁷

In 2006, ten years after the creation of the Specialized High School Institute, the New York Times reported that despite the increasing expansion of the free test prep program, the percentage of admitted Black and Latina/o students had in fact decreased. The percentage of Black students at Stuyvesant had dropped to an all-time low of 2.2%, from 4.8% in 1995. The other two schools saw even steeper decreases in the decade, with Bronx Science's Black student population dropping from 11.8% to 4.8%, and Brooklyn Tech's Black student population plummeting from 37.3% in 1995 to 14.9% 11 years later.²⁴⁸ The Department of Education claimed to have been taken off guard by these numbers, and Deputy Chancellor Andres Alfonso calling them "extraordinarily surprising."²⁴⁹ The Deputy Chancellor promised to look into it, and to insist that the Department specifically investigate whether it was an issue of Black and Latina/o students not passing the test or not taking it. Four years later, in 2010 the New York Times reported that the effort had been abandoned and had never come to fruition.²⁵⁰ Without a critical examination of the evaluation process, and continuing under the assumption that the test itself could not be the cause of this decline, the DOE continued to support and expand its test prep institute, heavily advocating for the program as the sole solution to the ever-increasing demographic disparity. Although the number of Black and Latina/o students had continuously decreased since the implementation of the Specialized High School Institute,

²⁴⁷ Gootman, "In Elite N.Y. Schools, a Dip in Blacks and Hispanics."

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Medina, "At Top City Schools, Lack of Diversity Persists."

Chancellor Joel Klein created many new locations for the institute, increasing the programs reach and admitting many new students. The Executive Director of Secondary Schools explained that the problem was not the program but rather that its “intended goal going back to 1995 was not realized,” as there had been “quite a bit of pushback” against favoring Black and Latina/o for admission to the program, and therefore they must continue trying.²⁵¹

In 2007, the pushback that the Executive Director referred to solidified in a lawsuit against the Department of Education. Earlier that year, the Supreme Court decided the cases of *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, striking down the two districts’ diversity plans that assigned students to schools partially on the basis of race.²⁵² In light of this landmark decision, a group of white and Asian/Asian American parents from New York filed a federal lawsuit, accusing the DOE of discriminating against white and Asian/Asian American students in admittance to the Specialized High School Institute.²⁵³ Since its inception, students of all races have always been allowed to apply to and attend the institute. However, before 2007 white and Asian/Asian American students had to be eligible for free or reduced-price lunch

²⁵¹ Gootman, “In Elite N.Y. Schools, a Dip in Blacks and Hispanics.”

²⁵² Supreme Court of the United States. *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*. 426 F. 3d 1162. 28 June 2007. Cornell University Legal Information Institute. Web. 30 Jan. 2013. <<http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/05-908.ZS.html>>.

Supreme Court of the United States. *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*. 05-915. 4 Dec. 2006. Cornell University Legal Information Institute. Web 30 Jan. 2013. <<http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/cert/05-915>>.

²⁵³ Arp, Chris. “A change in admissions policy transforms HS prep program.” Web blog post. *Gotham Schools*. 1 Apr. 2011. Web. 6 Nov. 2012. <<http://gothamschools.org/2011/04/01/a-change-in-admissions-policy-transforms-hs-prep-program/>>.

in order to be admitted, while Black and Latina/o students did not have that criteria.²⁵⁴ The parents who brought the lawsuit were angry about the racially differentiated criteria that made it more difficult for them to gain access to this free public resource. One of the parents in the lawsuit, a Chinese American mother from Brooklyn, explained that her older daughter had been admitted to the institute and had gotten into Brooklyn Tech, but her younger daughter had recently been denied. She believed that her second daughter had been excluded on racial terms due to a change in their family income, which made them no longer eligible based on the economic criteria for white and Asian/Asian American students. Their attorney argued that it was “not the business of the government of New York City to be counting up the Asians or whites in, say, Stuyvesant High School and concluding there are too many of them.”²⁵⁵

Due to these two legal developments, in 2008 the Department of Education changed the admissions policy for the institute to exclude race from the criteria. The present day policy admits all students based solely on economic class (eligibility for free-or reduced-price lunch) and academic records, without regard to race.²⁵⁶ Within a year of the change in policy, enrollment of Latina/o students in the program dropped

²⁵⁴ Shin, Alexander. “Possible Racial Bias in Specialized High School Institute.” *The Spectator*. Stuyvesant High School, 4 Sep. 2007. Web 7 Nov. 2012. <<http://stuspectator.com/2007/09/04/possible-racial-bias-in-specialized-high-school-institute/>>.

²⁵⁵ Bennett, Chuck. “In ‘Wrong’ Minority: HS Test-Prep Aid Denied for Asians.” *NYPPost.com*. The New York Post, 19 Nov. 2007. Web. 9 Nov. 2012. <http://www.nypost.com/p/news/regional/item_AoTo9W6QLydgDC7UY9INpI>.

²⁵⁶ Arp, “A change in admissions policy transforms HS prep program.”

by 50%. Black and Latina/o students were now in the minority in a program supposedly created to serve them.²⁵⁷

While parents and students battled over admittance to the institute, the effectiveness of the program itself was not necessarily clear. The DOE has continuously explained the racial inequality in the Specialized High Schools as largely an inequality in access to test preparation, and therefore continuously suggests free test-prep as the singular solution. However, the acceptance statistics cause us to question the institute as the solution to this disparity. In 2010, only 21% of Latina/o graduates of the Specialized High School Institute and 19% of Blacks were offered admission to a Specialized School.²⁵⁸ Although those numbers are significantly higher than the 7% of all Black students and 8% of all Latina/o students who took the test that year that were offered admission, they are still lower than the 28% of white students and 57% of Asian/Asian American students who were offered admission, test-prep or not.²⁵⁹

Throughout the 2000s, criticism of the racial make-up of the Specialized Schools continued. In 2008, Joshua N. Feinman, an alumnus of Stuyvesant and parent of a Bronx Science student released a report challenging the validity of the entrance exam. After looking at the scoring chart for his daughter's practice tests as she studied for the entrance exam in 2005, Feinman, an economist by training, realized something strange about the formulas: a student who scored almost perfect on one of the two test segments (math and verbal) but average or low on the other had a better chance at acceptance than a student that scored highly but not perfect on both

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Medina, "At Top City Schools, Lack of Diversity Persists."

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

sections. In other words, if a student studied excessively for only one part of the test, they were more likely to be accepted than a student who studied all of the material. This “quirk” as the New York Times called it, meant that students who knew to spend most of their time on their strongest subject – students with access to exclusive test-prep programs – had an advantage.²⁶⁰ After this realization, Feinman went on to publish a report called “High Stakes, but Low Validity?” arguing that the unusual scoring method violated “generally accepted testing standards and practices.”²⁶¹ He questioned the test’s neutrality, seeing as this uncommon testing method had never undergone bias studies across racial groups, which are standard procedure for most tests.²⁶²

Soon after, it also became clear that the problem of disproportionately low admittance of Black and Latina/o students to Specialized Schools did not lie in lack of participation of such students, as the DOE began to use statistics on the racial make-up of the applicant pool. In 2011 *Gotham Schools* reported that while the number of black and Latina/o students admitted to specialized schools had significantly decreased since 2009, the number of such students who applied and took the test had in fact increased.²⁶³ This meant that while more Black and Latina/o students were applying, an increasingly smaller percent of those students were being admitted.

²⁶⁰ Herszenhorn, David M. “Admission Test’s Scoring Quirk Throws Balance Into Question.” *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 12 Nov. 2005. Web. 9 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/12/nyregion/12exam.html?pagewanted=all>>.

²⁶¹ Feinman, Joshua. *High Stakes, but Low Validity? A Case Study of Standardized Tests and Admissions into New York City Specialized High Schools*. (Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Oct. 2008). Web. 5 Nov. 2012. <<http://researchhighschools.pbworks.com/f/Feinman-NYCTestsSpHS.pdf>>.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Phillips, Anna. “Racial gap persists for city’s specialized high schools.” Web blog post. *Gotham Schools*. 11 Feb. 2011. Web. <gothamschools.org/2011/02/11/racial-gap-persists-for-citys-specialized-high-schools/>.

While DOE officials have often argued that the lack of Black and Latina/o students therefore could partially be accounted for by a disproportionately low number of Black and Latina/o test-takers,²⁶⁴ these statistics show otherwise.

In October, 2012 the criticism of the Specialized Schools' admissions system came to a head when a coalition of education and civil rights groups filed a federal civil rights complaint. The coalition, which included the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, argued that Black and Latina/o students are disproportionately excluded from the Specialized Science High Schools due to the reliance on a single test for admittance criteria.²⁶⁵ In 2012, although the number of Black and Latino/a students increased slightly for the first time in many years, they still only received 14% of admissions offers to Specialized High Schools, even though they made up 45% of students who took the test, and they account for 71% of students citywide.²⁶⁶ The complaint argues that the admissions policy is in breach of the Civil Rights Act by having an "unjustified, racially disparate impact."²⁶⁷ However, it does not accuse the test of being culturally biased, or invalid, but instead focuses on the singularity of the exam in admissions criteria, arguing that many intelligent and high-achieving Black

²⁶⁴ Head of the Enrollment Office, Elizabeth Sciabarra commented: "It is a choice. There are kids who might be wonderful candidates for this who will just not sit for the test. That transcends ethnicity; that's across the board." (Hernandez, "Racial Imbalance Persists at Elite Public Schools."). Similarly, Deputy Chancellor Gibson notes, "not everybody wants to take the test, not everybody wants to go there." (Gibson, Personal interview.)

²⁶⁵ Baker, "Charges of Bias in Admission Test Policy at Eight Elite Public High Schools."

²⁶⁶ Campbell, Jessica and Phillissa Cramer. "In HS admissions numbers, hints of change at selective schools." Web blog post. *Gotham Schools*. 29 Feb. 2012. Web. 4 Nov. 2012. <<http://gothamschools.org/2012/02/29/in-hs-admissions-numbers-hints-of-change-at-selective-schools/>>.

²⁶⁷ Allen, Jonathan. "NAACP to file complaint over entry test for elite new York high schools." *The Chicago Tribune*. 26 Sep. 2012. Web. 20 Sep. 2012. <articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-09-26/news/sns-rt-us-usa-newyork-naacpbre88q040-20120926_1_latino-students-stuyvesant-student-black-students>.

and Latina/o students are not recognized by the singular form of assessment.²⁶⁸ In an article they wrote in the *Daily News*, two of the attorneys involved lay out an image of what they believed to be the issue: “Picture this: You’ve worked hard all of your life. You have the grades and academic awards to prove it... And you have the chance to apply for an educational opportunity that could change your life. But getting this opportunity requires that you take a test. No other factors matter.” One of the attorneys later also commented that, “The policy is unfair to children of all races because it doesn’t reward them for the hard work they’ve done in K-8.”²⁶⁹

The city gave mixed responses regarding the complaint, but provided a unified front in defending the test as fair, valid, and unbiased. The Department of Education’s official press statement took a tone that acknowledged the underrepresentation of Black and Latina/o students as a problem, but affirmed that it was not a problem with the test. They reminded readers that the test was mandated by State law, implying that even if there was a problem, there was nothing they could do to change it. The statement then emphasized the importance of outreach and preparation, and highlighted the Department’s continued efforts in those areas.²⁷⁰

Despite the DOE’s insistence on the fairness of and objectivity of the exam, it is clear that over the past decades there has been a sharp decrease in the number of Black and Latina/o students at the Specialized Schools, and the numbers remain disproportionately low. Although the DOE has continuously attempted to change this

²⁶⁸ Baker, “Charges of Bias in Admission Test Policy at Eight Elite Public High Schools.”

²⁶⁹ Burke, Tom and Melissa Russo. “I-Team: Federal Lawsuits Alleges Bias at Elite NYC Higg Schools.” *NBC New York*. 27 Sep. 2012. Web. 20 Sep. 2012.

<www.nbcnewyork.com/investigations/Federal-Civil-Rights-Complaint-Against-NYC-Schools-171529981.html>.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

trend through outreach and test-preparation, the percentages of these underrepresented students in the city's most prestigious schools continue to drop with little sign of change. Yet the DOE has given no indication of reconsideration their strategy. Although the Civil Rights complaint is currently at the federal level, when I spoke with the Deputy Chancellor Gibson, she informed me that they would eventually be dealing with it directly in the Department of Education. The effects that they will have on the long-standing Specialized High School exam process remain to be seen.

“There’s Nothing Subjective About It”

In response to the recent civil rights complaint about the SHSAT, Mayor Michael Bloomberg commented to the press in defense of the entrance exam: “I think that Stuyvesant and these other schools are as fair as fair can be. There’s nothing subjective about this. You pass the test, you get the highest score, you get into the school — no matter what your ethnicity,²⁷¹ no matter what your economic background is.”²⁷² Mayor Bloomberg’s confident and matter-of-fact response leaves no room for discussion, making it clear that the objectivity of the test is not a matter of opinion but a fact. The test is fair and objective, and therefore cannot be discriminate against or exclude anyone, as it only looks at a number: the student’s score. It is important to note that in this quote the mayor does not in fact mention race. However, as he is responding directly to an accusation of specifically racial discrimination, we can assume that he in using “ethnicity” to stand in for race. While

²⁷¹ As the Mayor is responding directly to an accusation of specifically racial discrimination, we can assume that here he is using ethnicity to stand in for race.

²⁷² Baker, “Charges of Bias in Admission Test Policy at Eight Elite Public High Schools.”

race and ethnicity are not the same, they are often used interchangeably in public discourse. This is a significant slippage, as ethnicity is one of the paradigms of race that Omi and Winant critique in their theory of racial formation. They argue that ethnicity was the dominant theoretical framework in the sociological explorations of race in the twentieth century. However they explain the paradigm is insufficient for dealing the specific ways in which various ethnic groups are collectively racialized, and critique it for perpetuating the immigrant analogy, which is used to compare different ethnic groups and evaluate their status through their “achievement of mobility,” and “acceptance into the majority.”²⁷³ The use of ethnicity in this comment therefore furthers his point about the objectivity and fairness of the exam, as it brings with it connotations of upward mobility and assimilation.

When I interviewed Deputy Chancellor of Access and Equity, Dorita Gibson, she agreed with the mayor that the test was fair. As a response to the calls to expand admissions criteria to include other factors besides the test, she added: “I believe in multiple criteria, but sometimes you just have to go with one flat way that’s objective.”²⁷⁴ Both Mayor Bloomberg and Deputy Chancellor Gibson describe the test as an equalizing tool. Gibson’s description of the test as a “flat way” suggests that the test measures everyone in a uniform manner. Bloomberg is more explicit in his description of the exam as a leveler of social and economic differences, telling listeners that “ethnicity”²⁷⁵ and “economic background” are not relevant factors in the process.

²⁷³ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formations in the United States*, 21.

²⁷⁴ Gibson, Dorita. Personal interview conducted by Cory Meara-Bainbridge. 15 Oct. 2012.

²⁷⁵ We can assume here that Mayor Bloomberg is using ethnicity as a stand in for race as the civil rights complaint that he is commenting on specifically talks about race and racial groups

“Objective” and “fair” are not new terms in the discussion of New York’s Specialized High Schools. The 1971 bill, the passing of which set the entrance exam in law as the singular admissions criteria for the schools stipulated that entrance must be granted “solely and exclusively by taking a competitive, objective and scholastic achievement examination.”²⁷⁶ The idea of the Specialized High School Admissions Test as a fair and neutral measure of merit and aptitude is not only enduring but also ubiquitous in public discourse. Almost every year for more than a decade, the New York Times has published pieces about the SHSAT, the astounding amounts of work that students put in to prepare for it, and the ongoing controversy around the racial demographics of the schools. While every year these articles focus on different aspects and take comments from a wide range of people, their messages have followed a similar thread. In 1998, just three years after the Specialized High School Institute was created to address the consistently decreasing number of admitted Black and Latina/o students, the New York Times published a feature on the entrance exam, profiling multiple students and their experiences with the process. In her introduction to the schools, the reporter, Elisabeth Buhmiller, wrote: “Everyone knew that Stuyvesant, although bitterly criticized by [racial] minorities for a test they say benefits students from districts with white majorities, remains a nonnegotiable meritocracy. Connections, money or a dazzling interview will not help a student get

rather than ethnicity. Lee Baker also critiques the use of an ethnic analysis to the exclusion of a racial analysis, arguing that “Shifting the focus from race to ethnicity allows proponents of a so-called colorblind society to ignore racism and explain disparate impacts in terms of culture, behavior, and lack of merit” (Baker, “The Color-Blind Bind, 109).

²⁷⁶Buder, Leonard. “Board Asks Defeat of a Bill Retaining 4 Specialized Schools’ Entrance Tests.” NYTimes.com. The New York Times, 17 May 1971. Web. 17 Feb. 2013. <<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=FB0A11FA355F127A93C5A8178ED85F458785F9>>.

in.”²⁷⁷ Like Gibson and Bloomberg, Buhmiller’s implies that the SHAT (as the entrance exam to Stuyvesant) is objective and equalizing across social and economic lines, as she argues that neither interviews and connections (which can be subjective measures), nor money can help you get in. Refuting the power of economic and social capital within the process right after the description of the school as a “meritocracy” constructs merit as an objective and equalizing measure, which is unaffected by socioeconomic status. Furthermore, Buhmiller’s comments reveal an assumed universality of the notion of meritocracy, framing it as unarguable fact. She dismisses any claims of racial exclusion or unequal advantages by explaining that “Everyone” knows that Stuyvesant is a “nonnegotiable meritocracy,” implying that it is nonsensical to criticize the exam, as it is common knowledge that the test is an unarguably fair and objective method of evaluation.

While Buhmiller portrays the objective nature of the entrance exam as common sense, the idea of merit as an objective, neutral concept and form of measurement has been disputed by a large number of scholars. Whereas Mayor Bloomberg argues that there is “nothing subjective” about the Specialized High School exam, in his book, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*, Frank Wu argues that all merit depends on value judgment and changes based on one’s situation. Writing in support of affirmative action, Wu reminds us that merit is not a naturally existing measure of truth, but rather an artificial construct that we create in order to make measurements and judgments. He argues that, “choosing the definition

²⁷⁷ Buhmiller, Elisabeth. “PUTTING DREAMS TO THE TEST: A special report; Elite High School Is a Grueling Exam Away” *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 2 Apr. 1998. <www.nytimes.com/1998/04/02/nyregion/putting-dreams-test-special-report-elite-high-school-grueling-exam-away.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

of merit chooses the identity of the people who possess it.²⁷⁸ In other words, what is seen as a valuable skill, trait, or achievement is not universal, and varies according to the person. In the decision of how to measure merit in school admissions, for example, the creators of the admissions process decide to value people with certain traits that they see as important.

The assumption of objectivity within the SHSAT stems from the fact that this process of choosing measures of merit is obscured, making it appear that the exam does not involve human judgment. In Mayor Bloomberg's comment we can clearly see who is identified as the active agent in the process: "You pass the test, you get the highest score, you get into the school." It's just you and the test. The framing of the exam as an objective tool of measure that allows evaluations to be made without human interference hides the human work that goes into designing the exam, as well as the decision to use the exam, which according to Wu's argument, both depend on value judgments. Faye Crosby and Stacey Blake-Beard similarly argue in their essay defending Affirmative Action that merit is subjective, and claim that it cannot be objective because we do not have precise instruments to measure merit, nor a clean, uncontaminated environment in which those measurements could be made correctly.²⁷⁹

As the admissions test is not in fact neutral or objective, it is also not unaffected by larger social and economic processes as described by Bloomberg and

²⁷⁸ Wu, Frank H. *Yellow: Race in America beyond Black and White*. (New York: Basic, 2002), 154.

²⁷⁹ Blake-Beard, Stacy and Faye J. Crosby. "Affirmative Action: Diversity, Merit, and the Benefit of White People." Ed. Lois Weis, Linda Powell Pruitt, and April Burns. *Off White: Readings on Power, Privilege, and Resistance*. Ed. Michelle Fine. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004. 74-85), 153.

Buhmiller. Also writing in support of affirmative action, legal scholar Patricia Williams furthers the critique of merit in her essay, “The Obliging Shell.” Williams argues that standards of merit are no more than “structured preferences,” which are not seen as bias or discrimination because they are naturalized as the ‘norm.’ Furthermore, she argues that these structured preferences carry the weight of centuries of white supremacy in which, “‘white’ had an ironclad definition that was the equivalent of ‘good,’ or ‘deserving,’” and, “‘Black’ had an ironclad definition that was the equivalent of ‘bad,’ or unworthy of inclusion.”²⁸⁰ As he furthers his discussion of affirmative action, Wu points out that studies have shown this type of implicit racial bias in examinations that are similar to the Specialized High School test, such as the SAT. In a 2001 University of Michigan law school affirmative action trial, Jay Rosner, then director of the Princeton Review Foundation, and David White, director of Testing for the Public testified as expert witnesses. Wu, who also appeared as a witness, accounts that the testing experts “explained in their expert reports and trial testimony how test scores, despite their seeming objectivity, may not be as reliable for African Americans...The refinement of the test skews it toward the racial majority. There are many questions, which have no noticeable racial or cultural connotations, on which whites tend to do better than African Americans, and a few on which African Americans tend to do better than whites.”²⁸¹ In this summary of the expert testimony, some of the most important people in charge of test creation remind us that they have a role in the evaluation method, although it is rendered invisible on

²⁸⁰ Williams, Patricia. “The Obliging Shell: An Informal Essay on Formal Equal Opportunity.” *Michigan Law Review*. Vol. 87, No. 8, Legal Storytelling (Aug., 1989,) p.2128-2151 (2133)

²⁸¹ Wu, *Yellow*, 152-153.

exam day, and that the biases and judgments that we are so eager to rid the process of by removing the human component are just as present in the writing of exam questions. While the DOE repeatedly says that the SHSAT is neutral and does not favor any particular type of student, it is entirely possible that a similar phenomenon occurs in its creation. However, because the exam is enshrined in law and widely thought to be objective, it has not been seriously considered as a possible source of racial discrimination since 1971.

Mayor Bloomberg's framing of the exam not only hides the human component of the evaluation and decision making process, but in doing so it also moves the agency to the test-taker. "*You pass the test, you get the highest score, you get into the school*" (emphasis mine). With the concealment of the human involvement in the construction of the exam, there is only one person left responsible for its outcome: you. Although the Mayor's use of this agency would most likely be a source of pride for the student he describes, as could say they got the highest score as their own work and agency, the reverse of his statement does not paint such a pretty picture: *You fail the test, you get the lowest score, you don't get into the school*. The student is depicted as solely responsible for their inability to be accepted to a highly resourced school. Wu argues that, "the better the meritocracy, the worse the social stratification," because, "in a meritocracy the people at the bottom deserve to be at the bottom".²⁸² Whereas in the case of residential segregation, unequally resourced schools are clearly a product of social stratification, in a merit-based system, the onus falls upon the individual. In the obscuration of the human-run production of the

²⁸² Ibid, 156.

evaluation tool, and the framing of the exam as objective, only students are left to blame for their own failure.

In the midst of a controversy about racial exclusion, this not only means personal failure but racial failure. If we assume the test to be objective and the students as the only responsible actors in test taking, the only explanation for the miniscule number of Black and Latina/o students that “get into” the school each year is the inability of Black and Latina/o students to pass the exam. This exemplifies Omi and Winant’s explanation of the connection between cultural representation and social structure. The maintenance and protection of the Specialized High School admissions process as an “objective” and “fair” institution simultaneously articulates a racial representation, as it implies that Black and Latino/a students’ low rates of acceptance are due to their academic inability. Conversely, this interpretation of the meaning of race, which paints Black and Latino/a students not intelligent or hardworking enough to attend these schools, in turn shapes the social structure to which it refers. The representation of these students as “not good enough” for the city’s elite schools works to maintain the existing structure that keeps them out. In her chapter of the coauthored book *Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failure of Education*, Jeanne Theoharis explains that if students are seen as less committed to their education they can more easily be cast as undeserving of resources, or at least unharmed by a lack of them.²⁸³ She argues that “what segregation looks like in twenty-first-century America” is “being scolded for

²⁸³ Ibid.

not holding the proper value of education.”²⁸⁴ If Black and Latino/a students are seen as just not up to par with white and Asian/Asian American students, it is easier to see their underrepresentation in the city’s most prestigious schools as “normal.” The normalization of this inequality precludes any concerted efforts to critically examine the evaluation system, thereby maintaining the existing racial organization of the schools.

Class-Based Explanations for Intersectional Problems

In my conversation with Deputy Chancellor Sternberg, I asked him a number of questions specifically about race in the admissions system. Near the end of the conversation, he said to me, “class is even more interesting than race in this issue, and I hope you focus on it.”²⁸⁵ His comment struck me, as it placed value on these two lenses of analysis, clearly privileging one over the other. I was not entirely sure what he meant by “interesting,” but it seemed clear to me that he felt that class was more important than race in discussions of educational inequality. Whereas Mayor Bloomberg has denied any problem with the admissions process for Specialized High Schools in response to the civil rights complaint, that is not the usual stance of the Department of Education. Although the DOE has consistently defended the SHSAT as an objective measure of merit, Department officials acknowledge the disproportionate racial demographics in the Specialized Schools as a pressing issue that they are constantly working to address. As the test itself is understood to be

²⁸⁴ Alonso, Gaston, Noel S. Anderson, Celina Su, and Jeanne Theoharis. *Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Urban Education*. (New York: New York UP, 2009), 110.

²⁸⁵ Sternberg, Personal interview.

objective and neutral, the DOE provides another explanation for the drop in admitted Black and Latina/o students. Within the ongoing controversy around admissions to the Specialized Schools, the DOE has met challenges about racial discrimination and exclusion with class-based responses that focus on test-preparation.

While SHSAT has been characterized as objective and therefore untouchable in policy initiatives²⁸⁶ for decades, the use of solely class-based explanations and solutions for the disproportionate racial demographics of the schools is a relatively new phenomenon. Although the Discovery Program used economic class as a requirement for admittance, it was created specifically to address race-based inequalities and was openly spoken about as such. In the era of affirmative action and integration, this is not that surprising, especially remembering that there was a citywide Plan for Integration in place. Yet in 1995, after the Plan for Integration and the Discovery Program were long gone, Chancellor Cortines responded to the report of a decline in the number of Black and Latina/o students in the Specialized Schools by creating a free test prep program that gave preference to Black and Latina/o students.²⁸⁷

Since the 2007 lawsuit in which white and Asian/Asian American parents challenged the racial criteria in the admissions policy for the DOE's test prep institute, leading to the abolishment of such criteria, the DOE's discourse has changed. While their solutions to disproportionate racial demographics are still based in test prep (and in fact still rely on the same test prep program created in 1995), their

²⁸⁶ Literally, as it could not be changed by law.

²⁸⁷ Newman, Maria. "Cortines Has Plan to Coach Minorities into Top Schools." *NYTimes.com*. The New York Times, 18 Mar. 1995. Web. 7 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/18/nyregion/cortines-has-plan-to-coach-minorities-into-top-schools.html>>.

explanations for the disparity have shifted to a solely class-based discussion. In interviews with two of the Deputy Chancellors, I asked them each the same question: “What do you think accounts for the disproportionate racial demographics in the Specialized High Schools?” Deputy Chancellor of Portfolio Management, Marc Sternberg’s answer was simple and concise: “At test schools it’s about test prep, that’s really the argument – who can afford test prep and who can’t.”²⁸⁸ Deputy Chancellor Gibson’s response was longer, but ultimately boiled down to the same answer: “you find that poor kids can’t afford to take the preparation class and you find that they may be smart, but they’re not prepared.”²⁸⁹ She did not mention race. These comments are consistent with the Department of Education’s public responses to accusations of racial exclusion with continuous reminders of their commitment to the Specialized High School Institute. In 2010, in one of the New York Times’ yearly articles on “lack of diversity” in the Specialized Schools,²⁹⁰ it was reported that, “The department has tried to increase the number of Black and Latino students admitted to the top schools by hosting an intensive test preparation institute.”²⁹¹ As the institute admits students based on household income, not racial identity, this can be seen as a class-based solution.

These statements reveal that the Department of Education use class-based approaches to explain and address race based issues. As I was asking directly race-related questions in my interviews and was responded to in a way that omitted race and instead used a class analysis, it is clear that the DOE officials understood the

²⁸⁸ Sternberg, Marc. Personal interview conducted by Cory Meara-Bainbridge. 24 Aug. 2012.

²⁸⁹ Gibson, Dorita. Personal interview conducted by Cory Meara-Bainbridge.

²⁹⁰ There has been at least one every year since 2006.

²⁹¹ Medina, “At Top City Schools, Lack of Diversity Persists.”

racial issue as a product of class dynamics. While access to economic resources is a crucial factor in the complex navigation of institutional bureaucracy that the high school admissions process requires, I argue that it is not sufficient as a lens of analysis for a historically race-based issue.

Why Class Matters A Lot

The Department of Education is right to be concerned about the barriers that low-income students face in seeking admittance to Specialized Schools, as students' class backgrounds affect their experience of every part of the high school admissions system. In her dissertation on the New York City high school admissions system, Madeline Pérez, a former education organizer and an alumna of New York City public schools, argues that families' class background and financial status are one of the most important factors in their experience of the high school choice process. Pérez uses Bourdieu's ideas of cultural capital and habitus, along with a political economy approach to examine how students, parents, and teachers experienced the admissions process in two middle schools with highly disparate class demographics. After witnessing the entire year-long high school process experienced by both upper-middle-class students and working-class students, she concluded that "the DOE created a classed experience which made multiple assumptions about families and middle schools based on middle-class ideals and a dominant habitus."²⁹² Bourdieu defines habitus as "the lasting system of transposable dispositions which functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes

²⁹² Pérez, Madeline. "Two Tales of One City: A Political Economy of the New York City Public High School Admissions Process." Diss. (The City University of New York, 2011) 48.

possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks.”²⁹³ Pérez further this definition, explaining it as “one’s individual make-up of beliefs, cultural practices, and how they are externally perceived.”²⁹⁴ Pérez argues that not only did the working-class families she worked with not have the economic resources needed to navigate the complicated high school admissions system, but that very often their particular habitus did not match up with the dominant habitus of the Department of Education or the high schools, and therefore “didn’t have the rules to the game, or didn’t even know they were in a game.”²⁹⁵

While that may sound similar to DOE accusations that the problem with the admissions system lies with parents who do not understand the process, or do not put in the effort, Pérez makes it very clear that this is not about a lack of care or effort. She argues that many working-class parents are in fact very involved, but not in the ways they are expected to be, and therefore their effort is seen as illegitimate and not recognized by the dominant social structure.²⁹⁶ Furthermore, she explains that families’ priorities when making school choices were highly influenced by their economic resources. After completing surveys and interviews Pérez concluded that whereas the upper-middle-class families were able to prioritize the academic prestige of the school and the availability of college preparation programs, working-class families prioritized location (distance from home), safety, and uniforms. She explained: “The political economy of families [from the lower-class school] shaped their school priorities because their limited incomes and few social connections did

²⁹³ Ibid, 72.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 36.

²⁹⁵ Pérez, Madeline. Personal interview conducted by Cory Meara-Bainbridge. 11 Feb. 2013.

²⁹⁶ Pérez, “Two Tales of One City,” 336.

not allow them to supplement their child's schooling with private transportation, apartments in safer neighborhoods, and more than modest clothing wardrobes."²⁹⁷ Furthermore, Pérez argues that working-class families' access to economic and social capital limits their access to information both on the schools and on the admissions process itself. Whereas the upper-middle-class families used many sources of information throughout the process, extensively using the internet, visiting schools, and buying books or time with consultants, the working-class families that Pérez worked with often had to rely solely on the 500 page High School Directory provided by the DOE.²⁹⁸

Pérez's work illustrates the extremely significant role that economic resources and class background play in the admissions process, showing us that the DOE's focus on economic barriers in admittance to the Specialized Schools remains imperative. However, her meticulous and detailed account of this experience also illuminates the intense complexity of the choice process in relation to the political economy of the New York City public high school system, and the multitude of factors that contribute to the ultimate outcome. From this work we can see that although economic class is clearly a point of inequality in admissions to the Specialized High Schools, the DOE's solution of increased test preparation is clearly not sufficient to address it. Until it is addressed that the system as a whole is based on middle-class ideals and values, any effort to provide economic services such as test preparation will be a drop in the bucket.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 324

²⁹⁸ Ibid, 191.

Why Class is Not Enough: towards a race and class-based analysis

While class is definitely an important factor in the exclusivity of the Specialized High School admissions process, it does not provide an exhaustive explanation. Ultimately, the continuous controversy around the process has concerned *racial* not class demographics, and while the DOE's class analysis may be able to explain a part of the racial disparity, the lack of success of their class-based solution begs the question as to whether there's something else going on. In their foundational text, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that race "has been a fundamental axis of social organization in the U.S.,"²⁹⁹ and therefore requires its own category of analysis. The authors critique what they identify as the three most prominent theories of race in the recent decades – ethnicity theories, class theories, and nation theories. They argue that these approaches "reduce race to a mere manifestation of other supposedly more fundamental social and political relationships such as ethnicity or class,"³⁰⁰ and "neglect the specificity of race as an autonomous field of social conflict, political organization, and cultural/ideological meaning."³⁰¹ They therefore propose a theory of racial formation, placing the creation, transformation, and inhabitation of racial categories as the center of analysis.³⁰²

In their explanation of the class theory of race and its shortcomings, Omi and Winant explain that class-based approaches have provided great insights on important sociological shifts, but that they have also failed to notice other key parts of these shifts. They argue that these theories do not take into account "political and cultural

²⁹⁹ Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*, 12.

³⁰⁰ Ibid, 2.

³⁰¹ Ibid, 48.

³⁰² Ibid, 55.

dimensions” of the changes and processes that they study, which are “often their most salient features.”³⁰³ Furthermore, in the class-based perspective of race, racial inequality is never seen as the root of the problem, and is always only an outcome, with the cause found in “market imperfections, political power structures, or the search for secure means of labor control.” Racial dynamics are only seen as a manifestation of these more “fundamental processes.”³⁰⁴

Omi and Winant’s diagnosis of the class theory of race is reflected in the Department of Education’s class-based explanation of the racial demographics of the Specialized High Schools. The identification of lack of test prep as the main reason for racial disparities suggests a cause that is solely based in economic structures and processes with the outcome of racial inequality. This ignores the political and historical processes particularly having to do with race that have shaped these schools and their admissions processes. While they have been further decreasing in recent years, the number of Black and Latina/o students admitted to the Specialized Schools has been disproportionately low throughout their existence. In the creation of the 1965 Plan for Integration, the Board of Education considered eliminating the schools as they viewed them as a hindrance to ending racial segregation.³⁰⁵ In 1970, parents and community organizations accused the test of being “culturally biased against Black and Puerto Rican candidates,” as they represented only 10.7% and 3.7% of

³⁰³ Ibid, 50.

³⁰⁴ Ibid,48-49.

³⁰⁵ Buder, Leonard. “Schools’ Experts Urge 4-4-4 System; Staff Committees Seek to Improve Instruction and Promote Integration.” NYTimes.com. The New York Times, 17 Dec. 1965. Web. 19 Feb. 2013.

<<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F70A10FE3C5D167A93C5A81789D95F418685F9>>.

accepted students respectively.³⁰⁶ Furthermore, the test-based admissions process as it stands now was cemented through a highly racially charged legal battle. When the Board of Education looked into changing the admissions process in response to the accusations of cultural bias, white parents fought back, organizing to assure the passing of the 1971 bill that wrote the test into law.³⁰⁷ As the current admissions process was fomented in a political battle that was decidedly racial, and part of a history of racial segregation based on white supremacy, it is not possible to explain the continued racial inequality using solely economic analysis.

Furthermore, the use of class-based analysis ignores the values and ideals involved in the creation of educational policy and the admissions process that are affected by the social and cultural norms of those who create them. Basing the analysis purely on unequal distribution of economic resource, which leads to an inequality of test preparation depends on the earlier discussed assumption that the exam is an objective and legitimate form of evaluation, which is only hindered by an inequality in its accessibility. Yet as we were reminded by Wu's discussion of the SAT, there are cultural and racial aspects at play in the production of the evaluation process as well, as it was created by humans who each have their own social and cultural backgrounds that help shape their values and ideals. We can see in Pérez's work that these values do not only come into play in the creation of the exam, but throughout the entire admissions process. From the distribution of information to the filling out of the application, the admissions process was created through decisions made by people, and affected by each individual decision maker's social and cultural

³⁰⁶ Buder, "Board Asks Defeat of a Bill Retaining 4 Specialized Schools' Entrance Tests."

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

values. Pérez argues that the admissions system is based on assumptions of middle-class values, thus, is it possible that there are assumptions of values that implicate race?

It is clear that the DOE's class-based analysis, which depicts the continued exclusion of Black and Latina/o students from the Specialized High Schools as an outcome of economic inequality, is not providing us with the whole picture. The Specialized High School Institute, created to address the economic barriers to admissions by providing free test preparation, was started in 1995 and has been continuously expanded to serve more students over the past 18 years. Yet in the nearly two decades since the institute was founded, the number of Black and Latina/o students admitted to the Specialized Schools continued to drop every year until last year, when the number increased by 14%, with Black students still receiving only 6% of offers and Latina/o students receiving 8%.³⁰⁸ Furthermore, even among students who have participated in the test-prep institute there remains a racial gap. In 2010, only 21% of Latina/o and 19% of Black graduates of the Specialized High School Institute were offered admission to a Specialized School.³⁰⁹ Meanwhile 28% of white students and 57% of Asian/Asian American students citywide received offers, test-prep or not.³¹⁰

The specifically racial nature of the admissions controversy deserves a specifically racial analysis. The system is in need of a thorough exploration of how

³⁰⁸ Santos, Fernanda. "More Blacks and Latinos Admitted to Elite New York High Schools." NYTimes.com. The New York Times, 29 Feb. 2012. Web. 20 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/01/education/more-blacks-and-latinos-admitted-to-elite-new-york-high-schools.html>>.

³⁰⁹ Medina, "At Top City Schools, Lack of Diversity Persists."

³¹⁰ Ibid.

race functions within the process, and how students of varying racial identities experience it. While an attention to the role of differing economic resources in admissions is crucial to the DOE's goal of a system based on access and equity, it is not sufficient and must be supplemented by a careful consideration of historically based racial patterns of exclusion. In *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, bell hooks reminds us that race and class are inextricably linked in the United States, and cannot be separated. Hundreds of years of legal, political, and economic structures that supported white supremacy denied people of color access to educational opportunities, jobs, housing, and protection from violence, causing deep-seated economic inequalities between racial groups. Cheryl Harris explains that "Whiteness determined whether one could vote, travel freely, attend schools, obtain work, and indeed, defined the structure of social relations along the entire spectrum of interactions between individuals and society. Whiteness then became status, a form of racialized privilege ratified in law."³¹¹ However, hooks makes clear that this in no way means that all people of color are poor or that all poor people are of color.³¹² She explains that there have always been class divides among both Blacks and whites, which notions of racial solidarity have often obscured. She argues that it is essential for people of color with class privilege to acknowledge that such privilege "mediates racial injustice in a way that it does not for the poor and underprivileged,"³¹³ and that racial justice cannot be achieved if upper class people of color do not stand in solidarity with the struggles of the poor. Yet that race is still a central factor in this class divide. hooks points out that before the end of legal racial segregation, the

³¹¹ Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness As Property," 1745.

³¹² hooks, bell. "Where We Stand: Class Matters." (New York: Routledge, 2000), 90.

³¹³ Ibid, 94.

amount of privilege that could be accrued by a person of color was severely limited, no matter how much wealth they acquired, as “the surrounding white supremacist world reminded all of us through exploitation and domination that even the richest Black people could be crushed by racism’s heavy weight.”³¹⁴ Although that is no longer the case, she argues not only that Black elites continue to experience racism on a daily basis, but also that the rise of a small amount of Black Americans to wealth and power has not led to a situation of racial inequality, but instead further isolated and segregated the Black poor.

hooks’ argument makes it clear that issues of systemic inequality such as those within the New York City public high school system cannot be thoroughly examined with a singularly race- or class-based analysis. The history of social and political processes in the U.S. has inextricably linked the process of racialization with economics and access to resources. The question of access within New York’s Specialized High Schools therefore demands a nuanced and careful examination of how both the race and class backgrounds of families affect their experience of the admissions system, and the interaction between these two frames of analysis.

The Model Minority

In the times when race is used as the center of focus in public discourse about the Specialized Schools, the emphasis is generally placed on the exclusion of black and Latina/o students. However, in order to talk about exclusion we must also look at who is included. Whereas Beacon and many other screened schools have a majority of white students, the majority of students who attend Specialized Science High

³¹⁴ Ibid, 91.

Schools are Asian/Asian American students. In 2012 8,549 of the 14,415 students who enrolled in the Specialized Schools identified as Asian/Asian American – 59%.³¹⁵ At the three original Specialized Schools, Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Tech, Asian/Asian American students – who make up 14.4% of high school students citywide – account for 72%, 63%, and 59% of their respective student bodies.³¹⁶ Asian/Asian American students are the majority in six out of the eight schools,³¹⁷ and in the schools in which they are not the majority, they are still overrepresented in relation to citywide numbers.

Yet although the majority status of Asian/Asian American students in the Specialized Schools is not insignificant, it is important to note that it does not signify a dismantling of white privilege in the high school system. Although many Asian/Asian American students now have access to the city’s prestigious high schools, which was not the case for the majority of the Specialized Schools existence, these students are still not fully accepted. In the past decade, the news media has consistently reported on the large presence of Asian/Asian American students in the Specialized Schools, always in an attempt to explain why and how it has happened. A post about Specialized School enrollment on a New York educational blog run by public radio station WNYC recently asked, “But why are so many of the kids Asian?

³¹⁵ Spencer, Kyle. “For Asians, School Tests Are Vital Steppingstones.” NYTimes.com. The New York Times, 26 Oct. 2012. Web. 14 Feb, 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/27/education/a-grueling-admissions-test-highlights-a-racial-divide.html?pagewanted=all>>.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Staten Island Technical School, which is 63% white and 30% Asian/Asian American students, and The High School for American Studies at Lehman College, which is 49% white and 16% Asian/Asian American. (“New York State Report Cards 2011.” New York State Testing and Accountability Reporting Tool. New York State Department of Education. 2011. Web. 24 Dec. 2012. <<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/School.do?county=NEW YORK&district=310300010000&school=310300011479&year=2011>>.)

It's an awkward question."³¹⁸ Last year the New York Times published a feature article with the headline, "Asians' Success in High School Admissions Test Seen as Issue by Some."³¹⁹ As the dominance of white students in the most prestigious schools in the city has been taken for granted since their inception, the media never questioned it in this way. However, the inclusion of Asian/Asian American students in these schools has been met with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. While many public interrogations of this demographic shift praise Asian/Asian American students and families for their presence in the schools, they still search for explanations as to how they have managed it, as their success breaks from the expected norm of white domination.

But as is clear in the above New York Times headline, not all public discussion represents the growing presence of Asian/Asian American students in the Specialized Schools in a positive light. To some white parents and students, the increasing numbers of Asian/Asian American students is an encroachment on their previously accepted dominance in the schools. The New York Times article about "Asian Success" that a white parent on a popular education e-mail unhappily referred to the "Asian-ification" of the elite schools, while a post on a parent blog complained about "Asian kids taking all the spots because they prep excessively."³²⁰ The idea that Asian/Asian American students are "taking all the spots" reveals a feeling of entitlement on the part of white families to the seats in the Specialized Schools. Asian/Asian Americans can only be "taking" spots if it is assumed that those spots

³¹⁸ Fertig, Beth. "City Faces Scrutiny About the Exam for its Specialized High Schools." 13 Mar. 2013. Web. 15 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.schoolbook.org/2013/03/13/city-faces-scrutiny-about-exam-for-its-specialized-high-schools/>>.

³¹⁹ Spencer, "For Asians, School Tests Are Vital Steppingstones."

³²⁰ Ibid.

belong to white students. There is no critique of white students prepping excessively, even though many white families also pay for private classes or tutors to prepare for the entrance exam,³²¹ but the efforts of Asian/Asian American families are met with resentment, as they are destabilizing the norm of white dominance which has been maintained in the Specialized Schools for the entirety of their existence.

As mentioned before, while many of the media representations of Asian/Asian American students in the exam schools have questioned their presence, many others have praised Asian/Asian American students and families for their high percentages of admissions. In the past decade, the DOE and mainstream media has often represented Asian/Asian American students as the “model minority,” who have been able to overcome racial inequality and succeed through hard work and dedication. In 2010 Chancellor Joel Klein commented that the most important story in high school admissions was “the number of Asian students who are coming to the city, taking the test and passing it at a very high rate...I think it reflect a real commitment and a real ethic in terms of preparing.”³²² This educational “commitment” is further explained as a result of specific cultural attributes that Asian/Asian Americans are seen as possessing, such as “a set of moral principles that emphasizes scholarship and reverence for elders, as well as their rejection of child-rearing philosophies more common in the United States that emphasize confidence and general well-being.”³²³ However, while these representations may appear to be a celebrations of Asian/Asian American success that indicate a commitment to racial equality, these representations

³²¹ Including my family and those of almost all of my white friends.

³²² Medina, Jennifer. “A Demographic Breakdown of Who Took, and Passed, the Test.” 16 Feb. 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/27/education/a-grueling-admissions-test-highlights-a-racial-divide.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.

³²³ Medina, Jennifer. “A Demographic Breakdown of Who Took, and Passed, the Test.”

constitute a huge generalization of a racial category that includes people of many different ethnicities, nationalities, and cultures, based on a racially essentializing assumption of their values. Furthermore, most of these praises reinforce essentialist stereotypes of Asian/Asian Americans while using them to criticize Black and Latino/a families for their exclusion from the Specialized Schools.

In his extensive critique of the popular representation in the U.S. of Asian/Asian Americans as the model minority, Frank Wu argues that while this myth may seem harmless and even positive at face value, it must be rejected for three reasons. First, because it is a “gross simplification that is not accurate to be seriously used to understand 10 million people.”³²⁴ Besides the obvious fact that such generalized statements about academic commitment and moral principles cannot possibly describe every member of a racial group, the Asian/Asian American racial category comprises of people from a large variety of ethnic and notional backgrounds, whose diverse cultural understandings and value systems surely cannot be described homogenously.

Secondly Wu argues that the model minority myth is used to simultaneously obscure the racial discrimination that Asian/Asian Americans face daily and turn Asian/Asian Americans into a “racial threat.” The common depiction of Asian/Asian Americans as unilaterally “successful” in both educational and economic endeavors makes it easy for others to dismiss the structural inequalities and racial hatred that they continue to be subjected to. This disregard for Asian/Asian Americans’ experience of inequality was exemplified in a recent episode of *The Brian Lehrer Show* on WNYC in which education reporter Beth Fertig discussed her investigations

³²⁴ Wu, Frank. *Yellow*, 49.

into Specialized High School test prep.³²⁵ As Fertig explained that the Chinese American families that she had spoken to in Brooklyn spent up to a fifth of their yearly household income on test prep, host Brian Lehrer relayed that his colleagues in the studio had expressed strong reactions of disbelief and admiration in response to this knowledge. Yet while they praised these families for investing heavily in their children's education, there was no acknowledgment of the economic inequalities that made it necessary for them to spend such a large percentage of their income in order to ensure that their children receive a quality education.

Despite the fact that this statistic caused such astonishment in the WNYC studios, as workers expressed disbelief that anyone would actually choose to making such spending choices, Lehrer did not hesitate to suggest it as a model for others. After a brief discussion of the NAACP's civil rights complaint against the Specialized Schools, Lehrer returned to Fertig's findings, commenting that, "one could argue, that if families like [the ones you spoke with] are willing to live close to the vest and spend so much money on the tutoring for their kids to get into these schools, then so can students who are from American culture...rather than spending so much money on their cellphone plan for example."³²⁶ His use of the term "American culture" is very revealing, as it simultaneously excludes Chinese Americans and other Asian/Asian Americans (as their discussion moved interchangeably between the two) from Americanness, while also obscuring the true targets of his comment. Looking at this remark in the context of a discussion on the civil rights complaint, we can assume that he is not talking about just *any* students who are from "American culture," but

³²⁵ Lehrer, Brian. "The Brian Lehrer Show: SchoolBook: High School Admissions." 13 Mar. 2013. <http://www.wnyc.org/popup_player/#>.

³²⁶ Ibid.

specifically those who have secured few spots in the Specialized Schools: Black and Latino/a students.

This leads us to Wu's third reason that Asian/Asian Americans should reject the model minority myth: it is used to criticize other people of color by carrying within it the implicit (and sometimes explicit) taunt of "They made it; why can't you?"³²⁷ Wu explains that representations of Asian/Asian Americans as the model minority use Horatio-Alger-like narratives of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" to depict Asian/Asian Americans as flesh-and-blood evidence of the American Dream. He argues that they are seen as "living proof of the power of the free market and the absence of racial discrimination,"³²⁸ and therefore, "Each commendation of Asian/Asian Americans is paired off against a reprimand of African Americans."³²⁹ This is visible in many news articles on Specialized High School admissions, which place possible reasons for the underrepresentation of Black and Latino/a students along side speculations of how Asian/Asian Americans have managed to gain so many of the coveted spots. While such juxtapositions provide a more subtle suggestion that Asian/Asian Americans have some quality and Black and Latino/a students are lacking, other comments make this critique more explicit. A New York Times article last year quoted Stuyvesant students' opinions on why there were so few Black and Latino/a students in the school. They explained that some students "did not hesitate to say that they believed the family culture of Asian and white students put a higher value on educational achievement than others," and quoted one such student, who contended that "African-American and Hispanic parents don't

³²⁷ Wu, *Yellow*, 49.

³²⁸ *Ibid*, 44.

³²⁹ *Ibid*, 62.

always seek out extra help for their kids and their kids don't score as high."³³⁰ The public lauding of Asian/Asian American students and families does not recognize their accomplishments in their own right, but instead is used to compare people of color without regard for differing histories of racial discrimination.

Examining the ways in which Asian/Asian Americans are represented within the Specialized High Schools makes it clear that their overrepresentation in the elite schools in no way signifies an equalized status with whites, nor the dismantling of white privilege. Asian/Asian American students are not fully welcomed into this previously white-controlled space, and their presence is continuously questioned and interrogated. Their success is repeatedly explained using racially essentialist descriptions that make sweeping generalizations and mark Asian/Asian Americans as perpetually foreign and "other." Furthermore, as these explanations are often based on stereotyped understandings of Asian/Asian American "value systems," they are used in public discourse to question why other people of color do not have the same commitment to their own success. The success of Asian/Asian Americans is represented as evidence that racial discrimination can be overcome with hard work, thereby relieving whites of the responsibility of addressing racial inequality, and leaving white privilege intact.

Conclusion

Although communities of color have continuously decried the lack of Black and Latina/o students in the Specialized Schools since 1965, today the numbers of such

³³⁰ Baker, "Specialized High School Admissions Test is Racially Discriminatory, Complaint Says."

students in the city's most prestigious schools remain almost as low as they were fifty years ago, with little sign of increase. While the Board of Education has continuously attempted to address the continued underrepresentation of Black and Latino/a students, their efforts have been to little avail. The legal protection of white expectations of privilege through the state-mandated preservation of the entrance exam inhibited the Board of Ed. from making substantial changes in the schools' admissions processes, despite findings of discrimination. With the subsequent normalization of the idea of the exam as an objective tool of measure, the Department of Education now refuses to consider the exam itself in their efforts to address the continued disparities, and have instead adopted an entirely test prep based approach. In the 60s and 70s, education officials were able to slightly increase Black and Latina/o enrollment in the Specialized Schools by providing structural support to a small number of students that were identified as talented and capable outside of the admissions exam. However, with the rise of colorblind rhetoric and anti-affirmative action sentiment in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that effort was abandoned and with it, the gains in Black and Latina/o enrollment.

The Department of Education then turned to a solely class-based analysis that focused on equal opportunity within a system of objective measure, and not equal results. This focus has shown no positive results in increased access for Black and Latina/o students, as the numbers of these students at the Specialized Schools have consistently declined. While families' access to economic resources is clearly significant in their ability to successfully navigate the admissions process, it is not sufficient within an admissions system with a history of specifically racial inequality

and domination. As the Specialized Schools began as white dominated spaces, and were subsequently maintained as such for the majority of their existence, a solely class-based solution has not and will not succeed in addressing the inequalities that Black and Latino/a students face within these schools. While Asian/Asian American students have recently challenged the majority position of whites within the Specialized Schools, this shift has not in fact challenged assumed expectations of white privilege, as these students have been viewed with a combination of resentment and suspicion, and used as further justification of the continued exclusion of Blacks and Latino/as.

Conclusion: Where Do We Go From Here?: Towards a Race-Conscious Politics of Equalization

In chapter one, I found that in Beacon, these explanations of the admissions system stemmed from an understanding of race as an archaic and flawed concept that recognized any attempt to address racialized groups as divisive and destructive to the creation of an equal society. The defenders of the Beacon admissions process's vision of an equal school therefore was one in which the schools maintained "high standards" and worked to lift up students of color to meet them. While this vision was based in genuine desires for racial equality, these understandings allowed these white educators to rationalize continued inequities, relieving themselves and their school from responsibility for halting the perpetuation of such injustices. In understanding Beacon as a diverse and therefore equal institution, Beacon teachers and administrators explain away surrounding inequalities as given and expected, and therefore not the concern of the school itself except in their charitable inclinations to help others into their oasis of equality. The schools are therefore able to feel secure in their commitment to racial equality while maintaining the school as a white-dominated space. The white educators' understanding of the students first and foremost as individuals caused them to see Beacon students – the majority of which were white – as "deserving" of their spots, as they had earned them on their own "merits." In turn, this depicted students of color, who were increasingly underrepresented in the school, as poorly informed and unprepared for a rigorous education. This perpetuates a racist representation of students of color, solidifying white students "stake in racism," as our quality education was seen as dependent on the exclusion of students of color. Such representations further the expectation of

white privilege, as they send a message to white students like myself that we are entitled to a high quality education, while students of color must work harder to be accepted into the selective circle. The defense of the Beacon admissions process can be classified as a racist white racial project, as it represents students of color as unworthy and white students as individually deserving of high quality schooling, while working to maintain an admissions structure that reproduces white dominance within the school.

In chapter two, I documented the ways in which structural inequality and white privilege have been maintained in New York City high schools despite fifty years of vocal commitment to racial equity on the part of the Board of Ed./DOE. As Harris explains, the Supreme Court's refusal to acknowledge the privilege that has historically been afforded to white people in the U.S. and the substantial material inequalities created by centuries of second class citizenship for people of color prevented the decision in *Brown v. Board of Ed.* from creating a substantial move towards racial equality. Instead, the ruling's sole focus on integration established the existing state of inequality as a neutral baseline and white privilege as an expected status quo. Whiteness as property therefore was not dismantled but instead took on a new, more subtle form, in which the State refused to acknowledge whites' right to racial domination, but still protected existing expectations of white privilege. This was visible in the NYC Board of Education's attempts to integrate, as they sought to provide equal access to schools, but did not guarantee equal distribution of resources, maintaining white students' entitlement to majority status in some of the best-resourced schools. The inability of the city to integrate schools further reinforced the

notion of the existing state of inequality as “normal” and “natural,” making it appear impossible to create anything different. However, their attempts were not looking to provide material equality to all, but only to create diverse learning environments for some – an understanding of equality that echoes that of the Beacon teachers and administrators. While the DOE’s attempts to create equality were based on the national norm, they did not in fact challenge the existing state of structural inequity, thereby maintaining and protecting white privilege.

In the twenty first century, this maintenance has continued in the form of market-based education. Dominant cultural understandings in the U.S. of the individual as the fundamental building block of society have shaped the understanding of expanded individual choice as a signifier of equality. Within this market-based approach, the only obstacle to equal opportunity in the school market is access to resources. However, this emphasis on student agency obscures the very real structural power of the high schools and the DOE in the school matching process. Schools are also able to choose students, and in a system where they are competitively evaluated, it is in their best interest to choose students that are most likely to perform well on evaluations and therefore to contribute positively to the school’s rating. In an accepted state of racial inequality in which it is expected that whites are at the top, this process privileges white students, who more often come from middle schools that are viewed as “high performing.”

Chapter three presents possibly the most fundamental example of the maintenance of privilege at the top in New York City high schools. The history of the Specialized High Schools is rife with conflict of a specifically racial nature. For the

majority of their existence, this constituted a struggle between whites and everyone else, as white students dominated the schools. While communities of color continuously demanded a change in the admissions process, white stakeholders in the school defended the exam, preventing efforts to amend or abolish it. In the last few decades this racial struggle has become more complex with the increasing presence of Asian American students in the schools. The conflict is now framed both as a struggle between whites and Asian Americans, as Asian American students encroach on the majority status that white students have long enjoyed and expected in the schools, and as the battle of Blacks and Latino/as to break into the mainly white and Asian American schools. Yet while the inclusion of Asian American students in the prestigious schools complicates the narrative, it does not destabilize the fundamental underlying power dynamics. White students are still overrepresented in all but one of the Specialized Schools, and are the only racial group whose presence is not questioned but rather expected and assumed. Furthermore, Asian American students' presence is used to justify the continued exclusion of Black and Latino/a students from the Specialized High Schools, thereby impeding efforts to dismantle the maintained privileged position of white students within the schools.

When Deputy Chancellor Gibson explained her job description, she assured me that while her position was still very necessary, the Department of Education had already accomplished a lot in the past decade to improve equity and access in the school system. She explained: "In the last ten to twelve years we've done *great* things – and we've closed the achievement gap a little bit, but there's still a gap. But I

always say there's always going to be a gap.”³³¹ The Deputy Chancellor's comment reflects many of the understandings of the state of inequality in the school system that I have observed throughout my research. Although there is continuous outcry about continued racial inequality from a select few, the dominant sentiment within the Department of Education and its selective high schools is that, while our system is not perfect and the road to inequality is long and winding, we are on course and en route to a just system. However, this notion of progress is based on particular understandings of equality that are not universal, but rather historically and politically situated, and shaped by a person's cultural conditioning.

Deputy Chancellor Sternberg similarly expressed a feeling that equity and access in high school admissions process had greatly improved in the past decade. While he admitted that “not every school is perfect,” he felt that the system had made significant progress in providing students of color and low-income students with more access to quality schools through the expansion of school choice. In his enthusiastic account of the positive aspects of the citywide system, he explained to me that students of color and low-income students “can choose from 100 different options, whereas before when I was teaching there, they had no choice but to go to their zoned school, which [often] had a very low graduation rate.” Sternberg's comments make clear that his understanding of equality involved increasing student choice. This view is based on an understanding of equality as the ability to function as independent agent within a market place of school options. Within this framework, increased school choice provides an equal opportunity for students of color and low-

³³¹ Gibson

income students to access the city's most high-quality schools instead of being assigned to failing schools by the State. Like Gibson and Sternberg, defenders of the Beacon admissions process also understood their school to be on a path towards equality. Those involved in the struggle over Beacon's admissions system expressed their understanding of equality as the creation of racially diverse groups in which individuals of many different backgrounds were included and valued equally. For the defenders of Beacon's admissions process, the schools' obligation to foster this type of equality was confined to their own student population, as they could not assure the diversity of other student populations. Under this understanding, Beacon was in fact working to create equality, as while they were part of a system that admissions defenders recognized as unequal, the school itself had students from many different racial and class backgrounds, neighborhoods, family histories, etc., thereby functioning as an island of "diversity" within a highly segregated system.

While these views express a desire for equal education, they are all based on notions of equal opportunity, not actual material equality of resource distribution. It is true that all students now have the opportunity to apply to high-quality schools, which was not a possibility in a zoned school system. It is also true that a few select schools, such as Beacon, have a much more racially mixed student population than any New York City schools did before integration. However, this by no means signifies an equalization of the educational resources allocated to all students. Regardless of students' supposed ability to choose any school in the city, and regardless of the small amount of racial mixing in schools such as Beacon, in 2011 the twenty lowest performing high schools in New York City were over 85% Black and Latino/a.

Fifteen of the twenty were over 95% Black and Latino/a.³³² What does school choice really mean when the options for quality education are so few and carefully guarded for those deemed worthy, and some of the other choices are so dismal that they are marked as “failing?”

While the introduction of school choice and the racial “diversification” of the elite high schools may have spelled inclusion for some students of color, there isn’t room for everyone. If we read these changes as indications of progress on a path to racial equality, what would be the next stop on the road? The Deputy Chancellor described one of her responsibilities as figuring out how to make sure that “all kids are prepared” to take the Specialized High School test, and that “everyone has access to the great schools” in the system. Similarly, a Beacon teacher suggested that we should not change the admissions system but instead should make sure other students have the chance to have the great experience we had at the school by helping them through the admissions process. Both the teacher and the Deputy Chancellor propose a path to equality that seeks to lift up those at the bottom and bring them to the top. If this is the next destination on the path to equality, we’re going to hit a sizable roadblock. The top is not big enough for all of us. While the idea of bringing everyone up to an equal level of advantage sounds tempting, it is inherently incompatible with the notion of selective schools that gains their prestige from their exclusivity. School choice does not allow all students access to highly desired high schools, because if it did, they would not be highly desired. Regardless of whether or

³³² "New York State Report Cards 2011." *New York State Testing and Accountability Reporting Tool*.

not “all kids” are prepared to take the Specialized High School test, only a fraction of them will ever be accepted.

Here lies the problem with solutions to racial disparities that focus on the disadvantage of people of color, but do not acknowledge the concurrent advantage afforded to white people. Regardless of the number of people applying, the same small number will be accepted. Therefore there is no way to simply include more people of color into the fold: any rise in the number of accepted students of color will necessarily imply a decline in the number of accepted white students. In a system of limited resources, we cannot all be at the top, meaning any hope for substantial material inequality demands a recognition and dismantling of long-established white privilege.

Furthermore, the suggestion that Black and Latino/a students simply need to be better prepared to apply to the city’s most prestigious schools implies that their underrepresentation in such schools is due to their own incapacities. While school choice opens options for all students and gives them decision-making power in their educational career, it also assigns them the responsibility of the outcome of their school match. While my school choice was praised by Deputy Chancellor Sternberg, in my interview with Deputy Chancellor Gibson, she repeatedly explained that one of the major problems in the high school admissions system is that students make poor choices due to lack of information. She explained that many students and families “just want to go to the school across the street,” and do not do the necessary research to find out that school may have low graduation rates or even be marked as “failing.” Within the framework of school choice, it is the student’s responsibility to make

smart educational decisions. However, Gibson's explanation for the fates of students in failing schools does not take into account the fact that in a stratified school system, someone will always be in those schools. Her argument obscures the structural role of the Department of Education, as the high school matching system has two sides, and even if all students chose not to apply to failing schools, some students would evidently still be placed in them. Just as we can never all fit at the top, we can also never all escape the bottom. As the lowest performing schools are overwhelmingly Black and Latino/a, her assessment of the high school admissions system only works to paint Black and Latino/a students as responsible for the enduring educational inequalities that they deal with daily. School choice therefore creates a fallacy of equal opportunity, in which a small percentage of Black and Latino/a students are given the chance to attend well-resourced, high-quality schools, whose prestige is based upon their exclusiveness, therefore leaving the majority of Black and Latino/a students in under-resourced schools with no one to blame but themselves.

The research in this project suggests that not only have we not reached a state of racial equality in the New York City high schools, but that we are not even on the path. The Department of Education and its elite high schools have yet to make their way to the road that leads to a just system. They instead have tried to jump to the end, to a society in which race is not a significant factor in social and economic well-being, and have gotten lost in their attempts to take short cuts. I argue that there can be no short cuts, as we will not achieve an equal system without facing the continued legacy of inequality and privilege head-on. I therefore propose that further efforts to

address educational disparities must move towards a race-conscious politics of equalization.

Arguing in defense of affirmative action, Harris contends that if implemented carefully and correctly, affirmative action policies could pose a serious challenge to the existing state of whiteness as a protected property interest. She argues that this delegitimation of whiteness must be accomplished “not merely by implementing equal treatment, but by *equalizing* treatment among the groups that have been illegitimately privileged or unfairly subordinated by racial stratification.”³³³ While Harris proposes this distinction between equal treatment and equalizing treatment specifically in the context of affirmative action policies, I hope to further it in relation to the New York City high school system in suggesting the idea of equalizing treatment must be present in *all* Department of Education high school policy, both within and beyond the selective schools.

First off, a race-conscious effort must be made to ensure equalizing treatment within the city’s elite schools. As the high school system’s most valued educational resources, the exclusion of Black and Latino/a students from these schools constitutes a gross inequality in the distribution of public resources. In order to address this disparity, the Department of Education must first investigate the specific ways in which race functions in the admissions system. This calls for further research. While In her dissertation, Madeline Pérez provided crucial insights into the ways in which race, class, language, educational background, and immigrant histories, intersect in families’ navigation of the admissions process. However, her study, which did not have a specifically racial focus, centered on almost entirely white and Latino/a

³³³ Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1779-1780.

families, as those were the demographics of the two middle schools where she conducted her research. Building off of Pérez's work, future research should seek to examine how families of many differing racial backgrounds experience the admissions process, exploring the important intersections of class, ethnicity, nationality, and immigrant status without subsuming race into these other categories of analysis. Keeping in mind the position of the high school system within a history of white domination, the admissions system must be carefully scrutinized for places in which race is a factor in the advantaging or disadvantaging of certain students. Future work must also entail the collection and analysis of racial demographics for the applicant pools in the city's selective high schools. At the moment it is unclear whether the underrepresentation of Black and Latino/a students at some of the schools is due to lower rates of application, or lower rates of acceptance, as there are no publically available statistics on the applicants. In order to address the small and often declining numbers of Black and Latino/a students at schools such as Beacon, it is important to know how this is happening in order to move forward in an appropriate manner.

However, while careful investigation into the selective high schools is essential to start on a path towards equalization, I would suggest that we must look beyond these schools to the larger high school system. I agree with Harris's conclusion that affirmative action policies, if applied correctly, could be an important step towards the de-legitimation of white property interests. In the case of the Specialized High Schools, the affirmative action program that the Board of Ed. implemented in the 1960s has been the only policy to date that has succeeded in

increasing the number of Black and Latino/a students in the city's most prestigious schools. However, the 2007 Supreme Court Case (cite) made it illegal for public schools to consider race in their admissions decisions, making this a logistically difficult solution. Beyond the feasibility, while the use of affirmative action in the city's selective schools may challenge white expectations of entitlement to those spots in those schools, and would provide more students of color with access to quality education, it would address the fact that there will never be room for everyone. While considering race in admissions might make it possible to mirror the city's racial demographics in the most selective high schools, the hierarchical nature of the high school system necessarily entails a large number of people at the bottom. A politics of equalization must therefore move outside of the existing school configuration and work to envision what an equal school system would actually look like. While we must work to assure that students of color are allowed an equal stake in the selective schools as they currently stand, we must also ask the question: Are highly selective and prestigious schools compatible with the vision of an equalized school system?

The city's most selective schools have long been held on a pedestal as the best education that New York has to offer. Sternberg saw my decision to go to Beacon to as a "great choice," and Chancellor Walcott described the Specialized High Schools as "the true gems of the system." The classification of selective high schools as the best schools in the city brings forward the question: What makes a school "good?" How do we define a "good" school? In the effort to work towards equality, it is important to interrogate and redefine our goals for education, envisioning what

“good” schools look like in an equalized system. In one of my interviews, an education activist who has worked for decades in the New York City public school system posed the question: “is a school good because everyone who comes in is going to succeed anyways and then, low and behold, they succeed, or is it good because kids come in not necessarily on a track to succeed, and due to something that happens within the school, they do end up succeeding.”³³⁴ In an envisioned system of equalized education, will “good” schools fit into the latter category? Or will they be defined as something else entirely?

I do not purport to have the answers to these questions. The articulation of a vision of an equalized school system would constitute an entirely separate project. My purpose is only to suggest that as the findings of this project have demonstrated that the DOE’s current framework for addressing inequality has been wholly insufficient, those of us who are committed to working towards a just education system must continue to contemplate such questions. New York City’s most selective schools have continuously been afforded a central and dominant positioning in the city’s high school system for the entirety of their existence. While this centrality demands a careful examination of the location of these schools in hegemonic social structures, and their role in the perpetuation of inequality, in moving forward we must also question their monopoly on public discourse. An equalized system calls for equalized attention. If we truly wish to build a just system, we must look to address the needs of those who have been relegated to the bottom of the educational ladder, relocating those students to the center of focus.

³³⁴ Educational Activist. Personal interview conducted by Cory Meara-Bainbridge. 15 Oct. 2012.

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