(Hiding) in Plain Sight: How Class Matters Differently Among Low-Income Students in Suburban Schools

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(Hiding) in Plain Sight:  
How Class Matters Differently Among Low-Income Students in Suburban Schools

A dissertation presented
by
Queenie X. Zhu

to
The Committee on Higher Degrees in Social Policy

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Sociology and Social Policy

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Abstract

U.S. suburbia is rapidly changing, becoming home to increasing numbers of poor families and immigrants. However, traditionally disadvantaged students who attend well-resourced middle-class suburban schools have been largely neglected in educational inequality research. In this study, I spotlight this overlooked population and find that class background takes on heterogeneous meanings and significance, as it is situated in contextualized hierarchies, systems of meaning, and boundaries that are forged within everyday school interactions. I illuminate the heterogeneity in the effect of class among youth who share demographic background characteristics but attend diverse suburban schools. These racial and contextual contingencies in the effects of class background—or how class “works”—shape the experiences and outcomes of traditionally disadvantaged students so that two students who share the same demographic background but attend different schools have different social and academic outcomes.

The power of social background and school-level forces in shaping educational outcomes are among the most robust findings in the sociology of education literature. What is missing from this quintessential portrait of American educational inequality, however, is a nuanced understanding of a race-class-context interaction that abandons the assumption that race and class intersect to produce uniform effects, and that school contextual effects are uniform for all students. Through mixed methods, I show that race, class, and context interact in a two-stage process whereby (1) race and class interact with each other, and then (2) jointly interact with
school context, to exert non-uniform effects on how traditionally disadvantaged students integrate into suburban schools. In this context, what it means and how it feels to be an economically disadvantaged student varies greatly depending on who you are and where you are.

For immigrant students, who are an important subset of this population, these dynamics further shape incorporation processes and pathways into the minority middle class. Through studying how social background and school-level forces interact in complex ways to impact how immigrants forge identities vis-à-vis natives and coethnics, I complicate the assumptions underlying segmented assimilation theory and the predictions that follow from it. In doing so, I highlight the need for an updated understanding of immigrant incorporation that reflects the heterogeneity of 21st century immigrants.

Finally, in studying school-level forces, I expand on traditional school-level forces and foreground campus spatial layout as an overlooked yet agentic force that regulates group dynamics. Specifically, I argue that spatial layout and organizational practices like tracking interact to structure social relations, differentially predisposing some schools to more unequal group relations than others. This research has broad implications for theories of educational inequality and immigrant incorporation, as well as for the contours of social inequality amidst a rapidly changing social landscape.
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propelled me to set high bars for myself and work hard to meet them. Perhaps my most valued asset in life is the foundation of support, resilience, and pure joy that is my immediate family, at the core of which are my parents. Coming of age in both their origin countries and the U.S., they raised my siblings and me with a perfectly symbiotic synthesis of both worlds. From them, we enjoyed the freedom to pursue and cultivate our passions while staying firmly rooted in the ethics and values they instilled within us. Under their guidance, nothing is impossible. Their parenting, courage, resilience, optimism, and overall biographies have been the fiercest motivating forces in my life, and it is my hope to live up to their dreams for us and to the sacrifices they have endured along the way. My younger sister and younger brother have forever been the reason why I work hard and aim to be the best version of myself. Though I am skeptical of claims of perfection, I say with full confidence that they are perfect siblings. They are constant reminders to me of who I am and what I value, and if they are in any way a reflection of who I am, then I can rest assured that I am doing just fine. Finally, my life partner, David, has been a colossal force in my dissertation and graduate school journey in more ways than I can describe. All at once, he was a rigorous thinker, a modest genius, an unconditional cheerleader, a thoughtful listener, a trusted consultant, a skilled troubleshooter, my best critic, and my worst critic. He relentlessly pushes me to my full potential, makes me laugh, keeps me grounded in what matters, and makes me a better person. He is my constant in a life full of variables.
For my family
Chapter 1

Introduction

On a crisp October morning, Elena Hernandez hurriedly makes her way through the throngs of students in the crowded hallways to get to her first period class. Seeing a couple of white students coming her way, she instinctively steps aside to avoid crashing into them, but does so too late—one of the students, a fashionably-attired white girl, bumps into her shoulder and shoots her an irritated glare. Though Elena’s face exhibits a constant sense of restless loneliness, her expression remains unchanged as she walks on. Finally at her classroom, Elena enters and holds the door open for a white male classmate behind her. He walks straight through without any acknowledgement. As students slowly fill the room, a small crowd forms and laughs around Chad, a popular white football player who has come to school dressed in a large Mexican sombrero, an exaggerated fake mustache, and a colorful poncho for a presentation for another class. Elena chuckles uncomfortably as she squeezes through the crowd to find her seat, on which the girl sitting across from her has propped her feet.

As Elena later explains, this is why her friends in Milagros Heights (the majority-Mexican high-poverty neighborhood from where she is bussed) make fun of her for going to such a “stupid” and “gay” school—one known for being filled with rich white kids who look down on minorities. She stays quiet most the day, as she has few friends. As she fiddles with the zipper of her gray and purple hoodie—the only light sweater she owns—she speaks softly about constantly feeling judged by her more affluent peers for wearing the same outfit multiple times a week due to her limited supply of clothing. As she brushes aside her frizzy wavy bangs, she sheepishly confesses that her social anxiety is so severe that she often skips school on days when she’s scheduled to give presentations in class. Not surprisingly, her grades suffer. Despite the
academic prestige of her school, Elena believes she may have done better at her neighborhood school, where she wouldn’t have been hampered by social anxiety and feelings of subordination. “Well,” she sighs, “at least it’s safe here.” Since she can’t say the same about her neighborhood school, it’s enough incentive for her to stay.

Just a few hours later, a few miles away, the bell rings to mark the end of lunchtime, and I meet Raquel Rivera in the lunch quad to follow her to her fifth period English class, where I will observe for the day. Her group of girlfriends, a friendly and racially-diverse bunch, welcome me immediately. One of them—a freckled white girl with pronounced dimples—asks me with a smile, “Hey! Are you a new student?” We share some laughter and I follow Raquel as she weaves through the lunchtime crowds to her class, saying hello to some passersby along the way. An Asian girl holds open the hallway door for her, and Raquel thanks her by name. As she walks into her classroom holding her leftover cup of tater-tots from lunch, a couple of classmates—a heavy-set white boy and a wide-eyed Latina—eagerly wiggle their fingers towards the golden nuggets of glory and help themselves to a few pieces as Raquel playfully swats them away (she later surrenders a few pieces to them). As Raquel sits down, two Asian girls behind her compliment her on her trendy boots, which Raquel later tells me are second-hand from the local thrift store. “You can be poor but still look good,” she later half-brags. “You just have to work harder to shop smart.”

From her cheery aura and the way she participates in class discussions with avid engagement, it would be reasonable to assume that Raquel is a fortunate product of a stable, middle-class upbringing. But she is not. In the past year alone, she has endured her parents’ contentious divorce and bankruptcy, and was on the brink of homelessness. As she discusses Toni Morrison’s Beloved in class, Raquel tries not to think about the fact that she doesn’t know
where she’ll live next month, as her family has been jumping from dwelling to dwelling while borrowing a friend’s address so that Raquel and her sister could continue attending their schools. Despite her hardships, Raquel considers her school an oasis from the troubles at home, where she is supported by friends and teachers. Later that day, she has a tutoring session with her math teacher—one of her favorite teachers—who reached out to her when he noticed her grades slipping and offered free after-school tutoring sessions so that she would not be moved to the remedial class. “This is my happy place,” Raquel says of her school. “My friends get me and what I’m going through, and the teachers care about me.”

***

Income inequality in the U.S. is on the rise. Not since the Great Depression has the country seen such pervasive disparities between the rich and the poor (Piketty and Saez 2003). In a recent speech delivered at the Center for American Progress, President Barack Obama identified rising income inequality as “the defining challenge of our time” (Obama 2013). In his address, he underscored that growing gaps in income are not merely racial gaps. Indeed, the research agrees: class is not identical to race, and class gaps are not necessarily accounted for by racial gaps (Wilson, 2009; Putnam 2015; Bettie 2002).

In light of rising class inequality, it makes intuitive sense to study gaps between the rich and the poor, as many scholars do (e.g., Putnam 2015). I, too, initially set out to study the class gap among students who attend well-resourced suburban schools that serve primarily middle- and upper middle-class students. My rationale for choosing these types of schools was that there seemed to be much to learn from studying the economically-disadvantaged students who, by virtue of their attendance at a privileged school, were best positioned for achieving upward mobility. In studying how economically disadvantaged youth fare at the “best” kinds of schools
that possessed characteristics traditionally deemed ideal, I hoped to get a glimpse of the extent to
which well-resourced, middle-class suburban schools were the key to ameliorating educational
inequality. Existing studies find evidence of both positive and negative outcomes (Wells and
Crain 1998; Eaton 2001; Schwartz 2010; Schofield 1989; Schofield 1991) for economically
disadvantaged youth who attend more affluent schools. I aimed to reconcile inconsistent findings
by investigating how disadvantaged students’ lived experiences within school walls can build on
or compete with the theoretical virtues of attending schools that are “good” on paper.

However, I soon realized that there was much heterogeneity within economically-
disadvantaged students that has not adequately been accounted for in prior studies. What it
means and how it feels to be an economically-disadvantaged student varies greatly depending on
who you are and where you are. In the process of seeking to better understand why and how
lower class status is experienced differently among economically-disadvantaged students, I
began to grasp the bigger picture: that, for all students, class matters differently depending on its
interactions with race and with social context.

In this dissertation, I address two central questions: (1) How—and for whom—does class
background matter in schools? and (2) How do race, class, and context interact to shape the
integration and incorporation pathways of diverse students in 21st century suburban schools? I
argue that class matters for traditionally disadvantaged students who attend “good” suburban
schools, but the extent to which class matters—and how it matters—depends on its interaction
with race and context. In short, race, class, and context interact in a two-staged intersectionality
process whereby (1) race and class intersect with each other, and then (2) jointly interact with
school context, to exert non-uniform effects on how traditionally disadvantaged students
integrate into suburban schools. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship.
I find that class background takes on heterogeneous meanings and significance, as it is situated in contextualized hierarchies, systems of meaning, and boundaries that are forged within everyday school interactions. I illuminate the heterogeneity in the effect of class among youth who attend diverse suburban schools and who share demographic background characteristics. These racial and contextual contingencies in the effects of class background—or how class “works”—shapes the experiences and outcomes of traditionally disadvantaged students so that two students who share the same demographic background but who attend different schools can yield diverging social/academic outcomes.

**Theoretical Motivations**

Conventional thinking among sociology of education scholars posits that educational outcomes hinge upon an interaction between individual/family background characteristics and school-level characteristics. Though it is well understood that educational inequalities stem from inequalities in the interaction between what one brings to the table (individual/family attributes) and what one encounters at the metaphorical table (school and organizational-level forces), our current understanding of this relationship is riddled with assumptions that oversimplify this
interaction and, in doing so, block our efforts to adequately and efficiently address diverse student needs. A timely update in our understanding of how individual-level background characteristics and school-level attributes jointly produce and reproduce inequality is essential, especially in light of recent demographic and metropolitan changes in 21st century America.

In what follows, I lay the theoretical foundation of my study through an overview of the literatures upon which I aim to build. I begin with a review of how individual and family background characteristics matter for students’ school experiences and outcomes long before they even step foot onto school campuses. I then discuss literature on how school-level characteristics interact with individual-level attributes to reproduce inequality. I identify gaps in both bodies of literature that I aim to address through my study. Finally, given the strong presence of immigration in my study, I draw on the immigrant incorporation literature, focusing particularly on segmented assimilation theory. In doing so, I highlight the need to theorize immigrant incorporation in ways that more aptly reflect today’s immigrants and their incorporation pathways—namely, in ways that are less predictive and less simplistic than current theoretical approaches.

**Individual-Level Influences on Education**

The unmistakable association between family social background and educational outcomes is one of the most robust findings in educational stratification literature. That family social background unequally predisposes youth for academic success (or failure) long before they enter schools is the theoretical basis on which advocates of early childhood interventions rely (e.g., Carneiro and Heckman 2003; Heckman 2006). In their study of socioeconomic status gaps in children’s skills and behaviors, Duncan and Magnuson (2011) find that, once they enter
kindergarten, students in the bottom quintile of family socioeconomic status perform over a standard deviation below their counterparts in the top quintile of family socioeconomic status, and that this gap remains relatively durable over their educational trajectories. Through these sorts of findings are not surprising—as the association between social background and individual outcomes can be traced to Blau and Duncan (1967), Coleman et al. (1966), and beyond—there is cause for recent concern, as evidence suggests that, in a time of rising income inequality, the association between family origins and individual student achievement is even stronger (Reardon 2011).

Research points to several reasons for the strong associations between family background and school outcomes. First, there is evidence that the presence of stressors powerfully shapes prenatal development. Children born to mothers of lower socioeconomic status, whose stressors are likely to be more in both magnitude and frequency than mothers of higher socioeconomic status, are more likely to be born with learning or cognitive disabilities such as ADHD and autism (Brinker et al. 1994; Ronald et al. 2011; see Hackman et al. 2010 for further discussion), as maternal stress disturbs fetal cognitive development and exerts substantial and powerful long-term effects well into the life trajectory (e.g., Van den Bergh et al. 2005; Charil et al. 2010).

Second, parenting styles differ markedly among families of high versus low socioeconomic status. For example, encouraging parent-child interaction even before toddlers can actually talk—such as through reading to toddlers and soliciting responses from them during conversations—powerfully impacts brain development. Dubbing this valuable resource “Goodnight Moon time,” Putnam (2015) repeatedly emphasizes the powerfully formative impact this has on later outcomes and on inequality more generally. Indeed, many authors find evidence that much of the early childhood foundational math and verbal skills are more effectively
attained through casual interactions with adults than through formal training (e.g., Ginsburg et al. 1998; Pungello et al. 1996; Storch and Whitehurst 2002; Stevenson and Newman 1986; see Putnam 2015 for further discussion). In their landmark review of environmental impacts on early child development, Shonkoff and Phillips (2000:6), state, “Virtually every aspect of early human development, from the brain’s evolving circuitry to the child’s capacity for empathy, is affected by the environment and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood years,”

Third, evidence in sociology, too, supports the heavily influential role of family background on school outcomes long before children enter schools. Research has found that there are notable socioeconomic differences in the types of cultural capital that children are exposed to (Lareau 1987; 2003). Specifically, Lareau (1987; 2003) finds that children raised in lower-class families are more likely to be raised in environments of concerted cultivation, which entails purposive organization of childrearing around both intellectual and socio-emotional development. Characteristics of concerted cultivation include organizing daily life around extracurricular activities aimed at promoting multi-faceted child development and encouraging reasoning and negotiation through social interactions. This style of childrearing, typical among middle-class parents, fosters in children a sense of entitlement and confidence in interactions with authority. Lower-class parents, on the other hand, are more likely to rear their children with the belief that children will grow and develop naturally (accomplishment of natural growth). Consequently, this style of parenting involves more informal play (rather than organized extracurricular activities) and directives (rather than the cultivation of conversation). Lareau finds that this style of parenting is associated with emerging signs of constraint, where there are firmer adult-child boundaries and where children are constrained in their interactions with
authority. Disturbingly, these differences—which are cultivated long before children enter school—facilitate a pattern of cumulative and compounded disadvantage, as middle-class students experience a seamless transition from home to school (since the cultural capital rewarded at school matches the cultural capital honed at home) while lower-class students suffer from a fundamental mismatch in cultural capital.

The bulk of research on social background influences on educational outcomes foregrounds race and class as key background characteristics that powerfully shape outcomes. As Wilson (2012:187) points out, quoting sociologist Robin Williams, “both racial discrimination and class position importantly affect life-chances, and…it is the changing character of the interaction of the two structural conditions that is critical for understanding [the situation of blacks in the U.S.] (emphasis added).” This study thus borrows from intersectionality theory (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Shields 2008) to understand how and why class is experienced differently by, and carries different meaning to, students in two diverse, high-performing suburban high schools. An intersectional approach holds that, because people simultaneously occupy multiple social categories that intersect and interact in dynamic ways, it is impossible to study one category as an independent force (e.g., women) without tending to other categories to which it is related (e.g., the race or class of the women) (Stuber 2011b). An intersectional framework is useful in understanding how the intersectional dynamics of social categories contribute to inequality. According to the framework, the sum of social categories is thus not only greater than—but specifically distinct from—its parts, such that the experience of being a black man (for example) is more than simply a combination of the experience of being black and being a man (Wilkins 2014). Instead, an intersectional model posits that the complex intersectionality between race and gender yields a particular “specificity of black masculinity”
that carries significance beyond being black or being a man (Wilkins 2014:172).

Little research has focused on how intersectionality among traditionally disadvantaged students in suburban schools shapes their school integration pathways. Extant research on low-income students’ integration into middle-class suburban schools largely focuses on one social category as a “main effect” whose power trumps other social categories—for example, studying class as a force subordinate to race, rather than disentangling the complex ways in which social categories interact (see Choo and Ferree 2010 for further discussion). More research is needed to unpack how race, ethnicity, class, and context jointly create different social and academic contexts of integration for low-income students in suburban high schools.

Stuber’s (2011a; 2011b) study of white first-generation college students explicitly employs an intersectional framework to study the distinct experience of white working class students. She finds that, for these working-class students, whiteness acts as both an asset and a liability. On one hand, since being white signaled middle-class status, their whiteness “offered a cloak of comfort and invisibility behind which they were able to adjust to college life” (Stuber 2011a:125). Other scholars have also found that low-income white students occupy a unique social position where their disadvantage is rendered “invisible” (Bergerson 2007; Casey 2005; Karen 1991), since whiteness is often associated with middle-class status (Morris 2005). On the other hand, however, Stuber (2011a; 2011b) finds that whiteness could also serve as a liability for working-class students who feel isolated, limiting their potential to identify with, and receive support and validation from, other socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Hartigan (1999) similarly finds that whiteness can act as a liability among socioeconomically disadvantaged whites who are labeled “white trash,” since they represent deviations from the status and privileges typically associated with whiteness.
Other studies have explored how social categories intersect to contribute to social inequality as well. For example, research on racial minorities who are bused to majority-white middle-class suburban schools finds that males have greater opportunities of successful social integration through athletics or their execution of a “hip hop star” image, while females have limited opportunities of social integration through achieving social status (Holland 2012; Kitsner et al. 1993; Schofield and Sager 1977; Wells and Crain 1997). This body of research concludes that generalizations about these students based solely on race, class, or gender cannot be made without considering the other two social categories, since race, class, and gender work in conjunction to create different integration outcomes.

Similarly, research in immigration finds that race and immigration status intersects in important ways that determine social outcomes and life chances of immigrants and their children. For example, Waters (1999) finds that, despite arriving in the U.S. with the optimism and resources necessary to thrive, black immigrants enter a social structure that relegates them to the bottom with black Americans. In response, while some second-generation black immigrants become integrated in a social structure that subjects them to a position of disadvantage, those who adhere to their ethnic identities are more likely to achieve success and upward social mobility. In essence, race and immigration status intersects in ways such that one cannot draw generalizations about urban black youth—for example—without considering immigration status. A wealth of other examples of intersectionality can be found in the immigration literature, since the immigrant experience is full of class, nationality, race/ethnicity, and gender contingencies (e.g., Lew 2004; Louie 2001; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Waters 1996).

What is missing from the intersectional approach, however, is an account of educational inequality that simultaneously synthesizes the intersectionality of social background categories
on one hand and the formative role of social context on the other. Intersectionality takes form in distinct contexts, and the meanings, salience, and consequences of particular intersectionalities (e.g., poor black men) may vary by context. Extant research offers some evidence that a nuanced perspective is necessary. For example, in his study of poor black men who live in inner city Chicago, Young (2006) finds that those who regularly leave their poverty-stricken neighborhoods are less likely to believe in the American Dream due to their firsthand experiences with racism, hostility, and structural barriers outside their community, while those who rarely leave their neighborhoods are more likely to be optimistic about the American Dream. In this case, these men share the same intersectionality—namely, poor black men (class, race, gender)—but exposure to markedly different contexts yields contrasting worldviews. Similarly, in his study of low-income college students in an elite college, Jack (2014) finds that students who were part of pre-college pathways that socially prepare them for elite colleges are substantially more poised to thrive in their elite institutions compared to their counterparts who did not have the early intervention—but who share the same social background intersectionality and origin neighborhood characteristics. For these students, differences in pre-college contexts produce dramatically different college experiences despite the fact that they are otherwise similar in intersectionality and origin.

In sum, we know from decades of past research that family background matters for educational outcomes and often contribute to inequalities long before students even begin school. As Heckman (2012) states, “The gaps in cognitive achievement…that we observe at age eighteen…are mostly present at age six, when children enter school. Schooling—unequal as it is in America—plays only a minor role in alleviating or creating test score gaps.” Moreover, we know that social background must be understood in terms of their intersectionalities rather than
in isolation. For this reason, it is useful to now turn to the literature on how school-level factors influence educational outcomes. Although schools may do little to influence educational inequality on a general level (due to factors such as neighborhood segregation and self-selection) as Heckman (2012) states, schools are a prime context of socialization for most youth and, as such, play a significant role in shaping the inequality of the students in ways that span far beyond test scores.

**School-Level Influences on Education**

School-level forces shape students’ experiences and outcomes in two main ways: through organizational-level practices such as tracking, and through compositional makeup. Through institutional arrangements and practices, schools shape students’ experiences, behaviors, and interactions in marked ways. Schools are “inhabited institutions” (Hallett and Ventresca 2006)—not merely bureaucratic machines that churn out educated students, but structures that are propelled and “inhabited” by people, interactions, and meaning-making. For example, in their study of college conservatives at two college campuses, Binder and Wood (2012) find that the “spatial closeness” of housing and dining halls at an elite college encourages bipartisan interaction and discourages alienation of students with different political views. Through shaping the contexts of interaction, space influenced the college conservatives’ political interaction styles, friendship patterns, and political identities. Similar patterns have been found in investigations of how physical space translates to social space in secondary schools (Dickar 2008; Flores-Gonzalez 2005; Tatum 1999; Eckert 1989). As a social construct created by intricate interactions, space, in turn, shapes interactions.
Tracking is another means through which school organizational practices affect peer relations and integration, since students typically make friends with people in their tracks (Oakes 1986; Hallinan and Williams 1989; Kubitschek and Hallinan 1998; Moody 2001; Conchas 2001). Tracking contributes to identity formation and ideologies about academic achievement (Flores-Gonzalez 2005). Racialized patterns in tracking have promoted segregation even in desegregated schools (e.g., Moody 2001); racially segregated academic tracks sort students into racially segregated peer groups, and students in such schools quickly catch on to the academic connotations of being black or Latino (Conchas 2001; Schofield 1979). Other ways school structure gives rise to school culture and context include transportation to and from extracurricular activities such as sports, as well as outreach programs that intend to support—but may seclude—disadvantaged students (Holland 2012). In essence, a wealth of research has suggested that school structure begets school culture. School organizational practices, as inhabited institutions fueled by actors, meanings-making, and interactional dynamics, create the social context in which students forge identities that impact their social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Crosnoe 2009).

The second body of literature that explains how school-level variables influence students is the literature on school compositional effects (and relatedly, peer effects). Though there is a general consensus that peer composition has some influence over student outcomes, the magnitude of peer compositional effects is uncertain. A possible explanation for the discrepant findings on the relationship between school composition and student outcomes may lie in the methods through which the relationship is studied. Specifically, though many descriptive studies have yielded strong associations between school composition and student outcomes (Crosnoe et al. 2008; Frost 2007; Goldsmith 2004), recent studies that employ causal estimation strategies
such as natural experiments (Angrist and Lang 2004) and instrumental variable techniques (Hoxby 2000) have established weaker associations between the two.

Whether students are differentially impacted by school composition is an important focus of research on school compositional effects. For example, scholars have suggested that black students are more sensitive to changes in school composition (Cooley 2009) and would benefit more from desegregation than white students (Coleman et al. 1966; see Kahlenberg 2001 for a more detailed review). Jencks (1972) finds that racial composition impacts black and white students similarly, but mean socioeconomic composition had a greater impact on black students’ test scores. However, in his study of friendship groups’ influences on self-confidence and aspirations among college students, Antonio (2004) finds that white students are more sensitive to feelings of relative deprivation. Vigdor and Nechyba (2007) find evidence that black and Latino students exert a negative impact on peers of other races, but not students of their own race, in predominantly non-minority classrooms. The consequences of racial composition thus depend on both the race of peers and the race of the students whose outcomes are measured. In addition to contingencies by racial group, research also suggests that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more sensitive to school compositional effects than their counterparts from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., Coleman et al. 1966; Ide et al. 1981; Entwisle et al. 1997). A possible explanation for this differential sensitivity may be that the latter often have opportunities to acquire social and cultural capital outside of school walls, while the former often do not (Coleman 1966; Rodgers and Bullock 1974).

Two distinct but not mutually exclusive theories of peer contexts help explain why we might expect peer composition to influence groups of students in non-uniform ways. The normative model of peer effects (Goldsmith 2010) aligns with Coleman et al.’s (1966)
conclusion that attending school with advantaged, high-ability peers positively affects academic achievement because such peers transmit pro-school values and behaviors that promote academic success (Epstein and Karweit 1983; Legewie and DiPrete 2012). In contrast, the frog pond effect, introduced by Davis (1966), posits that a student’s academic self-esteem suffers from attending a school where most classmates are higher achieving than they are (e.g., Crosnoe, 2009; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). Rooting his ideas in the concept of relative deprivation, Davis (1966) asserts that it is more academically advantageous to be a “big frog” in a “small pond.” Marsh (1991) contends that for some pupils, the formation of a self-image as a low-ability student at a higher-ability school may outweigh the potential benefits of attending such a school. Similarly, Owens (2010) finds that students from lower-SES neighborhoods exhibit even lower educational attainment in schools with more white and high-SES peers, while students from higher-SES neighborhoods reap further benefits from attending school with more white and high-SES peers.

Importantly, the normative model and frog pond model of peer effects are not necessarily in opposition with each other. They may simply represent different social processes at work in the same school (Owens 2010). One possibility is that both effects compete with each other simultaneously. Alexander and Eckland (1975) and Jencks and Mayer (1990) find that, while attending schools with peers with higher SES positively affects students’ achievement and goals, attending schools with high-ability peers has a negative impact. The two forces, which are typically highly correlated, effectively cancel each other out, making the net effect of having advantaged classmates small and unpredictable. While the normative model and frog pond model of peer effects are useful explanations of dynamics that may arise from different configurations of peer compositions, we have little information about the mechanisms through which peer composition shapes students’ experiences and outcomes. My study aims to shed light on some of
these mechanisms.

Furthermore, while research on school-level organizational practices and school compositional effects are both useful in explaining between-group variation in students’ experiences and outcomes, they still assume that these school effects are uniform for students who share the same demographic characteristics. In other words, while the school effects literature helps explain between-group differences, it does not adequately account for within-group differences. For example, the bulk of extant research does not consider how tracking, or peer composition, may influence low-income black students differently depending on their specific school contexts. Tyson’s (2005; 2011) research is an exception, which shows that school contexts shape differences in how academic tracking impacts black students. In contexts where black students are severely underrepresented in high academic tracks, achievement is more likely to be equated with race, and preoccupations with the burden of “acting white” impede black students’ academic achievement. In these contexts, tracking hurts black students in the ways traditional literature expects it to. However, in contexts where black students have fair chances of representation in high tracks, they are less likely to equate race with achievement, are thus less likely to be hampered by concerns over “acting white.” In these contexts, black students do not suffer from tracking in the same ways current research would predict.

My study fills the gap in our current understanding of how individual demographics and school-level influences shape students’ school experiences and outcomes by examining not only how school context shapes differences among students from different social backgrounds within the same school, but also how students from the same social backgrounds in different schools might be differentially impacted by their school contexts. In short, I challenge the assumption that school effects uniformly influence students by studying within-group differences in ways
extant literature does not. Through I cannot make causal arguments, my comparisons of two sites that are similar in most aspects except racial and residential composition will investigate the mechanisms and processes behind how school composition and school context may matter differently for students who share similar individual/family background characteristics, but who attend schools with diverging school contexts and social climates. In addition, while scholars extensively study how traditionally studied organizational-level forces such as tracking and school composition impact students, we have rarely ventured beyond this restricted list in studying school-level contributors to inequality. In studying spatial layout in Chapter 6, I address this shortcoming.

Immigration Incorporation in a Diversifying America

Based on the premise that traditional straight-line assimilation theory (Park and Burgess 1969) is an outdated theoretical lens that no longer adequately reflects the diversity of the myriad assimilation outcomes and destinations of post-1965 immigrants, Portes and Zhou (1993) propose segmented assimilation theory as a timely amendment. In place of a conceptualization of immigration as a progressive, unidirectional process (Park and Burgess 1969), segmented assimilation argues that subsequent generations may achieve upward social mobility or experience “second generation decline” (Portes & Zhou 1993; Gans 1992). Portes and Zhou (1993) outline three distinct pathways of incorporation that children of immigrants may experience: “traditional” assimilation through achieving upward social mobility, downward assimilation, and selective assimilation, where retention of one’s cultural heritage and language contributes to a strong ethnic community that promotes achievement and upward mobility (Zhou and Bankston 1998).
What propels immigrants into their respective assimilation destinations, the authors posit, is “the context that immigrants find upon arrival into their new country” (Portes and Zhou 1993:82) which, in combination with individual and family variables, plays an instrumental role in shaping the trajectories of the immigrants and their offspring. In short, the authors state, the consequences of assimilation depend heavily on the question of “into what sector of American society a particular immigrant group assimilates” (Portes and Zhou 1992:82). Specifically, three main factors make up the modes of incorporation, which jointly shape the degree of vulnerability and resources that affect immigrant assimilation outcomes: the policies of the host government, the values and prejudices of the receiving society, and the characteristics of the preexisting co-ethnic community (Portes and Zhou 1993:83-84). It is amidst these contextual complexities that immigrants forge the diverse and segmented pathways and outcomes that make up immigrant America.

**Figure 2. Segmented Assimilation Theory and School Integration Processes: Some Parallels**

![Figure 2](image_url)

*Note: This figure is for illustrative purposes only. The countries and groups are examples only and not meant to be exhaustive.*
In some ways, segmented assimilation theory parallels the multi-dimensional individual-context interaction that I explore in this study. As Figure 2 illustrates, just as different incorporation pathways and outcomes can arise among immigrants who share the same origins and backgrounds but who incorporate into different host societies (typically countries), I explore differences in school incorporation pathways among students who share social background characteristics, but who attend different schools.

Borrowing from segmented assimilation theory’s rejection of the concept that there exists “a relatively uniform mainstream whose mores and prejudices dictate a common path of integration” (Portes and Zhou 1993:82), I explore the possibility that the incorporation of economically disadvantaged youth into more affluent school settings does not follow a uniform path. I borrow the concept of modes of incorporation (Portes and Rumbaut 1990; Portes and Zhou 1993) to better understand the factors that shape different school integration pathways for economically disadvantaged students. While segmented assimilation theory identifies government policies, social reception (prejudiced/non-prejudiced), and characteristics of co-ethnic community (size and occupational structure) as the three main elements that make up
modes of incorporation for immigrant incorporation, I argue that school structural attributes, social reception (prejudiced/non-prejudiced), and co-ethnic community (“popularity” and social visibility structure) make up the modes of incorporation for student integration. In my application of the typology, I allow for social reception and co-ethnic community characteristics to interact, and influence, and mutually reinforce each other.

In applying this theoretical framework to understand school integration, I derive from segmented assimilation theory the assertion that the consequences of assimilation depend heavily on pre-established systems of meanings, values, and hierarchies in the host society. Just as Portes and Zhou (1993:83) argue that “prejudice is not intrinsic to a particular skin color or racial type,” this study starts from the assumption that there is nothing inherent about economic background (or race or color) that necessarily positions individuals for social prejudice at school, but that these characteristics take on (different) meanings as they are situated in context.

Scholars have found ample evidence of the power of these forces. For example, in her study of West Indies immigrants who settle in urban neighborhoods with high concentrations of low-income native blacks, Waters (1999) finds that they are received by mainstream white society as (native) blacks and thus often “assimilate” into the native black underclass, exhibiting similar educational and socioeconomic outcomes. Furthermore, durable structural and interpersonal racism make race salient in the lives of both native and immigrant blacks, and “whites’ behavior and beliefs about race and their culture of racist behaviors create the very expectations of discomfort that whites complain about in their dealings with their black neighbors, coworkers, and friends” (Waters 1999: 334). In addition, outsiders’ perceptions and ascriptions act as structural forces that powerfully constrain ethnic options for many “visibly” distinct groups that are phenotypically “marked” as foreigners (Portes et al. 2007; Rumbaut
2008; Tuan 1998). For example, even though black individuals may self-identify on bases such as ethnicity, class, and nativity, their “blackness…often overrides these internal differences when interacting with the public” (Bean et al 2009: 214; Kasinitz 1992; Waters 1999). The power of these external contextual forces thus exists in spite of—and can override—one’s internal identificational attributes. In these ways, “one person’s social structure is another person’s culture” (Wilson 2009:76, citing Erik Olin Wright). I engage with the discussion of how structural and cultural forces jointly shape the contours of inequality (Wilson 2009) through this study by illustrating how one group’s culture—namely, the taken-for-granted systems of meaning, values, and shared prejudices—acts as the structural force that maintains and reproduces another group’s marginalization.

However, while segmented assimilation theory is a useful tool for understanding how context and social background interact to produce distinct incorporation pathways, there are at least three key shortcomings that make it no longer sufficient in studying the incorporation of our ever-diversifying immigrant populations and their incorporation into increasingly diverse destinations. First, as Neckerman et al. (1999:948) note, segmented assimilation theorists “neglect the class and cultural heterogeneity of minority communities,” portraying minorities as “poor” and “their cultures as oppositional only.” As Neckerman et al. (1999:948) point out, “even poor minority neighborhoods are culturally diverse, including both people who hold to conventional norms of behavior and those characterized by a street-oriented lifestyle (Hannerz 1969; Anderson 1990; Kelley 1997; Carter 1999).” Harding et al. (2011) similarly find that disadvantaged contexts exert heterogeneous effects on youth who reside in the same neighborhood. Second, in studying minority immigrants, segmented assimilation theory focuses on those who settle in poor urban neighborhoods and does not properly address minorities who
settle in middle-class suburbs. Third, the theory does not explicitly model the influence of micro contexts such as schools in shaping incorporation pathways and processes in distinct ways that may either align or compete with their broader incorporation into American society (on which segmented assimilation theory is based). Given that most youth spend a substantial amount of their waking hours in schools, it seems important to consider multiple dimensions of contexts into which immigrant youth incorporate.

Figure 3. Multiple (and Possibly Competing) Levels of Influences on Individuals

Thus, segmented assimilation theory, as it stands, may not do justice to the heterogeneity in recent immigrant populations and, importantly, the role of micro contexts such as schools in mediating the relationship between (a) the segment of society in which immigrants incorporate into and (b) incorporation pathways and outcomes. For example, as illustrated in Figure 3, though past research finds evidence that macro forces (such as government policies at the national level) trickle down to influence more micro forces (such as school context), I explore

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1 For example, alignment involves positive modes of incorporation and a receptive school, while competition involves positive modes of incorporation but a non-receptive school.
2 Coldwell Banker Home Price Comparison Index 2009
3 Available through The South Haven Association of Governments
4 The U.S. World and News Report rankings for Best High Schools are based on overall student performance in standardized state tests; performance of disadvantaged (black, Hispanic, and low-income) students in standardized state tests; and college readiness (measured by both participation in Advanced Placement or International
the possibility that micro forces (such as school context) are more proximal to individuals, may have a more direct impact on them, and may thus compete with—or reinforce—more macro level forces.

In short, while segmented assimilation theory is conceptually useful in thinking about the incorporation of individuals into new contexts on a general level (e.g., in the case of this study, the incorporation of traditionally disadvantaged students into more affluent schools), it is limiting in its applications to studying actual immigrant incorporation into the U.S. Figures 4 and 5 compare the segmented assimilation theory framework with a new framework I propose, respectively—one that leaves room for micro contexts (schools) to influence the same students differently. As Figure 4 shows, segmented assimilation studies how context of reception—such as the United States—influences immigrants groups differently. What I seek to explore, however, is the possibility that different micro contexts—namely, schools—offer different incorporation pathways for otherwise similar groups (immigrant and non-immigrant groups). This proposition is illustrated in Figure 5. In the figure, $R$ represents a racial/ethnic category interacted with $C$, a class category. Under this framework, a low-income Latino student (for example; e.g., $R_1C_1$) attending School 1 may have different incorporation experiences and outcomes than a low-income Latino student with similar background characteristics who attends School 2.

For example, ethnic cultures may take on different meanings in different schools, and clinging onto one’s ethnic culture and sticking within one’s ethnic circle may lead to diverging outcomes depending on the contextualized systems of meanings and hierarchies in one’s respective school context. In other words, segmented assimilation theory is too predictive and does not adequately account for how micro contexts such as school social worlds can mediate or interfere with the
Figure 4. Segmented Assimilation Theory: Summary

Figure 5. Problematizing the Context x Individual Social Background Interactions Underlying Segmented Assimilation Theory
relationship between ethnic culture retention and positive incorporation outcomes that it predicts.

Finally, in empirically testing segmented assimilation using large-scale national data, Xie and Greenman (2005) argue that research on immigrant incorporation should focus on studying differences in processes rather than in consequences of assimilation, since assimilation is not necessarily exogenous to contextual and behavioral measures of assimilation (such as racial/ethnic composition of one’s neighbors or school friends). In other words, an endogeneity problem exists wherein assimilation behaviors may be determined by individuals’ anticipated consequences of assimilation, which then influence assimilation consequences. For example, as the authors explain,

“…immigrants living in poor neighborhoods may be aware of the danger of “downward assimilation” and may respond by withholding their children from full assimilation into their neighborhood peer group, or by soon moving to better neighborhoods. Thus, we may not observe the negative consequences of “downward assimilation” because immigrant families have found various ways to avoid, or at least minimize, its effects” (Xie and Greenman 2005:42).

This study thus focuses on school integration processes rather than integration outcomes, in part due to the potential endogeneity problem that Xie and Greenman (2005) describe, but also because heterogeneity of immigrant incorporation experiences and how multi-dimensional contexts shape them are best captured through studying processes rather than outcomes.

Better understanding the heterogeneity in how immigrants and their children adapt to suburbs is particularly crucial in the 21st century, given recent demographic trends. Specifically, Census data indicate that minority immigrant populations in suburbia are growing at rapid rates since 2000, while whites constitute lower shares of the suburban population in the U.S. (making up 81%, 72%, and 65% of the suburban population in 1990, 2000, and 2010, respectively) (2011). Trends in immigration patterns partially account for the suburbanization process (Alba and Logan 1991), especially as some new immigrant groups settle directly in suburbs rather than
in central cities as they traditionally did before (Massey and Denton 1988). In 2010, 51% of immigrants in the U.S. lived in suburban areas of large metropolitan areas (Wilson and Singer 2011). Latino residents are making the largest impact in the suburbanization of immigration, as the percentage of Latino residents in the suburbs grew from 8% to 17% between 1990 and 2010 (Frey 2011). In addition to—and partially because of—a proliferation of immigrant groups, suburbs are increasingly becoming home to low-income families as well. In short, immigrants are increasingly settling in U.S. suburbia rather than in the urban neighborhoods of large gateway cities as they are traditionally known to, and research in immigrant incorporation must catch up with these trends.

**Substantive Motivations**

*Traditionally Disadvantaged Students in Suburban Schools*

On a substantive level, our knowledge of how traditionally disadvantaged students fare in well-resourced suburban schools in the 21st century is limited. While Coleman et al.’s (1966) influential *Coleman Report* sparked decades of research on integrating low-income students into middle-class suburban schools, current knowledge on underserved students in more affluent school settings is dominated by studies that focus on very specific segments of this population, none of which adequately do justice to the diversity and changing demographics of the population today.

Studies of youth in voluntary school desegregation programs and court orders constitute a substantial amount of what is currently known about traditionally disadvantaged students in middle-class suburban schools. Such studies typically highlight both the struggles and triumphs of such desegregation programs. On one hand, student participants of these programs—typically,
but not always, racial minorities—often face racial insensitivity and discrimination from white staff and students, struggle with gaining social acceptance at their more affluent schools, and straddle two very different worlds—their lower-income home neighborhoods and their more affluent school communities—while often feeling fully accepted at neither (Wells and Crain 1998; Eaton 2001). On the other hand, evidence suggests that these students also reap the benefits of increased social and cultural capital at their new schools, are more comfortable traversing racial boundaries and interacting with “mainstream” white culture, and exhibit higher educational achievement than their counterparts in urban schools (e.g., Eaton, 2001; Wells and Crain 1998; Schwartz 2010; Schofield 1989; Schofield 1991). Evidence also suggests that gender differences in experiences and outcomes may exist for these students (Holland 2012).

While studies of school desegregation programs and court orders offer perhaps the most directly relevant insight into today’s low-income students in middle-class schools, they no longer suffice in detailing the educational experiences and outcomes of the population. Extant research has not yet systematically accounted for both the diversity of low-income students (which comprise of not only blacks and Latinos, but also increasingly Asian immigrant groups) and the ever-diversifying suburban school contexts that are increasingly deviating from the traditional majority-white schools. Moreover, while black students bussed to middle-class suburbs from urban neighborhoods may have once constituted the low-income population in such schools, this is no longer the case with the suburbanization of poverty and of immigration.

Current demographic trends make it imperative to update our understanding of the experiences and outcomes of low-income high school youth in the suburbs. For example, between 2000 and 2008, the low-income population in the suburbs grew five times faster than that of central cities, and by 2008, suburbs housed the greatest share of the nation’s low-income
residents (Kneebone and Garr 2010). Along with the suburbanization of poverty is the suburbanization of immigration, discussed above. Addressing these demographic changes in suburbia, this project is a critical and timely analysis of the heterogeneity amidst low-income students in suburban schools, which has not been adequately captured in existing studies.

**Overview of Chapters**

In the following chapters, I document the heterogeneity in how traditionally disadvantaged students fare in well-resourced, demographically-diverse suburban schools and show how race, class, and context interact to (1) make class matter differently for students in two suburban schools and (2) shape integration and incorporation pathways of traditionally disadvantaged students.

Chapter 2 details the research methods and analyses employed in this study. Given that high schools are complex bounded social spaces wherein most adolescents spend a bulk of their waking hours, I draw from four data sources to answer my research questions from multiple methodological angles: longitudinal student-level administrative data, ethnography, in-depth semi-structured student interviews, and student surveys.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed orientation to the two research sites of this study. It also calls into question the assumption that “good” well-resourced, high-performing suburban schools, as they stand currently, are indeed “good” at serving the needs of diverse students. Following Spillman (2015), I rely on quantitative analysis of the longitudinal student-level administrative data and the student surveys to set the stage for—and appropriately contextualize—my main findings. I begin by comparing how similarly low-income students fare academically in two public high schools I fictitiously name Ranch High versus in Bonita High.
Overall, I find that low-income students in Bonita High outperform their counterparts at Ranch High for some indicators, but the reverse is never the case (low-income students in Ranch High never outperform their counterparts in Bonita High), despite strong similarities in their school resources and general academic performance rankings. I then compare the academic outcomes of low-income students in Ranch High and Bonita High to their counterparts in higher-poverty, and typically lower-performing, schools nearby to test whether there exists a suburban school advantage for educational outcomes, as conventional research would lead us to believe. I do not find evidence for a clear suburban school advantage. Finally, I analyze survey data to show that low-income students—both between and within schools—are far from a uniform homogeneous group, even within intersectional race and class categories. Low-income students’ perceptions of their schools’ social climates, their perceived sense of belonging, and their general happiness at school differ notably both between and within schools. I then proceed to explore the potential mechanisms underlying these contextual puzzles in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 4 employs an intersectional approach in an in-depth analysis of how the salience, meaning, and consequences of being a low-income student vary depending on a two-staged intersectionality process between race/ethnicity, class, and context. I argue that students make sense of—and are judged by—their class backgrounds within the confines of contextualized hierarchies and systems of meanings, so that being a low-income Latina student (for example), as seen in the opening vignette above, holds different meanings, and is associated with different experiences, depending on school context. I find that the range in how low-income status is experienced is staggeringly large: while some low-income students are able to “pass” as higher-SES and can carry on with their school lived experiences like their middle-class peers, others are immediately marked—and treated—as subordinate, and suffer the socio-psychological
consequences accordingly. In short, for low-income students, where one attends school matters for integration processes and socio-psychological well-being.

In Chapter 5, I zoom in on immigrant students, who comprise a substantial portion of both Ranch High and Bonita High’s student populations, to explore their multiple heterogeneous paths of incorporation into the minority middle class. Drawing from the two-staged race/ethnicity-class-context intersectionality detailed in Chapter 4, I focus on how they form and manage one specific facet of their identities—what I call the *immigrant work ethic identity*—to study how race/ethnicity, class, and context interact to shape how immigrants and children of immigrants cast their identities vis-à-vis the perceived “mainstream” population on campus in ways that have important ramifications for both incorporation destinations into the minority middle class as well as group dynamics in future host societies.

Chapter 6 offers a glimpse into one of the many school-level forces that facilitate the dynamics I foreground in Chapters 4 and 5. Through a wealth of literature has pointed to the role of organizational-level practices such as tracking and school policies in shaping students’ experience and outcomes, I spotlight spatial layout of school campuses as an overlooked element that structures social relations, meanings, and hierarchies on school campuses. Through contrasting two different types of spatial layout—which I call hierarchical and egalitarian—I argue that space is an agentic force that interacts with organizational practices like tracking to enable and reinforce inequalities on campus.

Chapter 7 concludes by summarizing the key findings as they relate and contribute to theories of educational inequality and immigration, as well as discussions of how culture and structure interact to jointly shape social inequality. I argue that we have an incomplete and outdated rendering of how individual family background and school social context interact to
produce and reproduce inequality in schools, a shortcoming that is particularly alarming given changing demographics in the U.S. metropolitan landscape and the increasing diversification of our school populations. I seek to redirect our focus from dichotomous black vs. white, rich vs. poor discussions of inequality and challenge our assumption that race-class intersections and contextual forces exert uniform effects on individuals who share similar social background characteristics. I conclude with a discussion of recommendations and reflections for policy, future research, and society in general.
Chapter 2

Data and Analytical Methods

High schools are ideal bounded social spaces in which to study how the non-uniform manifestations and contingencies of class are constructed through everyday lived experiences. Unlike earlier years where youth are more passive inhabitants of their parents’ worlds, the high school years contain the critical juncture where both parents and peers exert powerful—and sometimes competing— influences on youth (Milner 2004; Steinberg 2005; Armsden and Greenberg 1987). As the prime context of social interaction and social activities for most adolescents, high schools are where youth are socialized into the intricacies of group relations, boundaries, hierarchies, and meanings in ways that can maintain, reproduce, or create social inequality over time.

I set out to study well-resourced, socially diverse suburban schools for several reasons. First, a student body that is diverse in both class and its close companion, race, is essential in studying how class matters differently for students. A diverse student population allows for the opportunity to maximize on the richness, dynamism of social group relations, as there is a greater range and degree of difference to navigate. Second, I focus on well-resourced, high-performing suburban schools to minimize the effects of school resources or school quality in my findings and instead focus on the social processes that occur within school walls. Finally, and most importantly, I choose schools that possess the traditional elements that are typically lauded by parents, public discourse, and scholarship (Lareau and Goyette 2014; Coleman 1966; Hanushek 1997). In illuminating the dynamics occurring in schools that are purportedly ideal or exemplary, at least in theory, I highlight both the strengths and challenges present in these types of schools.
In doing so, I hope to inform and lend insight to policy discussions around school reform in the twenty-first century.

**The Schools**

In selecting school sites for my study, I aimed to choose two high-performing, well-resourced, diverse suburban high schools located within the same school district. Two schools enabled a direct comparison of two different bounded contexts, while ensuring that they shared a school district minimized the role of district-level processes in my findings. In addition, given my focus on class, I sought two schools with similar proportions of lower- and higher-income students in order to control for class proportions to the extent that I could. I allowed racial distributions to vary across the two schools in order to leave room for the possibility that class may be manifested differently depending on the racial climate of each school campus. Finally, I sought an overall metropolitan area that was diverse both in terms of its demographics and in its neighborhoods—in short, a metropolitan area that well reflects the diversity of the contemporary U.S.

**The Setting**

*The Larger Community: South Haven*

South Haven is a large metropolitan area in the southwestern United States. The city has undergone rapid transformation as a major settlement area for post-1965 immigrants—largely from Latin American and Asian countries, particularly Mexico, the Philippines, and Vietnam. According to Census data, 26% percent of residents in South Haven city are foreign born. Of the
foreign born, 42% originated from Latin American countries while 43% emigrated from Asian countries. Thirty-two percent of the foreign-born population entered the U.S. after 2000.

The city is also economically diverse, with a median household income of $60,037. On one hand, it is home to wealthy communities like Crown Pointe, where 3% of families live below the poverty level, and 86% of residents are non-Hispanic white. In recent years, Crown Pointe had the highest house values in the nation, with an average home price in 2009 of $2.125 million\(^2\). On the other hand, the city is home to families living in poverty as well. Thirteen percent of families in the city of South Haven live below the poverty level. In the segregated, crime-ridden inner city barrios of South Haven, about one in three families live below the poverty level and nearly 90% of residents are Latino or black\(^3\).

The South Haven Unified School District (SHUSD), one of the largest school districts in the state, serves this immensely diverse city. Like the city itself, the school district comprises of a diverse range of schools, from underperforming, violence-ridden urban schools to highly affluent, almost exclusively white, schools. There is also a voluntary program in the district that allows families—typically lower-income families in higher-poverty areas with lower-performing high schools—to elect to send students to schools outside their zoning boundaries. “Receiving” schools are typically the middle-class high-performing schools in the district. As has historically been the case, this topic has been an issue of contention in some sub-communities in South Haven. Importantly, some schools are known to be flagship-receiving schools for “bussed” students. Both sites of fieldwork are high schools in the SHUSD.

*Ranch High School*

\(^2\) Coldwell Banker Home Price Comparison Index 2009

\(^3\) Available through The South Haven Association of Governments
Ranch High School is located in a suburban community of single-family homes that was developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Initially home to almost exclusively white residents, the community has seen a slight increase in immigrant families in the recent years. Today, the community surrounding Ranch High is 73% white, 14% Latino, 6% Asian, and 4% African-American. While Ranch High is located in an upper middle-class neighborhood, its zoning boundary includes neighboring suburbs, including less affluent ones. Three percent of families in the immediate community surrounding Ranch High live under the poverty level.

Table 1. Demographic Summary of School Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ranch High</th>
<th>Bonita High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Latino</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Asian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Filipino</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% African-American</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Mixed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Low-SES</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Bussed</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Student Population (#)</td>
<td>2529</td>
<td>2574</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 provides a demographic overview of Ranch High School. In the 2012-2013 school year, Ranch High School served 2529 students, 42% of whom qualified for FRPM. Forty-three percent of its students were white, 32% were Latino, 12% were Asian, 1% were Filipino, 1% were Pacific Islander, and 8% were African-American. Ninety-five percent of the student population is U.S. born. Of the 95%, 37% speak a language other than English at home (including those who speak English and another language(s) at home). This 37% estimates the composition of U.S. born children of immigrants.
Thirty-seven percent of its students were bussed to school from other neighborhoods outside of the school’s zoning boundaries, making it one of the flagship receiving schools for bussed students. The salience of busing at Ranch High is also the source of some frustration and debate among middle- and upper-middle class parents in the larger Ranch community.

Among the low-income population in Ranch High School in 2012-2013, 16% were white, 50% were Latino, 19% were Asian, 1% were Filipino, 1% were Pacific Islander, and 11% were African-American. Relative to their compositional makeup at Ranch High School, Latino students are overrepresented (by 18%) and white students are underrepresented (by 27%) among the low-income population. Figure 6 compares the representation of each racial/ethnic group among the low-income population with its representation on campus overall.

Ranch High School has been consistently lauded as one of its state’s—and the nation’s—best public high schools. According to the U.S. World and News Report, Ranch High School is in the top 10% of public high schools in its state (U.S. World and News Report 2015). The first

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4 The U.S. World and News Report rankings for Best High Schools are based on overall student performance in standardized state tests; performance of disadvantaged (black, Hispanic, and low-income) students in standardized state tests; and college readiness (measured by both participation in Advanced Placement or International
column in Table 2 summarizes Ranch High students’ overall academic outcomes. In the 2012-2013 school year, 69% of students scored proficient or advanced in the English Language Arts (ELA) state test, and 27% of students scored proficient or advanced in Mathematics. Ninety-one percent of Ranch High students passed the ELA portion of the Graduate Exit Assessment (required of all students in order to receive their high school diploma), and 69% scored proficient or advanced. On the Math portion of the Graduate Exit Assessment, 91% of students passed and 71% scored proficient or advanced. Almost half (44%) of all students at Ranch High are enrolled in at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course, and 64% of AP tests taken by Ranch High students scored a 3 (passing score) or higher. The average SAT score was 1565, while the average ACT score was 24. The graduation rate in 2012-2013 was 95.9, and 87% of graduates enrolled in four-year postsecondary institutions within 16 months of graduating from high school.

Table 2. Summary of Academic Outcomes by School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ranch High</th>
<th>Bonita High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Test - ELA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Proficient/Advanced</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Test - Math</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Proficient/Advanced</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Exit Assessment - ELA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Passed</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Proficient/Advanced</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Exit Assessment - Math</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Passed</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Proficient/Advanced</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Students Taking at least 1 AP Class</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% AP Tests Passed (score ≥ 3)</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average SAT Score</td>
<td>1565</td>
<td>1492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average ACT Score</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate</td>
<td>95.9</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% in Post-Secondary Insitution</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


5 Qualitative evidence suggests that this percentage is lower than usual because of administrative/staffing struggles in the Math department that year.
Bonita High School

Bonita High School is located in the largest suburban community in South Haven. It underwent rapid urban transformation in 1969 and then residential expansion in the 1990s to accommodate the boom in the number of employees affiliated with nearby companies and universities. Though similar to Ranch High’s surrounding community in its gradual replacement of white residents with Latino and Asian residents, the community surrounding Bonita High has a large Asian population, mostly comprised of immigrants from Vietnam, the Philippines, and India. The community today is 31% white, 13% Latino, 46% Asian, and 4% African-American. Three percent of families in the community live under the poverty level.

The last column of Table 1 above provides a demographic snapshot of Bonita High School. In the 2012-2013 school year, Bonita High served 2574 students, 49% of whom qualify for FRPM. Sixteen percent of its students were white, 21% were Latino, 20% were Asian, 28% were Filipino, 1% were Pacific Islander, and 6% were African-American. Eighty-four percent of the student population is U.S. born, and of this 84%, 34% speak a language other than English at home (including those who speak English and another language(s) at home). This 34% estimates the composition of U.S. born children of immigrants. Only 6% of Bonita High students are bussed to school from other neighborhoods outside of the school’s zoning boundaries.

Among the low-income population in Bonita High School, 8% were white, 29% were Latino, 24% were Asian, 22% were Filipino, 1% were Pacific Islander, and 8% were African-American. No racial/ethnic groups are as severely over- or underrepresented among the low-income population as in the case of Ranch High School, with the exception of Latino students, who were underrepresented among the low-income population by 20%. Figure 7 compares each
racial/ethnic group’s representation among the low-income population with their representation in Bonita High’s campus overall.

![Figure 7. Racial/Ethnic Representation in Overall Student Population vs. in Low-Income Population, Bonita High School](image)

Like Ranch High School, Bonita High has also annually been touted as one of the best public high schools in both its state and the nation. The U.S. World and News Report ranks Bonita High in the top 15% of public high schools in its state. The second column in Table 2 above summarizes Bonita High students’ academic outcomes. In the 2012-2013 school year, 70% of Bonita High students scored proficient or advanced in ELA portion of the standardized state tests and 40% of students scored proficient or advanced in Mathematics. On the Graduate Exit Assessment, 91% of students passed and 72% scored proficient or advanced on the ELA portion. On the Math portion of the Graduate Exit Assessment, 93% of students passed and 79% scored proficient or advanced. Forty-six percent of students were enrolled in at least one AP class, and 57% of AP tests taken by Bonita High students received a passing score or higher. The average SAT score was 1492, while the average ACT score was 22. Bonita High’s graduation rate was 95.5 in 2012-2013, and 82% of graduates enrolled in four-year postsecondary institutions within 16 months of graduating from high school.
Methods

I employ a four-pronged approach in my data analysis for two primary reasons. Employing multiple mixed methods allows me to triangulate my findings and to enhance my understanding of how contextual factors shape the salience, meanings, and manifestations of class. Often, it was through the triangulation process and reconciling inconsistencies between inferences drawn from different methods that yielded particularly interesting insights. For example, while I concluded from my ethnographic observations that economically-disadvantaged white students at Ranch High pretty much blended in with everyone and did not seem to share the difficulties faced by economically-disadvantaged students of color, I found through interviews that they had compelling insights and unique school experiences that I missed in my observations. The four-pronged approach also facilitates an analytical process from multiple angles and through multiple lenses. I apply and draw on the strengths of each method purposively to achieve different analytical goals, as each makes contributions to my findings in ways that the others cannot.

First, drawing from Spillman (2014), I begin by using quantitative regression to both contextualize and paint a preliminary description of the focal patterns I foreground qualitatively in this study. Second, I administer student surveys to capture attitudes on social climate and group relations that administrative data lacks. Third, I conduct ethnographic observations at both schools throughout the course of one academic year to investigate the social relations, climate, and dynamics in both depth and scope. Observations over the course of the academic year also allow for an investigation of group processes and the development of group relations over time. Finally, I conduct in-depth interviews with students to capture meaning-making processes, as
well as aspects of attitudes, identities, and biases not always visible through ethnographic observation. I discuss each method in detail below.

*Quantitative Administrative Data*

Longitudinal student-level data obtained from the South Haven Unified School District were analyzed to paint a picture of the two school sites in broad brushstrokes to provide an orienting overview before delving into the qualitative findings. The main purpose of the quantitative data is to contextualize the research question and the two school sites both over time and in relation to each other and to their surrounding schools. Though the quantitative data does include academic outcomes, my research design and available data does not allow me to establish a causal direction. In other words, for example, although I show that economically-disadvantaged students in Bonita High generally perform better academically than their counterparts in Ranch High, and that economically-disadvantaged students in Bonita High are generally happier and more comfortable at school than their counterparts at Ranch High, I cannot establish (nor is it my purpose to establish) which came first.

I use administrative data from a restricted-use dataset provided by the South Haven Unified School District. The data cover all students from grades 1-12 who attended a school in the district between 2010-2016. This includes seven cohorts (class of 2010-2016), including 3 graduating cohorts (classes of 2010-2012), for a total of 48,893 students. The dataset contains traditional administrative data collected by the district through standardized state test administrations and upon students’ enrollment in and out of the district. The data contain information on students’ family background (e.g., race/ethnicity, parental education), attendance and disciplinary record, academic record, and participation in special programs (such as the
voluntary busing program and other similar residential programs). Also included are data from the National Student Clearinghouse, which contains information about students’ college enrollment and SAT/ACT scores (if applicable).

The data do not include free or reduced price meal (FRPM) qualification, a traditional measure of low-income status. However, it does contain students’ addresses, which are geocoded and merged with Census data (Census 2000) to gather neighborhood information for each student in the dataset. Since the data do not contain information about individual students’ economic background due to the district’s restrictions, I use neighborhood data as proxies for students’ family economic backgrounds. Because students must have a family income at or below 185% of the national poverty line to qualify for free or reduced-price meals (FRPM)\(^6\), I define a student as economically disadvantaged if they live in a block group whose median household income is at or below 185% of the poverty level that year (for the 2012-2013 school year, the cutoff is $43,568). In the absence of FRPM data, this is my low-income status indicator for analyses of the administrative data.

These data are also used to determine what constitutes a high-performing, well-resourced, middle-class suburban school. I classify this type of school as one that (a) is located in a block group with a population density under 10,000 per square mile; (b) is located in a block group with a median household income greater than the national average ($53,046\(^7\)); (c) serves 60% or fewer economically-disadvantaged students; (d) has an State Performance Index score higher than the state average for that year; and (e) is at or above the state average for college readiness.


\(^7\) http://census.gov/search-results.html?q=median+income&search.x=0&search.y=0&page=1&stateGeo=&searchtype=web
**Student Surveys**

To capture students’ attitudes, reports, and reflections on their school experiences and on the social climate and relations at their school, I administered surveys to 334 students at Ranch High (31% of the entire school population) and 353 students at Bonita High (29% of the entire school population), for a total of 687 surveyed students. The purpose of the surveys is to achieve an expansive scope in collecting students’ attitudes on the social climate and group relations at each school. Much like the administrative quantitative data, whose main purpose is to contextualize the study, the survey also provides context for the patterns and social phenomena I later foreground. While the administrative quantitative data contextualize the study with quantifiable traditional outcomes such as test scores and attendance rates, the survey is a useful supplement that contextualizes the study with a wide scope of students’ perspectives on social climate and peer relations at school.

After several months of being immersed in the field and becoming a familiar face to teachers and students, I began by asking the teachers whose classrooms I observed whether I could administer my survey to their students at a scheduled date. All teachers who I asked allowed me to survey their students, and some even allowed me to survey their other classes (classes that I did not observe). Because I wanted an equal balance of advanced- and regular-track classes, I also sought out specific teachers during the survey recruitment process. All of these teachers also agreed to let me survey their classes. In total, I surveyed 12 classes at each school—five advanced-track classes, six regular-track classes, and one Associated Student Body (ASB; student government) class. The purpose of surveying ASB at each school was to ensure that I included the voices of elected student leaders who, given their job roles, should know their campus dynamics quite well.
On each scheduled survey administration, I briefly introduced myself (if I was in a new classroom) and gave a short description of my project. My typical introduction was that I was a graduate student from Harvard who was interested in learning about life in high school. This vague description proved sufficient. I emphasized that participation in the survey was completely voluntary and that survey responses would be anonymous (no names collected). Students who wished to participate filled out a consent form. To incentivize participation, all students who submitted the survey were entered in a raffle for a $100 gift card to a store of their choice. Since only one prize was given per school, and since the students knew that I was surveying multiple classes throughout campus, I do not believe that this pressured students into participating in cases where they otherwise would not have participated. On the contrary, many students were excited about taking up class time to allow their voices to be heard through the surveys. The surveys took students approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

Likely due to the non-threatening and low time commitment nature of the survey, almost all students who were given the chance to participate did so. Only two students at Ranch High and three students at Bonita High opted out of survey participation. Table 3 summarizes the demographic characteristics of students who participated in the survey.

Table 3. Demographic Breakdown of Survey Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FRPM</th>
<th>Bussed*</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ranch High School</td>
<td>51% (32)</td>
<td>46% (29)</td>
<td>24% (15)</td>
<td>17% (11)</td>
<td>10% (6)</td>
<td>35% (22)</td>
<td>13% (8)</td>
<td>2% (1)</td>
<td>100% (63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonita High School</td>
<td>52% (32)</td>
<td>21% (13)</td>
<td>23% (14)</td>
<td>33% (20)</td>
<td>13% (8)</td>
<td>18% (11)</td>
<td>11% (7)</td>
<td>2% (1)</td>
<td>100% (61)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix A contains the survey instrument used. All surveys were distributed in paper form. Surveys begin by collecting some basic demographic information such as parental education and race/ethnicity and then prompt students to report their academic histories. The
bulk of the survey questions, however, are aimed at capturing the social climate, norms, and relations at each school using a simple forced-choice Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree; neutral option omitted). For example, the survey asks students about the extent to which cliques at school are based on race/ethnicity, busing, or academic track. The survey also prompts questions that aim to capture students’ social well-being. For example, it asks students how comfortable they feel at school, whether they feel accepted and included in their school community, and whether (and how) they feel judged by others at school.

The survey concludes with a group of five questions that are potentially more sensitive. Given the complications in defining class using different types of data, I include five questions that have been used in past research (e.g., see Rector et al. 1999 and Coleman-Jensen et al. 2014) that may be helpful in identifying economically disadvantaged students. These five questions ask students to report how often they: (1) experience a disruption in utilities; (2) lose their home or face the threat of losing their home; (3) receive government assistance (e.g., welfare, food stamps); (4) not eat when hungry because there wasn’t enough money for food; and (5) not attend non-academic school events (like prom and football games) because of the need to save money.

Given the oft-noted critiques of using FRPM status as a measure of low-income status, these questions serve as additional options for measuring low-income status. Prior to running analyses, I tested how well FRPM status aligns with the other measures of low-income status in my survey. To do so, I created an alternate definition of low-income status based on whether a student met any of the following situations in the survey data: (1) they answered “sometimes,” “often,” or “all of the time” to three or more of the five scenarios described above; (2) self-identified as “lower-middle” or “lower” income; (3) their father is not a high school graduate; (4)
their mother is not a high school graduate. I found that this definition of economic disadvantage aligns relatively well with free or reduced-price meals as an indicator of economic disadvantage. For both schools, there is a relatively strong correlation between this definition of economic status and FRPM status (r=0.5 at each school). To remain as consistent as possible with my other data sources, therefore, I use FRPM status as the low-income indicator in my survey analyses.

Paper surveys were coded manually onto Excel and then analyzed using Stata.

Ethnographic Observation

I began fieldwork at the beginning of the school year at each of the two schools. Within the first couple weeks of the school year, the principal of Ranch High and the vice principal of Bonita High introduced me to approximately 3-4 teachers in their respective schools. These teachers welcomed me in their classrooms either because they were interested in my project, needed extra classroom assistance, or a combination of both. Over the course of the school year, these teachers introduced me to other teachers who also allowed me to observe in their classrooms. Through this snowballing method and through approaching teachers myself later in the school year, I observed classes that were diverse in their subject matter and academic track, and thus quickly became a familiar face to students across campus.

Depending on the teacher whose classroom I observed, I either served as a classroom assistant (e.g., helping students on homework or passing out papers) or strictly a non-intrusive observer during class hours (e.g., sitting in the back of the classroom). I took notes in a notebook, which helped me seem non-intrusive, as students often assumed I was a college student doing my homework. Through this method of seeming like I was doing my homework and not paying attention to what was being said or done around me, I was able to make observations that I
believe I otherwise may not have gathered if students knew that I was actively observing them. For instance, when I was sitting at the back of a classroom, a Latino male and a black male were horsing around at the two seats next to me. The black student said, “Shut up, or I’ll cut you,” to which the Latino student replied, “I’ll rape you.” The black student retorted back, “I’m black. I do the raping.” The boys shared a chuckle while I continued to pretend to do my homework. I believe that students would hesitate to behave freely had they known that I was keenly observing them and logging details of their interactions for my study. My “homework” strategy, especially during non-instructional time, was a helpful strategy that distracted students from noticing that I was keenly observing them.

In addition to classroom observations, I also observed students before school, during lunch (e.g., in the cafeteria/lunch areas, in classrooms as they ate with their teachers and peers, and in the libraries), in the counselors’ or other administrative offices on campus, in extracurricular settings (e.g., club meetings, theater performances), and in special events such as Open House, Prom, Graduation, and Awards Ceremonies. All students attending the schools were subject to observations during school hours throughout the entire school year. I devoted the first two months of fieldwork exclusively to observations in order to both get acquainted with the school sites and to establish rapport in each school. I observed at the schools from two to eight hours per day, five days a week during the school year. In total, I logged 372 observational hours at Ranch High and 408 observational hours at Bonita High, for a total of 780 hours.

Notes collected while in the field, which ranged from quick jottings to detailed excerpts, were transcribed at the end of each day. To facilitate systematic note-taking, I logged each day’s fieldwork in a structured template, which included prompts for notes on the weather, overall mood on campus, and special contextual notes (e.g., if there was an assembly or a fight that
broke out that day). Ethnographic fieldnotes were coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti. I utilized both inductive and deductive analysis (Wilson and Chaddha 2009), as I both used my theoretical knowledge as a roadmap for my analysis and revisited my analysis when new theoretical insights emerged from my data. Maintaining a dynamic relationship between my data and analysis, and engaging in focused coding (Charmaz 2002), allowed me to refine both my theoretical analysis and coding schemes as I was observing in the field throughout the year.

**In-Depth Student Interviews**

Social relations and group dynamics are complex phenomena that neither quantitative administrative data, surveys, nor ethnographic observation can adequately capture. I employ in-depth interviews to add depth to the analysis and explore attitudes, thought processes, and narratives that are unobservable or not fully observable through other methods. Through in-depth interviews with 124 students—63 at Ranch High and 61 at Bonita High—I directly engage in focused conversations with students and am able to interpret and analyze their accounts in the context of their personal narratives and life histories. Table 4 shows the demographic breakdown of my interview sample.

| Table 4. Demographic Breakdown of Interview Sample |
|----------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Ranch High School                      | FRPM | Bussed* | Latino | Asian | Black | White | Mixed | Other | TOTAL |
| FRPM                                   | 51% (32) | 46% (29) | 24% (15) | 17% (11) | 10% (6) | 35% (22) | 13% (8) | 2% (1) | 100% (63) |
| Bonita High School                     | 52% (32) | 21% (13) | 23% (14) | 33% (20) | 13% (8) | 18% (11) | 11% (7) | 2% (1) | 100% (61) |

*This does NOT include students who live outside school residential boundaries but are NOT bussed (e.g., their parents drive them to school)

I began recruiting students for interviews after about two months in the field. I began by recruiting students in the classrooms I was observing. Thus, by the time I began interview
recruitment, all recruited students were familiar with who I was. Using the class rosters, I began
by randomly selecting students to interview. I then took the selected students aside during class
and explained to them vaguely that I was doing a project on how teenagers experience high
school and that they were randomly selected to participate. I told them that participation was
entirely voluntary, that our conversation would be confidential, and that they would receive $5
for their time. After my brief explanation, I then asked whether they think they might be
interested, and if they were, I handed them a consent form for their parents to sign and return. All
students who were randomly selected took home a consent form, and all but one student (at
Bonita High) obtained parental permission to participate in the interview.

In addition to randomly selecting students for interviews, I also occasionally accepted
teachers’ recommendations of potentially good interviewees. On multiple occasions, teachers
pulled me aside privately and suggested that I interview a specific student because they were
particularly articulate, friendly, or held interesting views. Because the teachers did not know the
exact purpose or subject matter of my interview beyond my vague “elevator pitch” (for teachers,
I simply explained that I was doing a project on peer networks among high school adolescents),
and because I only obtained a small handful of interviewees in this way, I do not believe that this
sampling technique skewed my results in any meaningful way.

As I got further along with interviews, I also employed purposive sampling in order to
obtain a more demographically representative sample. For example, towards the end of my
interview recruitment at Bonita High, I realized that I needed more interviewees who were black
and more underclassmen interviewees, so I purposively sought students who were black or who
were ninth or tenth graders. At Ranch High, when I realized that I needed more underclassmen
interviewees and more low-income white interviewees to balance out my sample demographics, I similarly targeted those groups.

I aimed to achieve interview samples that roughly reflect the demographic composition of the overall school population. In both schools, I had access to the roster of all students attending the school, along with their racial/ethnic background and whether they qualified for free or reduced price meals (FRPM). I used the information in the rosters to categorize my interviewees into racial/ethnic and class categories. Usually, racial/ethnic information on the roster aligned with my interviewees’ self-reports. However, some students who were listed as one racial/ethnic category (e.g., white) revealed in their interview that they were actually another (e.g., mixed race). In even fewer cases, some students who were listed as mixed race in the school roster actually identified as one race (e.g., a half white half black student identifying as just white). Both types of inconsistencies were interesting and were noted in my interview notes and analytical processes, and I sensibly adjudicated between school records and self-reports in choosing the correct way to categorize each of these students. I was careful to distinguish between self-reports (e.g., a student listed as white in school records but is actually mixed race because her grandparents are Asian, White, and Latino) and self-identifications (e.g., a student listed as mixed race in the school roster but identifies as just white because he has a negative relationship with his estranged black father). While self-reports had bearing in how I demographically categorized interviewees, self-identifications did not.

As for class categories, I largely stuck to the FRPM status in the school rosters in categorizing my interviewees. Though FRPM status is far from a perfect measure of low-income status, I use it because (a) it generally captures the low-income status for my specific research purposes; (b) there were no feasible alternative methods to discern students’ class backgrounds,
on a school-wide level, at the time; and (c) it aligns well with other traditional markers of low-income status, as discussed above in the overview of the survey data. Furthermore, I triangulated students’ official FRPM statuses with the narratives they revealed during their interviews. For the most part, elements of my FRPM interviewees’ narratives confirmed that they indeed came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. To be sure, there was substantial variance in the degree to which (or even whether) interviewees explicitly identified as low-income or revealed their FRPM statuses to me (at the time of the interview, interviewees did not know that I already knew their FRPM statuses). However, unlike in the case of racial/ethnic category classification, I did not view this mismatch between self-reported income status and FRPM status on the school roster as an inconsistency. Rather, the degree to which students identified as low-income, the salience of their economic background, and what it means to them to be low-income are all elements relevant to my research question. Thus, I relied on school records (triangulated with students’ narratives) to categorize interviewees’ economic backgrounds. In very few cases did I find evidence that contradicted the school records. For example, one student listed as non-FRPM by his school turned out to actually be low-income. The reason for the discrepancy was that (a) his parents forgot to submit the paperwork that year, partially because (b) he typically skips school lunch anyway and waits until he gets home after school to eat.

I did not have sufficient data to ensure that my samples of interviewees in the two schools were similarly “rich” or “poor”—that is, I did not have data to guarantee that the range of poverty or of wealth for each school’s interview sample were the same. To address this issue, I used the information I did have (FRPM designations, students’ narratives gleaned from interviews, and observations) and matched students from Ranch High to their similar counterparts in Bonita High based on this information. While an imperfect technique, this one-
to-one matching helped achieve a more comparable sample than I would have achieved in the absence of this technique.

At Ranch High, most interviews were held in a private conference room in the library that the librarian graciously set aside for me. In cases when the conference room was being used, my backup interview location was a spacious and well-lit storage room. Both locations were quiet and private, though occasionally, the librarian or her assistants would walk into the library conference room during an interview. When this happened, I simply engaged in small talk with the interviewee as the passerby passed through or paused the interview to greet the passerby as they passed through. There were no interruptions when I was in the storage room, though sounds from adjacent classrooms were sometimes audible. While the storage room was more private, the library conference room was always my go-to location, since it was more casual and comfortable.

At Bonita High, most interviews were held in an unused conference room on campus that was nestled among classrooms. Students were often surprised that the room existed amidst their typical classes. The room was well-lit and the conference table was surrounded by soft, comfortable rolling chairs. For interviewees who seemed nervous, I found that rolling around in these chairs with them helped ease tension. Rarely, the custodian walked in during an interview to empty the trash cans, but only for a very brief moment. When the conference room was not available, I conducted interviews in an empty bungalow classroom. The classroom was a familiar space for students, since it looked just like their other bungalow classrooms. Interviews in this room were never interrupted by people coming in. However, I avoided this room when possible because it was often too cold on cold days or too hot on hot days.
All interviews were conducted on campus either during instructional time, lunch time, or after school. Interviews during instructional time were always done so with the permission of the teacher whose class would be missed. Most interviews conducted during instructional time were either during study hall periods, non-academic (e.g., physical education, yearbook, ASB) classes, or on days when both the student and teacher agreed that the student would be missing little and could make up work easily (e.g., when English class was watching a movie). I also obtained permission from students’ teachers of the next period (e.g., period 4 teacher if the interview was to be conducted during period 3) in case the interview ran overtime. Similarly, for interviews during lunch, I was sure to speak to the student’s fifth period (the period after lunch) teachers to ensure that they were allowed to miss part of fifth period if the interview ran overtime.

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes to two hours. All interviews were recorded with students’ permission. I began the interview by reminding students that our conversation would be confidential, that they should not filter any of their comments because only I would hear them, and that their names would never be linked to their interviews. I thus asked each student at the beginning of his/her interview to choose a pseudonym. In addition to serving as extra assurance for the student that they were in a safe space (I referred to the student by their pseudonym during the interviews—e.g., starting the recorder and saying, “Today is February 8, 2013 and I’m here with Taylor Swift”), the devising of their pseudonym often helped break the ice, as we often shared laughter when coming up with a (sometimes silly) pseudonym. Though I kept a notebook and pen close by, I rarely took many notes because I did not want to disrupt the flow of my casual conversation with students. I did take quick jottings when a student said something I wanted to return to later during the interview.
While I had an interview guide, I began the interview with an open-ended approach by asking the interviewee to tell me a little about himself/herself. This approach gave me a glimpse of the interviewee’s self-identification, self-presentation, and how they relate to others. For example, some interviewees immediately began by telling me their age and grade, while others immediately discussed their racial/ethnic or religious identities. Others began with a quirky hobby or talent. Still others began with provocative statements such as, “I hate the people at this school.”

While maintaining an open-ended and casual conversation flow, I guided myself with a structured interview guide to ensure that I systematically addressed the topics I needed to explore. Appendix B contains the interview guide I constructed and used in all my interviews. The guide includes six topic modules. Module 1 asks interviewees about their personal background and contains questions about their family, neighborhood, and the schools they have attended in the past. In Module 2, I get a sense of interviewees’ academic histories, including their grades and the “type of student” they were throughout their educational trajectories. I also gather information about how they identified academically (e.g., what kind of student they were) at the time of the interview. Module 3 begins to explore interviewees’ attitudes on friendships, peer dynamics, and general social climate at school. Specifically, I probe interviewees to discern the degree of diversity (or homogeneity) of their friendship networks, collect their reflections on how students are divided at school (and why they are divided that way), and ask them to explain what statuses (e.g., racial/ethnic, economic, busing) are salient on campus and why. It is typically in this module that students articulate in-depth explanations of on-campus hierarchies, boundaries, and systems of meanings. In Module 4, I dig deeper and situate interviewees in the school climate they just described. I prompt students to discuss their everyday lives as a student,
given the school social climate. In this module, I also aim to get a sense of students’ social and psychological well-being by asking them about their perceived levels of comfort, safety, and acceptance at school. Module 5 captures interviewees’ post-secondary plans, as well as their informational and social networks related to their plans. Module 6 concludes by asking students whether they would send their own future children to a high school like theirs, and whether there is anything they would like to add to our discussion.

After each interview, I jotted down notes while they were still fresh in my memory. After each day, I transcribed my notes and also systematically took detailed interview field notes for each interview, following an interview template. The template prompted me to note, for example, any information not captured by the recorder, any distractions or interruptions, or any noteworthy information about the interviewee that stood out. I also ranked the quality of each interview on a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high), based on the degree to which the interview contents were relevant for my research questions. This ranking system proved useful to me, for instance, when prioritizing the first groups of interviews to be transcribed.

In general, likely because I was asking questions that aimed to get their opinion rather than quiz them or interrogate them on sensitive issues, I did not encounter obstacles in getting students to open up and talk to me. Many students confessed that the interview was refreshing, cathartic, or therapeutic, as they had never been asked before to share their thoughts on the topics I asked them about. In all my interviews, I strategically assumed an outsider status. Depending on the demographic characteristics of the interviewee, I established myself as an outsider through my age, my not being from the local community or high school, and/or my race/ethnicity. I would often ask questions by saying, “In my high school, things were this way. How are they
like here?” I found that students were eager to explain, to a curious outsider, phenomena that were such mundane and taken-for-granted aspects of their everyday lives at school.

Interviews were transcribed and then coded using Atlas.ti. I followed the same analytical strategies outlined in my discussion of ethnographic coding/analysis above. Collectively, the interview questions capture a comprehensive and detailed glimpse into everyday lived experiences among suburban high school students who attend diverse, publically-acclaimed schools. Interviews provide detailed insight into how students make sense of the social world around them in their bounded school spaces, how these perceptions permeate into their identity formation and socialization during these formative years, and how they negotiate, change, and maintain the multiple layers of their identities in their school social contexts.

*My Role*

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I remained actively cognizant of the role I played at each school. My aim was to present myself to students as a non-threatening, non-authoritative figure with no alliances to the adults or administration at their school. My attire was always casual on campus—jeans, t-shirts, sandals, and casual dresses—and I avoided attire that made me look older or too professional. I wanted the students to see me more as an older peer than as an adult authority figure. I believe that my attire strategy was successful, as I was often mistaken for a student by both the students and the adults at both schools. Female students frequently complimented me on my attire. Many times, as I was walking to my car to run errands during lunch, I was angrily chased down and yelled at by school administrators who thought I was a student cutting school. These instances were pleasant affirmations for me that my presence was indeed non-threatening and unassuming.
At each campus, I worked to fulfill the paradoxical role of *immersed outsider*. On one hand, I aimed to be fully immersed as a member of each school. For my research purposes, I wanted students to become familiar with who I was, and I wanted to establish rapport and trust with them. On a personal level, I wanted to become a part of the two school campuses that I moved away to study—and wherein I would be spend virtually every weekday over the course of the entire school year. On the other hand, I also employed my newcomer status as a strategy, as both students and adults at both schools were eager to help me by explaining, describing, or clarifying things in just the amount of detail that I needed for my purposes. For instance, students excitedly taught me their school-specific slang and terminology (e.g., what and where the Stoner Tree was; where the Asian Crips hung out, etc.) and matter-of-factly mapped out which social groups occupied what spaces during lunch. I found that students and adults at both campuses generally enjoyed taking on the responsibility of educating a trusted outsider on the everyday lived experiences of life on campus. My affiliation with Harvard, which quickly spread despite my hesitations, ended up helping me: though I was initially worried that I would come off as pretentious or distant, I found that it was a great conversation-starter, as students were excited to know someone from Harvard and asked me endless questions about the mythical school.

As an ambiguous figure on campus who was neither student, teacher, nor administrator, I sometimes encountered interesting issues. For example, because I did not want to be seen as someone who worked for the teachers or for the schools, I did not tell teachers when I witnessed behavior or conversations that I knew would get students in trouble (e.g., discussions about consuming/selling drugs, the use of racial slurs, a student’s confessions of vandalism, etc.). Eventually, students understood my neutral position and some openly chatted to me about their deviant behavior. Similarly, sometimes in class, a teacher publicly asked for my account as a
witness when a conflict arose (e.g., disagreement about which of two students started throwing things at another during class). During these awkward moments when I was put on the spot, I typically mumbled a neutral and intentionally unhelpful (to the teacher) response, such as, “Uh, sorry, I wasn’t really paying attention.”

In addition to the strategies I employed for research purposes, I also remained true to my own philosophy of giving back to my research sites whenever possible. As qualitative researchers, we are often validated by—and awarded for—the data we collect. As people, we should be mindful of what we take, and if possible, aim to give as much as we aim to take. In return for the personal stories I collected and for the opportunity to observe the everyday lives of students and teachers at the schools, I always sought to give back through assisting in the classroom, lending a hand with miscellaneous tasks in the office when staffing was low, providing physical labor while setting up for graduation ceremonies, consulting students on their college planning, providing feedback on college essays, and helping students with their homework.
Chapter 3

Setting And Descriptive Analyses

Given the centrality of the comparative aspects of this study, it is essential to understand each school site in detail before delving into research findings. By doing so, we better understand the broad contextual circumstances under which low-income students at the two schools experience their low-income statuses.

This orienting chapter thus sets the stage for the analytical chapters to follow, by providing a descriptive overview of each of the two schools. The previous chapter provides an introductory overview of the South Haven community and the two schools in Chapter 2 suggested, accentuating both the ways in which the two schools are strikingly similar—for example, in their socioeconomic makeup, their racial diversity, and their statuses as stereotypical middle-class suburban schools—as well as how they are vastly different—specifically, in their exact racial makeup and in their greater community and community history.

In this chapter, I begin by comparing the academic outcomes of low-income students at Bonita High and Ranch High to see whether being low-income might translate to better or worse academic outcomes at one school but not the other. I then compare low-income students in the two suburban schools to their counterparts in higher-poverty schools. By doing so, I test whether a “suburban advantage” exists for low-income students who attend better-resourced, middle-class suburban high schools, as past research suggests.

Next, I ask whether—and to what extent—the effects of being low-income are accounted for by other background variables traditionally associated with it (race/ethnicity, immigration status, and busing status). For example, is the income effect simply a racial effect? I consider the possibility that the association between income and other income-related background variables
varies by school. In doing so, I aim to find evidence that may hint at whether income might matter in different ways and carry different meanings, depending on context.

Finally, I turn to survey data to show that low-income students in Ranch High and Bonita High experience school differently despite their similar racial/ethnic and class origins. These analyses offer preliminary evidence of heterogeneity in the low-income experience in suburban schools that extant research has not yet adequately captured.

**Being Low-Income in Different Schools: A Comparative Analysis of Academic Outcomes in Ranch and Bonita High Schools**

While the descriptive statistics above suggest that low-income students at each school generally exhibit worse academic outcomes than their higher-income peers, the regression analyses below directly compare low-income students’ academic outcomes in Ranch High to low-income students’ academic outcomes in Bonita High, incorporating controls.

I restrict the sample to only low-income students and create a dummy variable for Bonita High, making Ranch High is the reference category. The regression coefficient for Bonita High thus represents how much low-income students in Bonita High deviate from their counterparts in Ranch High for the outcome of interest. The academic outcomes observed are weighted GPA, scoring proficient or advanced in the 10th grade ELA state test, scoring proficient or advanced in the 10th grade Math state test, SAT score (all three subjects combined), and enrollment in a four-year college after high school. Linear regressions are conducted for continuous outcomes (GPA and SAT score), and logistic regressions are conducted for dichotomous outcomes (scoring proficient/advanced in ELA, scoring proficient/advanced in Math, and enrollment in a four-year

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8 Weighted GPA is calculated for each student based on all grades available. For example, a ninth grade student’s weighted GPA is based on only her grades earned in ninth grade, while a twelfth grade student’s weighted GPA is based on his weighted GPA from grades 9-12. Grade level is added to control for potential grade level effects in weighted GPA.
Samples vary, due to variance in data availability for each outcome. For example, while analyses of state test scores include the graduating classes of 2010-2014, analyses of SAT score are restricted to the graduating classes of 2010-2012, and analyses of college enrollment are restricted to the graduating classes of 2010-2011.

Model 1 of the six-model nested regression begins by regressing the outcome of interest on the Bonita High dummy variable, with no controls. Model 2 adds prior achievement (ELA and Math scores in both fifth and eighth grade). Model 3 controls for gender and cohort\(^9\). Model 4 adds race/ethnicity dummy variables. The racial/ethnic categories are Asian, black, Latino, and Filipino (white is the reference group). Model 5 adds controls for whether a student speaks a language other than English at home, as well as whether a student is an English Language Learner (ELL). Model 6 controls for whether a student is bussed into school from another neighborhood.

As Table 5 shows, low-income students at Bonita High earn higher weighted GPAs than their counterparts at Ranch High, and this advantage remains significant even after all controls. Without controls, the GPAs of Bonita High’s low-income students is 0.2 points higher than those of Ranch High’s low-income students. Net of all controls, Bonita High’s GPA advantage is 0.1 points but remains statistically significant. Bonita High’s low-income students also perform better than Ranch High’s low-income students in the 10\(^{th}\) grade Math test, as depicted in Table 6. The odds of scoring proficient or advanced in the 10\(^{th}\) grade Math test is almost three times higher for low-income students at Bonita High than for their counterparts at Ranch High, net of all controls.

\(^9\) Cohort is measured by graduating class (e.g., “Class of 2010”).
## Table 5. OLS Estimates Comparing Low-Income Students' Weighted GPA in Bonita High vs. Ranch High

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
<th>Model 6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bonita High</td>
<td>0.222***</td>
<td>0.172***</td>
<td>0.174***</td>
<td>0.121***</td>
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<tr>
<td>8th Grade ELA Score</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001
No significant differences exist between the two schools exist for ELA test scores, SAT scores, or college attendance.

Is There a Suburban School Advantage?

While the above analysis is useful in comparing low-income students in Bonita High to their counterparts in Ranch High, an additional comparative factor is warranted: a comparison of low-income students in Bonita and Ranch High—two middle-class suburban high schools—to low-income students in higher-poverty, and typically lower-performing, high schools. Extensive research suggests that attending middle-class, high-performing suburban schools like Bonita and Ranch High is beneficial for low-income students, given the better academic resources, positive peer effects, and lower risk factors associated with such schools (e.g., Coleman et al. 1966; Kahlenberg 2001; Schwartz 2010). To test whether these benefits apply for low-income students in Bonita and Ranch High, I compare their academic outcomes with those of their counterparts who attend higher-poverty and less resourced high schools in the same school district.

Observing the same academic outcomes in the analysis above, I restrict the sample to low-income students who attend Bonita High, Ranch High, or any of the other higher-poverty schools in their district. I define a high-poverty school as one where 50% or more of the student population qualifies for free or reduced price meals. I create a dummy variable for Bonita High students and Ranch High students, making students in higher-poverty schools the reference category. The regression coefficient for Bonita High thus represents how much low-income students in Bonita High deviate from their counterparts in higher-poverty schools for the outcome of interest. Similarly, the coefficient for Ranch High represents how much low-income
students in Ranch High deviate from their counterparts in higher-poverty schools. As in the above analyses, samples vary depending on outcome, due to data availability.

The models in the nested regression analyses mirror those in the analyses above, with the exception of Model 6, which is omitted. Because the bussed status is not one typically held by students who attend higher-poverty schools, it is not a meaningful differentiating status in this analysis, and is therefore not included as a control.

Results suggest that Bonita and Ranch High are beneficial to low-income students for some academic outcomes, but not for others. Both Bonita and Ranch High are significantly better than high-poverty schools at promoting college-readiness—defined by SAT score—for low-income students. As Table 7 shows, low-income students at Bonita and Ranch High score 65 and 56 points higher on the SAT than their counterparts at higher-poverty high schools, respectively, net of all controls. Bonita High’s low-income students are also more likely to score proficient or advanced in Math than their counterparts at higher-poverty schools, as depicted in Table 8. Net of all controls, the odds of Bonita High’s low-income students scoring proficient or advanced in the 10th grade Math test is 1.8 times higher than those of low-income students in higher-poverty schools. Ranch High’s low-income students are also more likely to score proficient or advanced in the 10th grade Math test, but this effect is accounted for by prior achievement. There are no significant differences between schools in ELA test scores.

While both Bonita and Ranch high are significantly better than higher-poverty schools in preparing low-income students for college—as measured by the SAT—they are not better at getting low-income students into four-year colleges. As Table 9 shows, Bonita High’s low-income students have 48% lower odds of attending four-year colleges than their counterparts at
Table 7. OLS Estimates Comparing Low-Income Students' SAT Scores in Bonita High, Ranch High, and High-Poverty Schools

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* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001
Table 8. Odds Ratios Comparing Low-Income Students' Math Proficiency in Bonita High, Ranch High, and High-Poverty Schools

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* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001
Table 9. Odds Ratios Comparing Low-Income Students' Four-Year College Attendance in Bonita High, Ranch High, and High-Poverty Schools

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* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001
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* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001
higher-poverty schools, after all controls. There are no significant differences in the odds of attending a four-year college between Ranch High and higher-poverty schools.

Finally, as shown in Table 10, low-income students at both Bonita and Ranch high have significantly lower weighted GPAs than low-income students in higher-poverty schools. Prior to adding controls, low-income students at Bonita High had a significant 0.3-point advantage in weighted GPA over their counterparts in higher-poverty schools. Prior achievement renders this difference insignificant. With the addition of race/ethnicity, Bonita High’s low-income students have significantly lower GPAs than low-income students at higher-poverty schools. With all controls, Bonita High’s low-income students have a significant 0.1-point disadvantage in weighted GPA, relative to their counterparts at higher-poverty school. Similarly, while Ranch High’s low-income students have a significant 0.1 point advantage in GPA without controls, the addition of prior achievement reverses the relationship. With prior achievement controlled, Ranch High’s low-income students have a significant 0.2 disadvantage in GPA relative to low-income students in higher-poverty schools. This disadvantage persists through all models.

One possible explanation for the suburban disadvantage in weighted GPA is that low-income students at Bonita and Ranch take more advanced (AP/Honors) classes than their counterparts at higher-poverty schools. These classes are likely more challenging, which may explain worse grades at Bonita and Ranch. However, this pattern still holds when I control for the percentage of classes taken that are advanced (AP or Honors level) (see Table C1 in Appendix). Thus, differences in enrollment in advanced classes do not explain the suburban disadvantage in weighted GPA. Another possible mechanism driving this finding is that observing weighted GPA as an outcome—instead of unweighted GPA—works in favor of students who take more rigorous courses and/or are in advanced academic tracks. However, the
same pattern holds when unweighted GPA, rather than weighted GPA, is the outcome (see Table C2 in Appendix). Yet another possibility is that grade inflation may be driving this pattern. In other words, higher-poverty schools may have lower grading standards and may thus be more prone to giving out higher grades, compared to the two suburban schools. To test for this, I compared the percentage of “A” grades given, and then the percentage of “A” and “B” grades given, for each school (See Table C3 in Appendix). There was no significant difference between schools in either indicator. To test for the possibility that schools grade low-income students differently than non low-income students, I also compared the percentage of “A” grades given to low-income students, and then the percentage of “A” and “B” grades given to low-income students, and found that the pattern of no significant between-school differences still holds. Thus, the evidence suggests that neither course enrollment nor grade inflation explains the suburban disadvantage in GPA.

It is possible that other mechanisms are driving the suburban disadvantage in GPA that are not observable or captured by the quantitative data. For example, following Frog Pond Theory (Davis 1966), it is possible that low-income students at the suburban high schools feel more relatively deprived than their counterparts at higher-poverty schools, and this deprivation may contribute to the suburban disadvantage in GPA. Relatedly, there may be social or psychological hardships of being a low-income student in a middle-class suburban school that can be manifested in academic outcomes (Crosnoe 2011). In sum, the quantitative analyses indicate that the effects of attending middle-class suburban schools for low-income students are more complex than the school integration literature suggests. This complexity will be explored in the chapters to follow.
Income and its Association With Other Social Background Variables

Scholars often struggle in studying the effects of income, given its complex associations and interactions with other background demographic variables such as race/ethnicity and immigration status. Income is impossible to isolate as an independent effect given its intersectionality with other social background indicators such as race and gender, and most realistically operates in conjunction with other variables (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Stuber 2011;). However, past research has taken for granted the context-specific nature of income. In this subsection, I relax the assumption that income interacts with race/ethnicity uniformly across similar educational settings.

In this sub-section, I explore whether income’s association with other variables differs by school context. I investigate the extent to which income is accounted for by other variables traditionally assumed to be associated with it and allow for the possibility that income works differently—and carries different meanings—at different school contexts. For example, it is possible that an observed income effect is simply a racial effect. I test such possibilities in this section.

I run nested regressions separately for Bonita High and Ranch High. Unlike the above analyses, I do not restrict the sample to low-income students. For each academic outcome, I begin by regressing the outcome on income status and variables not typically associated with income status—specifically, prior achievement, gender, and cohort. Models 2-4 add in demographic variables traditionally associated with income status. Model 2 adds race/ethnicity (Asian, black, Latino, Filipino, and other; white is the omitted reference category). Model 3 adds dummies for immigration status—specifically, speaking a language other than English at home,
and English Language Learner (ELL) status. Model 4 controls for busing status. As in the above analyses, samples vary depending on outcome, due to data availability.

In the analyses, I focus on the low-income coefficient and how it changes with each additional model. Table 11 presents truncated results that focus only on the low-income coefficient. In sum, race accounts for the effect of income in some outcomes in Ranch High, but never accounts for the income effect in Bonita High. At Ranch High, a significant income effect exists in Model 1 for weighted GPA, ELA proficiency, SAT score, and four-year college enrollment. Specifically, before any income-related controls, low-income students in Ranch High have 0.2 point disadvantage in weighted GPA, have 75% lower odds of scoring proficient or advanced on the ELA test, score 32 points lower on the SAT, and have 63% lower odds of enrolling in four-year colleges than their higher-income peers. However, controlling for race/ethnicity in Model 2 render the income effect insignificant for ELA proficiency, SAT score, and four-year college enrollment.

Fewer SES differences exist at Bonita High. As Table 12 shows, low-income students at Bonita High have significantly lower GPAs, have lower math proficiency, and are less likely to attend four-year colleges than higher-income students, without controls. The significant negative effect of income for these two outcomes remains robust with the addition of other variables typically associated with income status. Even with race/ethnicity, immigration status indicators, and busing status controlled, low-income students at Bonita High have a 0.1-point GPA disadvantage, have 68% lower odds of scoring proficient or advanced in Math, and have 42% lower odds of attending four-year colleges, compared to their higher-income peers. However, unlike Ranch High, there are no significant income effects for ELA or Math score, or SAT score.
Table 11: Estimates of Low-SES Status with the Addition of Race/Ethnicity, Immigration Status, and Busing Status (Ranch High School)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2 (adds race/ethnicity)</th>
<th>Model 3 (adds immigration status)</th>
<th>Model 4 (adds busing status)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weighted GPA Low-SES</td>
<td>-0.231***</td>
<td>-0.190***</td>
<td>-0.188***</td>
<td>-0.158***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.592***</td>
<td>0.750***</td>
<td>0.745***</td>
<td>0.747***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA Proficiency Low-SES</td>
<td>0.746*</td>
<td>0.823</td>
<td>0.889</td>
<td>0.940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.16)</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math Proficiency Low-SES</td>
<td>1.017</td>
<td>0.940</td>
<td>0.863</td>
<td>0.951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT Score Low-SES</td>
<td>-31.667*</td>
<td>-21.257</td>
<td>-8.303</td>
<td>-1.964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(14.78)</td>
<td>(16.38)</td>
<td>(17.11)</td>
<td>(17.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>307.247***</td>
<td>342.885***</td>
<td>362.804***</td>
<td>365.592***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(42.85)</td>
<td>(45.12)</td>
<td>(45.40)</td>
<td>(45.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-Year College Attendance Low-SES</td>
<td>0.628*</td>
<td>0.643</td>
<td>0.650</td>
<td>0.593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.16)</td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.002***</td>
<td>0.002***</td>
<td>0.002***</td>
<td>0.002***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Note: OLS estimates are reported for weighted GPA and SAT score; odds ratios are reported for ELA Proficiency, Math Proficiency, and Four-Year College Attendance.
Table 12: Estimates of Low-Income Status with the Addition of Race/Ethnicity, Immigration Status, and Busing Status (Bonita High School)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2 (adds race/ethnicity)</th>
<th>Model 3 (adds immigration status)</th>
<th>Model 4 (adds busing status)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weighted GPA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-SES</td>
<td>-0.175***</td>
<td>-0.157***</td>
<td>-0.158***</td>
<td>-0.149***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>1.140***</td>
<td>1.165***</td>
<td>1.172***</td>
<td>1.173***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ELA Proficiency</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-SES</td>
<td>0.764</td>
<td>0.728</td>
<td>0.715</td>
<td>0.705*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Math Proficiency</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-SES</td>
<td>0.680*</td>
<td>0.675*</td>
<td>0.675*</td>
<td>0.672*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SAT Score</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-SES</td>
<td>-16.332</td>
<td>-33.000</td>
<td>-29.521</td>
<td>-27.661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(18.73)</td>
<td>(18.56)</td>
<td>(18.65)</td>
<td>(19.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>351.048***</td>
<td>407.799***</td>
<td>424.591***</td>
<td>423.646***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(40.33)</td>
<td>(42.79)</td>
<td>(43.75)</td>
<td>(43.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Four-Year College Attendance</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-SES</td>
<td>0.502*</td>
<td>0.456**</td>
<td>0.450**</td>
<td>0.423**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.001***</td>
<td>0.001***</td>
<td>0.001***</td>
<td>0.001***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Note: OLS estimates are reported for weighted GPA and SAT score; odds ratios are reported for ELA Proficiency, Math Proficiency, and Four-Year College Attendance.
The differences in whether and how the income effect is accounted for by other income-related variables in the two similarly diverse suburban high schools is evidence that the effects of income are context-specific. For some outcomes at Ranch High, the income effect appears to be largely a racial or busing effect. This is not the case, however, at Bonita High, where the effect of income is independent of race/ethnicity, immigration status, and busing status. Income status is linked to race and busing status differently depending on context. Analyses in the chapters that follow will explore the mechanisms underlying the differences in how income status is manifested and experienced in two different school contexts.

Low-Income Status is Experienced Differently by School

Logistic regressions of survey data\textsuperscript{10} with 687 students (334 at Ranch High; 353 at Bonita High) show that groups that are demographically similar, but who attend different schools, experience school differently. Moreover, these differences are robust even with controls. Three outcomes are foregrounded: whether students agree/strongly agree that their schoolmates cluster by race/ethnicity; whether students agree/strongly agree that they feel judged at school because of their race/ethnicity; and whether students agree/strongly agree that their schoolmates assume that certain races/ethnicities are poor. Race and FRPM dummies, along with their interaction terms, are included to facilitate group comparisons (non-FRPM whites are the reference category). Controls include: residential status (bussed or not); whether the student attended feeder elementary and middle schools; prior achievement (self-reported grade categories for 8\textsuperscript{th} grade).

\textsuperscript{10} Survey data on black students should be interpreted cautiously, given their low sample sizes. The survey sample for Ranch High consists of 126 white students (105 higher-income, 21 low-income); 48 Asian students (23 higher-income, 25 low-income); 69 Latino students (27 higher-income, 42 low-income); and 12 black students (7 higher-income, 5 low-income), for a total of 255 students. The survey sample for Bonita High consists of 44 white students (30 higher-income, 14 low-income); 162 Asian students (97 higher-income, 65 low-income); 34 Latino students (15 higher-income, 19 low-income); and 9 black students (6 higher-income, 3 low-income), for a total of 249 students. The remaining students are omitted because of missing data or mixed-race/other-race status.
Table 13. Logistic Regressions of Selected Survey Items by School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANCH HIGH SCHOOL</th>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>z-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peers cluster by race/ethnicity</td>
<td>0.281</td>
<td>0.390</td>
<td>0.742</td>
<td>2.561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feel judged at school for race/ethnicity</td>
<td>0.481</td>
<td>0.619</td>
<td>1.099</td>
<td>34.028***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peers assume certain races/ethnicities are poor</td>
<td>34.028***</td>
<td>46.859</td>
<td>0.306</td>
<td>1.987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian X FRPM</td>
<td>0.261</td>
<td>0.304</td>
<td>1.234</td>
<td>(0.481)</td>
<td>(0.584)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino X FRPM</td>
<td>1.119</td>
<td>(0.854)</td>
<td>0.213</td>
<td>(2.561)</td>
<td>0.306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRPM</td>
<td>4.712</td>
<td>1.854</td>
<td>(7.405)</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>(5.173)</td>
<td>(7.405)</td>
<td>(0.061)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>5.759*</td>
<td>5.143</td>
<td>6.522**</td>
<td>0.687</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bussed</td>
<td>0.413</td>
<td>0.227</td>
<td>1.532</td>
<td>1.323</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended feeder schools°</td>
<td>1.223</td>
<td>(0.461)</td>
<td>1.532</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade performance</td>
<td>1.299</td>
<td>(0.274)</td>
<td>1.323</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.453</td>
<td>0.159</td>
<td>0.804</td>
<td>1.592</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Education</td>
<td>0.970</td>
<td>(0.182)</td>
<td>1.073</td>
<td>1.096</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>1.886</td>
<td>(2.294)</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>0.315</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
°both elementary and middle school
### Table 13 (continued). Logistic Regressions of Selected Survey Items by School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>Peers cluster by race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Feel judged at school for race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Peers assume certain races/ethnicities are poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian X FRPM</td>
<td>2.103</td>
<td>2.058</td>
<td>0.926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.302)</td>
<td>(2.521)</td>
<td>(0.907)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino X FRPM</td>
<td>2.266</td>
<td>2.050</td>
<td>1.920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.706)</td>
<td>(3.075)</td>
<td>(2.312)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRPM</td>
<td>0.424</td>
<td>0.558</td>
<td>1.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.417)</td>
<td>(0.649)</td>
<td>(0.956)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1.345</td>
<td>0.767</td>
<td>0.704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.806)</td>
<td>(0.380)</td>
<td>(0.312)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1.315</td>
<td>0.586</td>
<td>0.542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.562)</td>
<td>(0.547)</td>
<td>(0.402)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bussed</td>
<td>(omitted)</td>
<td>1.297</td>
<td>1.999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.270)</td>
<td>(1.872)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended feeder schools°</td>
<td>1.419</td>
<td>0.937</td>
<td>0.860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.666)</td>
<td>(0.387)</td>
<td>(0.300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade performance</td>
<td>0.920</td>
<td>0.996</td>
<td>0.854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.287)</td>
<td>(0.247)</td>
<td>(0.180)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.769</td>
<td>1.234</td>
<td>1.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.318)</td>
<td>(0.420)</td>
<td>(0.288)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Education</td>
<td>1.013</td>
<td>0.933</td>
<td>1.138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.211)</td>
<td>(0.150)</td>
<td>(0.154)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>6.750</td>
<td>0.396</td>
<td>2.716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(11.607)</td>
<td>(0.552)</td>
<td>(3.213)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
°both elementary and middle school
grade); gender; and education level of highest-educated parent.

Table 13 compares the regression results of Ranch High with those of Bonita High. As the table shows, significant group differences exist among students in Ranch High but not in Bonita High. Specifically, compared to middle-income whites, middle-income Latinos at Ranch High are 5.8 times more likely to report that their schoolmates cluster by race/ethnicity. Middle-income Asians and middle-income Latinos are 11.9 and 6.5 times more likely, respectively, to feel judged because of their race/ethnicity. Low-income Asians are 34 times more likely to report that their schoolmates assume that certain races/ethnicities are poor, while middle-income Asians are 90% less likely to make the same report. Importantly, no significant group differences exist for Bonita High.

Figure 8. Low-Income Students Who Feel Judged for Their Race/Ethnicity
Moreover, descriptive statistics\textsuperscript{11} restricted to just the low-income population offer evidence that the low-income experience is not uniform across groups even in the same school. For example, Figure 8 shows percentages of low-income students in each school by racial/ethnic category who agree or strongly agree that they get judged because of their race or ethnicity. Among the low-income population at Ranch High, about 5% of white students, 46% of Asians, 30% of Latinos, and 40% of black students feel judged at school because of their race or ethnicity.

\textsuperscript{11} Descriptive statistics are used instead of regressions, since the survey sample decreases substantially when it is restricted to only low-income students.
ethnicity. Racial and ethnic differences exist at Bonita High as well, where 18% of whites, 17% of Asians, 26% of Latinos, and 100% of black students in the low-income population feel judged because of their race or ethnicity.

Similarly, Figure 9 shows percentages of low-income students in each school by racial/ethnic group who would not send their future children to a high school like theirs. At Ranch High, 50% of whites, 42% of Asians, 38% of Latinos, and 80% of black students would not send their future children to a school like Ranch High. At Bonita High, 36% of whites, 33% of Asians, 26% of Latinos, and 67% of black students would not send their future children to a school like Bonita High.

Figure 10 depicts the percentages of low-income students in each school who disagree that students at their school receive equal treatment at school, regardless of social background. At Ranch High, 50% of whites, 50% of Asians, 50% of Latinos, and 20% of black students do not believe students at school are treated equally, compared to 36% of whites, 33% of Asians, 32% of Latinos, and 67% of black students at Bonita High, respectively. These preliminary glimpses of survey data suggest that the low-income population is far from a uniform, homogeneous group. Rather, survey analyses point to both between- and within-school heterogeneity among the low-income population that warrant further investigation.

Conclusion

Evidence from past research suggests that low-income students are best served in well-resourced suburban schools with demographically diverse student populations (e.g., Coleman et al. 1966; Kahlenberg 2001; Schwartz 2010). However, it is also known that simply attending better-resourced schools with more diversity and higher-performing peers is not a panacea to the

\footnote{Note: The low sample size of black students likely drives this percentage.}
negative effects of being a low-income student. Factors like tracking, segregated integration, and feelings of relative deprivation (Tyson 2011; Oakes 1985; May 2014; Davis 1966) complicate understandings of class integration best practices. By studying two high schools that match the ideal-type of the diverse, high-performing suburban school, I aim to better understand how and why the low-income status matters differently—and contributes to disparate outcomes—across otherwise similar school contexts.

The descriptive analyses above indicate that the low-income status translates to different outcomes in different contexts. First, results indicate that, for some academic indicators, low-income students at Bonita High exhibit better academic outcomes than their counterparts at Ranch High, while Ranch High’s low-income students never perform better than their counterparts at Bonita High. This finding holds even with all prior achievement and demographic controls, which suggests that there are factors that help low-income students succeed more at Bonita High than at Ranch High. Secondly, the descriptive overview shows that there is a “suburban school advantage” for low-income students for some academic outcomes but not others. While low-income students in suburban schools do better than their counterparts at high-poverty schools in SAT scores and Math scores, they perform worse in GPA and four-year college enrollment. These mixed findings suggest that the mechanisms underlying the influence of income on academic outcomes is contingent upon the outcome of interest. In other words, it can be that income status matters differently for different outcomes. Moreover, the descriptive analyses show that the effects of being low-income are accounted for by other income-related demographic variables (such as race/ethnicity) in Ranch High, but never in Bonita High. In other words, race/ethnicity explain away the income effect for some outcomes in Ranch High, suggesting that the income effect is largely a race/ethnicity effect in some cases. The fact that the
income effect is independent of race/ethnicity, immigration status, or busing at Bonita High, on the other hand, suggests that income status “works” differently at the two schools. Finally, as the survey analyses show, the between-school differences in how demographically-similar students experience school and perceive their school climates shows that there is something happening within the schools that is driving within-group/between-school differences that warrants further investigation.

In sum, even before exploring observational data or interviewing students, there is already evidence that the contexts of integration for low-income students is different at the two schools that appear similar “on paper.” Together, the above analyses of the academic outcome patterns provide a backdrop for the forthcoming analyses in the following chapters, which will both delve more into the mechanisms driving these patterns and provide a detailed analysis of how and why being low-income carries different meanings/salience to different students in different contexts.
Chapter 4
The Intersectionality of Race, Class, and Context

While a wealth of literature exists on low-income students in different educational settings (including suburban schools), research has not adequately captured the diversity among low-income students. General patterns among low-income students are well known: they are often subjects of cumulative disadvantage (e.g., in human, cultural, and social capital), which puts them more at risk of academic struggle and risky behavior. However, since low-income students occupy far more social categories than just their income status alone, generalizations of low-income students (or even low-income minority students) that past studies offer paint an incomplete portrait of economically disadvantaged students.

Using interviews and ethnographic observations at Ranch High and Bonita High (two diverse suburban high schools in the same school district), I employ an intersectional approach (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Shields 2008) to explore the heterogeneity among the low-income population. While an intersectional approach holds that social categories such as race, gender, and class intersect to produce inequality, I argue that intersectionality works in a two-staged process to produce differences in the integration of low-income students. In addition to social categories intersecting with each other, they also jointly interact with school context to create differences in the meaning and salience of being low-income at each school. I find that being low-income is an inescapable, glaringly salient identity for some low-income students, while other low-income students hardly ever think about their low-income statuses. Specifically, at Ranch High, since the dominant majority of residential students are middle-class students, low-income status is a stigmatized deviation from the mainstream. Furthermore, low-income status is more salient for Latino and black low-income students (and, in a different way, Asian
students), while low-income whites are often able to pass as middle-class, since whiteness signaled middle-class status at Ranch High (McIntosh 1988; Morris 2005; Stuber 2011). At Bonita High, income was perceived as a less relevant, and decidedly not stigmatized, characteristic. In general, low-income students were open about their income statuses, which they viewed as temporary, and race/ethnicity did not serve as a proxy for income status at Bonita High.

In this chapter, I foreground the stories and experiences of low-income students from different racial groups at each school to show how the experience, meaning, and salience of being a low-income student is shaped by the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, class, and context. While most studies of socioeconomically disadvantaged populations focus on one or two racial/ethnic groups for methodological reasons (e.g., parsimony or to “control for” race/ethnicity), I include white, Asian, Latino, and black students in my study. In doing so, I account for the relational, relative, and contingent nature of group dynamics, group differentiation, and group identity formation. Specifically, I aim to capture a holistic representation of the social fabric at each school, since meanings, statuses, and signals associated with one group must be understood in relation to the other groups on campus. For example, the experience of low-income Latinos may appear one way when considered relative to the experience of low-income white, black, and Asian students, yet appear entirely different when viewed with a more myopic lens. Comparing the experience of low-income Latinos—for example—with that of low-income students in other racial/ethnic groups yields a more complete representation of the social milieu at each school, especially as it pertains to socioeconomically disadvantaged students.
In reality, a highly complex array of social categories—such as race/ethnicity, income, gender, immigration status, and sexual orientation—constantly intersect to create the social experience. For methodological feasibility, however, I focus on the intersection between the two social categories I identify as having the most powerful impact on low-income students’ integration in to suburban schools—race/ethnicity and income status. Also, except when specified, I did not note significant gender differences in my data.

**Literature**

*Contextual Contingencies to Social Incorporation: The Intersectionality of Social Categories and Context*

As I review in Chapter 1, I borrow theoretical insights from intersectionality theory (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Shields 2008), which holds that, because people simultaneously occupy multiple social categories that intersect and interact in dynamic ways, it is impossible to study one category as an independent force (e.g., women) without tending to other categories to which it is related (e.g., the race or class of the women) (Stuber 2011b). In addition to the intersectionality of social categories, it is also crucial to understand how social categories interact with social contexts to produce inequality. The interaction between demographic and contextual contingencies to incorporation has been most widely studied in the immigration literature discussed above, where immigrants who share the same social categories but occupy different host societies can exhibit disparate outcomes (e.g., Alba and Waters 2011). In education, too, we know that the educational experiences and outcomes of individuals who share the same intersecting social categories—black low-income males, for instance—varies by social context. For example, studies of oppositional identity find evidence that black students deem academic
success as “acting white” only in contexts where students perceive racial patterns in curricular tracking, but not in contexts that are void of racialized tracking patterns (Tyson 2011). Stuber (2011b) finds that white first-generation college students from poor and working-class backgrounds are officially included yet feel marginalized in a small college with good outreach programs for first-generation college students while their counterparts at a large state school are less incorporated in extracurricular activities yet also are less aware of their marginalization. Though they share the same intersectionality—that of being white, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and the first in their families to attend college—their status as low-SES white first-generation college students interacts with their college’s social context to create significantly disparate integration experiences and outcomes.

Another example of the contextual contingencies to social incorporation is in Carter’s (2012) study of how schools facilitate or hinder integration through the degree to which they promote cultural flexibility on campus. In her study of integration and cultural flexibility in eight schools located in four cities in the U.S. and South Africa, Carter (2012:9) finds that “students from similar racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds but who attend different schools—with varying organizational climates and boundary maintenance—can attain significantly different levels of cultural flexibility.” For example, school policies that discourage and devalue “ethnic” hairstyles inhibit cultural flexibility and brighten social boundaries. Through organizational-level school practices such as dress code policies, Carter concludes, schools contribute to disparate integration outcomes among students of color who share the same demographics (and same intersection of social categories).

*The Importance of School Context*
While a wealth of studies since *Brown v. Board* illuminate the complexities of school integration in racially and socioeconomically diverse schools, most studies of school integration treat “diversity” as a single force that acts uniformly across contexts. Little is known about how campus diversity—typically measured using schools’ demographic compositions—is manifested differently, or produces different consequences, depending on the actual demographic composition of students. For example, less is known about differences in the consequences of diversity in settings with different numbers of groups, or with different groups as the dominant majority. In the ever-diversifying student populations in the U.S., defining “diversity” merely as having students from many social categories, and treating it as a force that acts uniformly across contexts, is no longer sufficient.

Evidence suggests that different diverse school contexts can produce quite different social integration outcomes. Based on analyses of a national sample of adolescent friendship networks, Moody (2001) finds that there is a “tipping point” of diversity, such that once diversity in a setting reaches a certain level, interracial friendships are less likely to occur. Specifically, he finds that friendship segregation is highest in moderately heterogeneous schools, and tapers at highly heterogeneous schools. He attributes the nonlinear relationship between interracial friendships and racial homogeneity to the interaction between relative group size and the number of races at a school (Moody 2001:707) and finds that the salience of race increases as the size of a racial minority group increases. Similar to past research on racial/ethnic relations and group competition (e.g., Blalock 1967; Smith 1981), Moody finds that the increased salience of race increases the likelihood that minorities are perceived as threats to the majority group’s dominant position, which in turn decreases the number of interracial friendships. In addition, he finds that empirical evidence of “very different levels of friendship segregation across similarly
heterogeneous settings,” (Moody 2001:680) concluding that the relationship between interracial friendships and racial heterogeneity is not uniform.

Another reason why similarly diverse schools may produce different integration outcomes is that students may be differently impacted by school composition. For example, scholars have suggested that black students are more sensitive to changes in school composition (Cooley 2009) and would benefit more from desegregation than white students (Coleman et al. 1966; see Kahlenberg 2001 for a more detailed review). Jencks (1972) finds that racial composition impacts black and white students similarly, but mean socioeconomic composition had a greater impact on black students’ test scores. Similarly, Crosnoe (2009) finds that low-income students experience more psychosocial problems as the proportion of middle- or high-SES students increased, and that these negative psychosocial effects are more pronounced among black and Latino students. Vigdor and Nechyba (2007) find evidence that black and Latino students exert a negative impact on peers of other races, but not students of their own race, in predominantly non-minority classrooms. The consequences of racial composition thus depend on both the race of peers and the race of the students whose outcomes are measured. In addition to contingencies by racial group, research also suggests that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more sensitive to school compositional effects than their counterparts from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., Coleman et al. 1966). A possible explanation for this differential sensitivity may be that the latter often have opportunities to acquire social and cultural capital outside of school walls, while the former often do not (Coleman 1966).

*Group Differentiation and Boundaries*
In addition to demographic composition, the process of group differentiation and boundary formation is another way in which similar diverse schools can exhibit different integration outcomes. Social identity theory posits that “pressures to evaluate one’s own group positively through in-group/out-group comparison lead social groups to differentiate themselves from each other” (Tajfel and Turner 1979, p. 16-17). Even creating categories arbitrarily in lab settings creates a context of distinction and, consequently, biases and discrimination (Brewer 2007; Tajfel et al. 1971). In addition, regardless of an individual’s internal personal identity, the role of others’ perceptions in addition to self-perceptions in identity formation is a crucial consideration (Howarth 2002). Some social identities have “obvious visual cues” such as skin color that “place each relevant individual firmly and instantly in the category to which he belongs” (Tajfel 1969: 88). In other words, visibility of social identities can serve as cognitive shortcuts so that identity can sometimes be imposed on individuals rather than dictated by individual choice or agency. Studies of immigrant assimilation and incorporation find that, regardless of self-identities, outsiders’ perceptions and ascriptions powerfully constrain ethnic options for many “visibly” distinct groups that are phenotypically “marked” as foreigners (Waters 1990; Portes et al. 2005; Rumbaut 2008; Tuan 1998).

However, the conditions under which differences become relevant social boundaries remain under-investigated. Little is known about the specific characteristics of boundaries in everyday life (Lamont and Molnar 2002), especially in school settings. Research on boundary work distinguishes between symbolic and social boundaries. While symbolic boundaries are “conceptual distinctions” used for categorization purposes, social boundaries are “objectified forms of social differences” that translate to real resource and opportunity inequality (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Symbolic boundaries are used to “enforce, maintain, normalize, and
rationalize” social boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002), and the existence of symbolic boundaries are a necessary but insufficient condition for the existence of social boundaries (Lamont 1992). For example, language is a symbolic boundary that can perpetuate racial boundaries (Carter 2012).

Just as self-categorization is fluid, comparative, and varies with social context13 (Turner et al. 1994), boundaries also vary across space, place, and time. A bright boundary in one context may be a blurred or nonexistent one in another (Zolberg and Long 1999; Bail 2008). More research is needed to determine what makes one boundary bright in one context but not in another (Lamont and Molnar 2002), but past studies suggest that institutional forces like schools influence this distinction through creating different contexts where boundaries differentially come to fruition. For example, as discussed above, a social boundary between black students who “act white” and black students who do not “act white” exists in schools with racialized tracking patterns but not in schools with weak associations between track placement and race (Tyson 2011). Similarly, racial boundaries are brighter in schools that practice policies such as discouraging “ethnic” hairstyles than in schools that do not (Carter 2012). Organizational practices are fully discussed in Chapter 6.

Findings

For each school, I contrast differences in low-income students’ experiences by racial/ethnic group. For each racial/ethnic group, I begin by presenting a vignette of a student whose experience is representative of their fellow low-income peers in the same racial/ethnic category. Following the vignette, I proceed to discuss more generally how students of that particular

13 For example, two women may self-categorize themselves on lower-level personal identities that emphasize their individual differences when alone together, but when in a work setting where all other colleagues are men, they may categorize themselves as similar, on the basis of the higher level category of gender (Haslam et al. 2011).
Table 14. Summary of findings by Racial/Ethnic Group and High School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>RANCH HIGH SCHOOL</th>
<th>BONITA HIGH SCHOOL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name and General Background</strong></td>
<td>Elena. Grade 12. Female.</td>
<td>Luciana. Grade 12. Female.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low-Income Identity/Experience</strong></td>
<td>• Immediately identifies as low-income</td>
<td>• Physical and psychological abuse (starved as a child for punishment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Bussed from crime-ridden high-poverty neighborhood where she feels unsafe</td>
<td>• Works almost full-time at local supermarket (her oasis from home) to help support family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Wears outfits multiple times a week because of limited clothing options</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LATINO</strong></td>
<td>• Withdrawn, extremely quiet, has few friends at school</td>
<td>• Has friends from diverse social backgrounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>• Feels bullied by affluent white peers</td>
<td>• School (and work) is an oasis from troubles at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-conscious about wearing same clothes in the same week</td>
<td>• Close bonds with teachers and peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>• Skips class when she has to give presentation (because of anxieties related to feeling judged)</td>
<td>• Sought (and received) teachers’ help when struggling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Aspires to attend community college, but academically struggling</td>
<td>• The struggle to balance school and work keeps her from taking advanced classes, but she is admired by teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Too intimidated to ask teachers for help or engage during class discussions for fear of looking “dumb”</td>
<td>• Doing well in regular-track classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low-Income Identity/Experience</strong></td>
<td>• Single-earner household</td>
<td>• Criminal record by age 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Bussed from crime-ridden high-poverty neighborhood</td>
<td>• Lives with adult siblings because parents (likely) involved with drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Switched elementary schools more times than he can remember</td>
<td>• Grew up in one of most crime-ridden areas in city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BLACK</strong></td>
<td>• Can get along with other groups because of outgoing personality, but sticks with black friends because of racial distrust</td>
<td>• Enjoys his down-to-earth peers, though still close to his childhood friends in the city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>• Experienced overt racism in early high school</td>
<td>• Feels the need to &quot;prove&quot; himself to high-track peers who know about his troubled past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Appreciates segregation because it prevents overt bullying and confrontations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>• Almost failed school a few times; almost not able to graduate</td>
<td>• Jumped from almost failing school (9th grade) to 4.5 GPA (12th grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Aspires to be choreographer or dancer; not convinced that school helps with career goal</td>
<td>• Doing well in advanced classes; accepted into competitive college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teachers say he is smart but often acts up in class (acts as class clown)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 14. Summary of findings by Racial/Ethnic Group and High School (continued)

|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| **Low-Income Identity/Experience** | • Came from Vietnam in 3rd grade  
  • Currently lives with 11 other people  
  • Identifies as low-income | • Raised by single mother after abusive father left  
  • People at school don't know about his turbulent episode and downward mobility |
| **Social Outcomes** | • Very few friends  
  • Refers to her more affluent, white schoolmates "bitches" and "jerks" who think they're superior to students of color  
  • Copes with feelings of marginalization by ignoring conversations and socially withdrawing | • Social butterfly; able to permeate diverse social groups  
  • Strong networks among both school and church friends  
  • Role model for younger students and recent Vietnamese immigrants (because of fluent Vietnamese and academic prowess)  
  • Accepted into competitive college |
| **Academic Outcomes** | • Studies hard but weak academic foundation and issues with friends and at home impedes her success in regular-track classes  
  • High stress, stemming from view that school is the only way to rise from current poverty | • Has been taking--and excelling in--the most advanced programs since elementary school  
  • Loved by teachers for his sharp mind and work ethic |

|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| **Low-Income Identity/Experience** | • Raised by single mother  
  • Assumed rich because of popularity (due to older brother, cool mom, "big" house, nice clothes, etc.)  
  • Feelings of relative deprivation; keeps them to herself | • Single-earner household; parents grew up in extreme poverty (starvation)  
  • Low-income status is a force that inspires him to work hard  
  • Parents grew up poor and taught him how to appreciate things even though he has less than his peers. |
| **Social Outcomes** | • One of the most popular girls in her grade  
  • Younger sister of star football player  
  • Sometimes is a victim of drama that she claims stems from popular girls' jealousy | • Star football player; popular and well-respected  
  • Well-liked by different cliques across campus; known to be friendly and approachable |
| **Academic Outcomes** | • Takes regular and advanced track classes  
  • Struggled for part of high school during turbulence in family life  
  • Supported by teachers, many of whom are aware of her troubled family background/dynamics (father) | • Takes regular and advanced track classes  
  • Aspirations of social mobility steer him towards academic success  
  • Teachers admire and support him for his work ethic and all-around nice personality. |
racial/ethnic group experience their low-income statuses. I also discuss exceptions to the patterns I foreground. At Bonita High, the exceptional cases are generally low-income Latino and black and black students in the high academic track. These cases are thus discussed in their respective racial/ethnic sections. In contrast, because the exceptional cases at Ranch High are more heterogeneous, they are discussed in their own section, following the four sections by racial/ethnic group. Table 14 summarizes findings.

Ranch High School

Ranch High: Low-Income Latino Students

Fiddling with the zipper of her hoodie, Elena states quietly yet firmly, “I come from a poor family” when I ask her to tell me about herself. She is soft-spoken and smiles nervously when I ask her about her family or life at school—subjects she has strong convictions about. She comes from a family of seven—her parents, an older brother who is 19 and working, and three younger siblings. Though she refuses to fully elaborate, she states that the chronic physical and emotional abuse she endured as a child prompted her to pursue a career in social work. She lives in a community ironically named Milagro Heights (milagro is Spanish for “miracle”), a predominately-Latino, high-poverty urban neighborhood far from Ranch High that she describes as flowing with daily drug and gang activity, helicopters and searchlights at night, and cholos who “mess with” (whistle at and taunt) her when she walks by them. She feels unsafe where she lives, and avoids going outside her home.

Life at school is not much easier. She laments that Mexicans are at the “way bottom” of the social hierarchy and severely disrespected at school, since their peers perceive them as “poor” and “uneducated.” Her friends are all Mexican girls, though she has few of them left at
school, since one got pregnant and another got cancer. She wistfully wishes that she went to her neighborhood school in Milagros Heights despite its reputation as a low-performing school, since peers at that school would at least relate better to her, given their more similar life experiences and circumstances. She surmises that she’d be more happy, confident, and comfortable at her neighborhood high school, though also laughs as she admits that her increased confidence and comfort would probably get her into more trouble. Her friends in Milagro Heights make fun of her for going to “such a gay white school.” Elena’s feelings of subordination at school, coupled with her low-income status, leads to pervasive social and emotional anxiety that impacts academics:

Elena: I don’t feel comfortable in my classes.
Interviewer: Why not?
Elena: Because, I don’t know, I’ve been very shy and I don’t like talking in front of the class. I get really, like, nervous. I get really nervous and I sort of try to avoid school when I can so that if we have presentations, I won’t have to do them.
Interviewer: Why do you get nervous?
Elena: Well, I see people with cars, they have their own cars and then they have new clothes every day…and I wear—every week I wear the same clothes so I feel I’m not fitting in correctly.
Interviewer: Does that affect your schooling?
Elena: Yeah because I feel like I can’t go up in front of class because they are judging me or something like that. They are mean!

Elena’s anxieties of constantly being judged by her higher-income peers affected both her emotional and academic well-being at school. Her father, who understands how his daughter suffers from the anxiety of presenting in front of her peers, no longer hesitates in writing her notes to excuse her absence on days when she has to give a presentation. From Elena’s perspective, she is at least doubly marked—not just by her race but also by the fact that her limited resources cause her to commit the social faux paux of repeating outfits during the week. Because she is racially and economically different from the dominant (middle-class white)
students on campus, she struggles with “fitting in correctly” as a legitimate and accepted member of her school.

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Latino students—regardless of income status—grappled with stereotypes about neighborhood of residence, family structure, immigration, and intelligence. Common descriptors given by their higher-income peers include “they just started off and kind of like are not in a good situation at home,” “poor,” “not the smartest,” and “they don’t really care about school, they don’t want to be here.” Their status as outsiders was a recurring theme, typically discussed in the context of immigration and living in poorer neighborhoods. Even Latinos who were higher-income, such as Israel, were subject to these assumptions:

I remember there was a black dude and a white dude also. And they were talking about my shoes because they were like—I had like Nike and stuff. And they’re like, “How can you afford like—freakin’ like, Nikes are like 150 bucks?!” And I’m like, “What are you trying to say? You calling me poor or what?” And he’s like, “Whoa, I’m just sayin’.” And I’m like, well, first thing is my brother works at Foot Locker so I get discounts. So it’s a benefit for me while you pay regular prices. And he’s like, “Oh, uh-huh, okay.” Yeah. Like, okay, carry on.

Low-income Latino students were well aware of unspoken stigma they held, and often reported feeling scrutinized and judged by higher-income (usually white) students:

There are white people that they think that they’re on top. The way they act, the way they talk and the way they approach people. They wouldn’t really talk to you. They just like ignore you, or if they are like talking to them, they just like look the other way, and they act like they’re more than you are.

I don’t like their attitude. They act stuck up and look at you, like the side eye look [demonstrates side-eye]. I stay away from them. Once there was a guy in my class and he was like, “I don’t know why Mexicans go to this school. They’re gonna end up working for us anyway.”

Attending school daily in a school environment that perceives them as poor, subordinate Others with deficiencies in intelligence, family, and neighborhood, these students most
commonly cope through avoidance, withdrawal, or attempts to laugh or brush off the discrimination. Such avoidance of students in the middle-class dominant majority maintains segregation and prevents racial/ethnic mixing so that students remain segregated despite attending school in the same campus space (May 2014).

Given the powerful racial/ethnic cleavages at Ranch High, low-income and higher-income Latinos share many similarities in their school experiences and outcomes. Higher-income Latinos are typically lumped with low-income Latinos socially and academically, and are rarely differentiated in the eyes of their peers (the main exceptions are the few (almost exclusively middle-class) Latinos who have consistently taken classes and accelerated programs in the high academic track since before high school, or the few male Latino athletes who have gained the respect of their higher-income peers over the years via sports). Importantly, however, though both lower- and higher-income Latino students are subject to the same set of stereotypes, they experience them quite differently. Higher-income Latinos have the option of brushing off the stereotypes as instances of their peers’ bigotry, racism, or ignorance. Low-income Latinos, however, often bear the psychological burden of “fulfilling”—or matching—many the poverty-related stereotypes held against them. These students doubly experience the pain of being stereotyped as well as the pain of living many aspects of the stereotype. While both low-income and higher-income Latinos were frustrated with the negative stereotypes associated with being Latino, these stereotypes were disproportionately more debilitating for low-income Latinos such as the ones featured above, who both internalized and lived the negative stereotypes held by their more privileged peers.

*Ranch High: Low-Income Black Students*
Most recognized for his distinct Afro and stylish thick-rimmed glasses, Deshawn is a slender and charismatic senior who aspires to be a dancer or choreographer after college. An extremely extroverted class clown, he describes himself as “straddling the fence” between failing school and barely passing to graduate. His mother is unemployed and his father serves in the military. For most his life, Deshawn has lived in Jefferson Heights, a high-crime urban neighborhood with a heavy concentration of poor black residents. He has attended school in the Ranch community since middle school, though prior to that, he switched elementary schools more times than he could remember.

Though Deshawn initially brushes off questions about group tensions at school, he eventually reveals, after probing, that tensions are high—but swept under the rug—at school. He explains that white students generally feel “superior” to and “cooler” than students of color, and reflects that white students make up a sizable majority of the popular crowd. He recounts a time during freshman year when a white student called him “nigger” to his face after school, and he felt too shocked and powerless to do anything about it. His outgoing personality and having some friends from middle school who are currently on the football team grants Deshawn the opportunity to occasionally socialize at the fringes of the popular crowd. He talks at length about the importance of “swag”—“basically how well you dress…like if you wear top of the line stuff [that’s] hanging on the mannequin in the store”—to signal status among peers, but is quick to add that he himself does not buy into the system of values and status symbols set by the more affluent white students at school:

Sometimes I dress nice, sometimes I don’t. But I could get all the stuff the rich kids have, but I just choose not to because I feel as though there’s nobody at the school for me to impress. So I just wear my bum clothes like this. But if I would never go to a party like this [gestures at outfit]. Like, if I were to go to a party on the weekend, I’d have my Louis [Vuitton], my Gucci, I’d have Jordans, I’d be looking…like my swag. But coming to school…I don’t feel like I have to prove myself to anybody.
At the end of the day, despite his ability to get along with different groups, Deshawn’s true friends are his black friends—many of whom attend school in his neighborhood high school. Summarizing a sentiment held by many students of color at Ranch High, Deshawn states:

“You just stick with your race, you don’t go dipping into other racial groups. Because if anything happened then your race would have your back. But if you were with another race you never know what’s gonna happen.”

Though he points out that group relations are slightly better than they were when he first started at Ranch High, he admits that he appreciates the separatism at school because it prevents bullying and overt confrontation like the one he experienced his freshman year. He explains that the segregation is helpful in avoiding conflicts because “people just don’t pay any attention [to each other]. It’s just like, just stay with your group, we’ll stay with ours, don’t say anything to me, I don’t say anything to you."

Deshawn thus acknowledges the underlying tension and race-based social hierarchy at school that paints a picture of black students as ghetto, poor, and loud. He responds by actively choosing to reject value systems held by the white majority, and instead attributes value to the true friendships he has with his “ride or die” friends who “have [his] back” when he is “in trouble.”

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Low-income black students at Ranch High tell similar narratives of exclusion and rejection as low-income Latino students, though they are subject to a different package of stereotypes than their Latino peers. As with Latino students, the polarizing racial dynamics at Ranch High meant that low-income and higher-income black students alike share similar academic trajectories, school experiences, and feelings of marginalization. Also like Latino
students, exceptions include (typically middle-class) black students who stand out from their fellow black students because of academics or athletics, as discussed below.

At Ranch High, black students in general are typically described as “ghetto,” “ratchet,” “loud,” and “scary,” and are assumed to live in rougher urban neighborhoods far from school. Males and females differ slightly in the degree to which they are stereotyped. For males, the strong presence of football in Ranch High’s school culture and history present an opportunity to become accepted and even revered as school leaders, as some of the school’s star football players are black. This opportunity is absent, however, for females, who are rarely revered, let alone integrated, in the school. For females, the possibility of athletics is further hampered by logistical obstacles such as the high financial commitment of joining team sports and transportation and safety issues for those who live farther from campus (Holland 2012).

Another group of black students who are sometimes exempt from such stereotypes are the few who are in the high academic track. However, the racialized tracking patterns at Ranch High, coupled with the fact that many black bussed students at Ranch High attended poorer elementary schools in their residential neighborhoods (and therefore have been academically behind their peers from their early years), created a situation where black students rarely took classes in the advanced college preparatory track.

For the many black students who did not stand out as exceptions athletically or academically, the negative stereotypes applied against them transcended income boundaries. For example, Yana and Rebecca, lower-middle income black students, explain the racism and exclusion they feel as students of color:

Yana: Like in a class…if there’s like a majority of white kids, like it’ll be like weird or like awkward, for like an Asian kid, or like a black kid to like try and join the group. Like if the teacher tells you to get into a group, because that’s not like your [pause] and then they’ll [the white kids] make a group like automatically, and then you’re just
be like sitting there like [disappointed voice] “Oh.” They don’t say anything. But, like they do it so you know. They’ll just like hurry up and get in a little group and then you’ll just be like “Oh,” and then the teacher like has to force you to go into group.

Interviewer: Tell me about the kids here.
Rebecca: They're mostly the rich white kids who think they are superior to everyone. Yeah. That's pretty much it.
Interviewer: So what makes you think that they're rich and that they're stuck up?
Rebecca: Just by the way they carry themselves. They always have this stinky look on their face. The way they talk to people, like short rude answers, like they're better.

Black students’ struggle with exclusion and feelings of subordination is no secret to the Ranch High administrative staff. The staff responded to tensions years ago by bringing to campus an African-American outreach group, led by African-American professionals in the community. The program, which pulls students out of class once every two weeks for hour-long discussions of race relations and identity, is known colloquially by students as “the black people group” and is criticized by many teachers because it interrupts class time.

Inspired by discussions that took place during such group sessions, some black students respond to their feelings of group inferiority and oppression through conscious efforts to permeate social territories that were deemed middle-class, white spaces, such as student government (ASB):

Interviewer: What made you want to join ASB?
Rebecca (low-income black student): Because I just—I don't know. I feel like at school, like I said, we're looked down upon. So if I were to join ASB they would have to notice me. They would have to do what I—they have no choice. They would have to hear what I have to say. Since no one else is going to do it, no other African American, so I'm going to be the one to step up.

Rebecca felt that her voice and opinions were discounted at school and felt that she had an important duty to take action and infiltrate spaces typically occupied by middle-class white students only. Interestingly, her motives were not individualistic, as such motives often are.
Instead, she viewed her decision as a sacrifice necessary in order to gain respect for her often-ignored fellow low-income minority peers.

For black students, income status is not a significant factor that differentiates their experiences at school, since the negative stereotypes of black students traversed income boundaries. Instead, the key differentiating force behind intra-race differences in school experiences is the extent to which black students encounter or interact with other-race peers in their day-to-day lives. With the exception of those selected to join the outreach group, most black students who had racially homogeneous social circles did not articulate critical feelings of subordination. They typically reported satisfaction with group dynamics at school, since there was little overt racial conflict, and since segregated friendship groups were the accepted norm at Ranch High anyway. On the other hand, black students who regularly interacted with other-race peers in their social circles or classes exhibited more consciousness of their ascribed low position in Ranch High’s social hierarchy. Like Rebecca above, these students freely articulated sentiments of frustration, anger, and withdrawal from “mainstream” student culture. This finding is consistent with past research (e.g., Young 2006), which has highlighted the powerful role of exposure to more privileged groups in framing minorities’ critical consciousness, as well as the power of the lack of exposure to more privileged groups in shielding them from the harsh realities of strained intergroup relations.

*Ranch High: Low-Income Asian Students*

A shy and quiet individual who rarely speaks in class, Amanda’s youthful, dimpled face lights up with energy and enthusiasm during her interview. Amanda immigrated to the U.S. from Vietnam with her father when she was in third grade. The pair left behind Amanda’s mother and
younger sister in Vietnam because of immigration issues, and was separated from them for five years. Amanda recalls that the day she was reunited with her mother and younger sister at her eighth grade graduation ceremony was her happiest day. She currently lives in a three-bedroom house in a racially diverse working class neighborhood with 11 other people, including her parents, sister, grandmother, and aunts and uncles. This crowding, she laments, comes with family drama that sometimes affects her schoolwork and emotional well-being.

In Amanda’s conception of the social hierarchy at school, Asians are at the absolute bottom. She expresses a strong hatred for Ranch High and her social life on campus, which mostly stems from her feelings of oppression, exclusion, and subordination:

Amanda: I told my aunt, “Do not let your kids go this school when they grow up.” I honestly have to tell you that girls here, actually, ‘cause—girls here are bitches. And guys here are jerks.
Interviewer: Tell me more about that.
Amanda: I told you, I think this school is a white school. And majority are white people, white girls who are like the popular white girls. They look down on you. They either tease you, laugh at you. That's why we have a lot of suicides in this school.

Amanda’s negative feelings stem mostly from her encounters with her white schoolmates. For example, during lunch, when she and about ten other students sit in a classroom eating their home-brought lunches with a teacher, Amanda sits alone and ate her shrimp fried rice. A white male student walks into the classroom, wrinkles his nose, and bellows, “UGH! What is that smell?! Smells like a fish died in here!” He points a finger aggressively at Amanda. “Is that YOU?!” Visibly trying to fight back emotion, Amanda tries to answer in a detached tone, “No. It’s not.” When asked how she copes with being judged by her more affluent white peers, Amanda explains,

Well, just do your thing. Just do my thing and I don’t jump in random conversations, whatever they talk about. I just sit there and laugh or I just think that they’re idiots in my head [laughter]. I stay out all the problems...avoid drama. Avoid their conversations. Just sit there, laugh, or talk about it when you go home.
Like many low-income students of color discussed above, Amanda copes with feelings of oppression and exclusion at school by attempting to dissociate and distance herself from them. In addition, she develops an adversarial stance against them that serves as a self-defense mechanism that shields her from the hurtful effects of exclusion.

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Asian students at Ranch High occupy a unique position in the social hierarchy. While not looked down on as “poor,” “ghetto,” or from broken families as Latino and black students are, they are considered socially awkward, strange, and foreign “Others” (Kim 1999; Tuan 1998) who cluster amongst themselves “in their own little world” at the peripheries of campus. For low-income Asians, the salience of their racial Otherness overpowers their low-income statuses, as few low-income Asians identified their income status as a prominent force in shaping their school experiences. Unlike their Latino and black peers who are assumed to live in poorer urban neighborhoods, their income status is mysterious and not contemplated by others. Interviews revealed that Asian students on campus are often overlooked or even forgotten in the eyes of non-Asian students. As a black student half-joked when asked about Asian students, “Honestly, when was the last time I saw an Asian?” (After some probing, he realized sheepishly that there were two Asian students who sat in front of him in the classroom I observed). A white student clarified that, although Asians are strange, “they don’t bother anyone, so they’re not a nuisance.”

Typical descriptions of Asians on campus include:

“Interesting…like they speak to themselves. And like they play Pokémon or Yu-Gi-Oh. Like, oh my God, they play *Yu-Gi-Oh* in the library.”

“Anti-social…and they never hang out with other races.”

“I don’t know anything about them because they’re over there [gestures towards office] and they just segregate themselves from everyone else.
Asian students are known to be the racial group that mixes least with other groups. Thus, unlike Latino and black students—many of whom were well aware of the stereotypes held against them—not all Asian students were as critically conscious as Amanda was in describing group dynamics at Ranch High. While some students’ accounts resonated with Amanda’s (e.g., “[White students] do things like ignore you or sigh when they’re in a group project with you”), many low-income Asian students reported no conflicts or tense group dynamics at all. Many reported that groupings were based solely on “interests” and “personality,” or, as one low-income Asian student summarized, “I don’t really know because I hang out with my group near the office so I don’t see other groups much at all.”

For example, Madeline, a low-income Asian student who reported that friendship groups were based solely on personality, was in an English class I observed where students chose their own seats. As a result of that freedom, the white students (about half the class) occupied the right side of the classroom while the minorities (mostly Asian; about half the class) occupied the left side. On multiple occasions, “the border”—the aisle that “separated” the two groups—was openly acknowledged and nervously joked about, much to the chagrin of the teacher. However, when asked about “the border,” Madeline discounted the obvious racial aspect of the division, explaining,

Madeline: I guess it just tended to form like from the first day. It was just, like, people who were familiar with each other. I guess it’s mostly the white kids over there [gestures], and then the rest of us like over here [gestures], but it’s really just the kids who want to have fun in class and the kids who really need to study in class.
Interviewer: So it’s not a racial thing?
Madeline: Not really. It’s just personality. We on our side tend don’t tend to talk as much as they do.

All of her other non-Asian peers, as well as the teacher, reported that the division was strictly racial, and not personality-based. For students like Madeline, who rarely interact with non-Asian
students even during class time, it is not surprising that group dynamics seem harmonious and not given much consideration. Young (2006) reaches a similar finding in his study of marginalized black men in almost exclusively homogeneous networks. Like the black men in Young’s (2006) research, students like Madeline hold (positively) skewed views of group relational dynamics.

Similarly, Simon, a low-income Asian student, initially reported no group tension at school. However, when asked later in the interview about the ASB-led pep rally that took place that same morning, he speaks of the uneasiness felt by some Asian students about how white students indirectly teach Asians to “know their place” at school. During the ASB-sponsored (student government, which comprised almost entirely of white students) pep rally, when Ascend (a dance group on campus comprised of mostly Asian students) went up to perform, their music began to skip and then stopped playing altogether, causing much confusion, embarrassment, and awkwardness among both the performers and the audience. The performers were forced to terminate their performance and sit back down. Simon explains,

My friends are in the Ascend dance group. And during the last pep rally, their CD got scratched. And apparently someone scratched the CD on purpose. Someone on ASB. And then when they performed in the Quad, some people threw food. My friend, she got hit by a piece of bread as she was dancing. She was pissed. That’s messed up.

Regardless of whether Simon’s account of the pep rally was true, it suggests that racial tensions brew under the façade of seemingly peaceful social relations, which is made possible by racial groups’ mutual avoidance and spatial segregation.

Just as low-income black students have the opportunity to be exempt from assumptions of being “poor” or “ghetto” through athletics or academics, Asians who are in the college-prep advanced academic track are often exempt from being perceived as foreign Others, since taking classes in the advanced track—which, at Ranch High, served mostly white students—signaled
middle-class status and exposed them to peers who were more racially diverse. Moreover, placement in advanced tracks gave some Asian students the opportunity to use their academic prowess to achieve social status and respect from their peers. Contrary to popular stereotypes of the model minority (e.g., Lee 1994), however, Asians were actually underrepresented among the highest echelons of scholars at Ranch High.

For the few advanced-track Asian students who also came from low-income families, the removal of their first “layer” of stigma—their status as foreign Others—made their second “layer” of stigma—low-income status—more salient. For example, Susie describes both the relative deprivation she feels and the benefits she receives from being in a racially diverse friendship group where, unlike most Asian students on campus, she is not perceived as a “weirdo”:

I would say that being poor is a disadvantage for, like, doing well in school. So you have to like commute on the bus and [poor students] might not have like computers at home because I would say that the top students are all wealthy. Except me I guess [laughs]. When my friends go to my house, they don’t think that I’m poor. They tell me like, “You don’t seem poor.” But, I think it’s just that I feel that way because I have to go out of my way to do certain things and my friends don’t. I have to, like, work to make sure that I can pay for like AP exams and like my school supplies and my everyday things. I just have to do a lot of extra things like come to school early to use the computers and for a printer. Just stuff like that. But then again I don’t know if I’d be as successful if I went to a less wealthy school. I think since like I’m surrounded by people who are like very wealthy, like they help me like sometimes. Like they’ll give me like their old test prep book and things like that.

Importantly, the relative deprivation she feels is internal, and not brought upon by the actions or words of her peers. Moreover, as the next chapter will discuss in detail, her immersion in higher-income friendship groups—and her reflections on how different her lifestyle is different from those of her peers—actually empowers and inspires her to achieve upward social mobility through education.
To summarize, low-income Asians occupy a different position than Latino and black students at Ranch High. The salience of their status as foreign Others trumps the salience of their low-income status, as few low-income Asian students identified their low-income status as a meaningful status that shaped their school experiences. Responses to feelings of exclusion as Others range from a critically conscious avoidance of the dominant majority (white peers) to a perception of conflict- and tension-free group dynamics, stemming from extremely limited interaction with non-Asians. In general, Asian students communicated a feeling of not having full ownership of or entitlement to their school—expressed through stories of Ranch High being “a white school,” Asians “keeping to ourselves,” and “ignoring” white (and other non-Asian) students—and in doing so, reified their stereotype of anti-social, self-segregating behavior on campus. For low-income Asians who are able to escape assumptions of strangeness or foreignness through interaction with more diverse students through taking classes in the advanced track, the stripping away of their racial foreignness allows for income status to become salient. However, because there is no income-based stereotype for Asians at Ranch High (as there are for Latino and black students), the salience of income status for low-income Asians is typically manifested in internal feelings of relative deprivation rather than judgment from peers.

Ranch High: Low-Income White Students

The sweet, floral scent of Ashley’s pungent perfume fills the room as she walks in for her interview, dressed in a faded denim jacket, tights, and Ugg brand shearling boots (imitation, she reveals in her interview). With her trendy clothing, immaculately styled long brown hair, and fresh coat of makeup, Ashley appears to be the epitome of the privilege and wealth that characterizes Ranch High’s most popular students. Unlike the other low-income students
discussed above, Ashley, a junior at Ranch High, discusses her ability to pass as higher-income despite her struggles growing up in a low-income single-parent household. She lives with her mother—an emergency medical technician—and an older brother—a senior star football player at Ranch High—in a house in the Ranch High community. Her father has been out of her life for years, after a violent altercation with her mother, which led to an arrest. Prior to leaving his family, Ashley’s father had added extensions to their once modest-sized house, making it a sizable house. Ashley explains how living in the community, coupled with other factors, allows her to “hide” her low-income status and the hardships that come with it:

Ashley: Well, like for me, my family does not have a lot of money at all, but it doesn’t seem like it—like, we hide it pretty well. So I think there are people who are low income but they don’t seem like it but they really don’t have that much money.
Interviewer: Tell me more about how you hide it.
Ashley: They assume that I have money because I live around here. And I don’t dress like…someone who’s lower. And my mom’s really pretty and cute and sweet, so I think that has to do with it. Everyone loves her and my brother has tons of friends and they always go to our house and they love her and some call her “Mom.” And also because our house is pretty big, it’s not a small house.
Interviewer: Tell me a bit more about how you dress and how that helps you.
Ashley: I feel like people…would judge that. Like, let’s say you wear like cute clothes or you’re dressed kinda nice or you look attractive at school or something…people would say, like, you’re rich because you wear nice clothes.

Ashley recognizes the multitude of factors that jointly allow her to pass as higher-income: her big house located in the Ranch community, being the younger sister of a star football player, consistently being seen in trendy attire, and having a well-liked and hospitable member who feeds the football team when during their regular hangouts at her house.

Despite these factors, however, Ashley struggles with feelings of relative deprivation, stress, and even guilt as she attempts to use her attire—something she deems a powerful signal of status—to pose as an affluent student while on a limited single-parent income.

Ashley: It’s different because there’s like, I mean, there’s definitely like competition with like clothes and stuff. It really doesn’t bother me but, like, it sucks sometimes not
getting to go to a store that has cute clothes but is, like, too expensive. Or only getting to get like one shirt from there because it’s too expensive and, like, that kinda sucks sometimes but it’s, like, I know at the end of the day, it’s just clothes. It really doesn’t matter, like, no one really cares and like, my mom tries her best to make it so that we can, like, get what we want and stuff and, like, get clothes that we want but, like, I don’t know. You can’t act spoiled and like just want it.

Interviewer: Are a lot of people here spoiled?
Ashley: Yeah, there are a lot of people that are very spoiled here. They’re, like, just get money, like...I don’t like to ask my mom for money…I feel bad. I mean, if she wants to take me shopping and, like, get me a couple of shirts, I’m always really careful because I don’t want her to spend a lot of money on me and when she does take me shopping, it’s always for an occasion. It’s not just, like, to go shopping. Like it’s either for my birthday or like for Hanukah or something like that. And like I always make sure that when I do, I get what I actually need and not just what I want, like get clothes that are appropriate for that weather that I need…not just stuff I want.

Though taxing and stressful, Ashley reveals that her struggles are purely internal and well hidden. At school, she is not only socially well integrated—she is even envied by her more affluent peers. She has had her fair share of “drama,” the causes of which she attributes to girls on her cheerleading squad being jealous of her and her popularity. She is academically well integrated as well. Aside from a turbulent period during her freshman year when her grades suffered as her father was trying to re-enter her life, Ashley gets “decent” grades and takes a combination of “regular” and AP classes. She is close to—and loved by—many teachers on campus, who have also guided her through times of personal strife like her family problems during freshman year. 

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Though many factors helped render Ashley virtually indistinguishable from her more affluent peers, one crucial factor she did not identify was her race. Much like how being black or Latino signaled low-income status, being white at Ranch High signaled middle-class or affluent status. The extent to which race was deemed a proxy for income status was taken for granted by students. Non-white students often referred, matter-of-factly, to their white peers as “the rich
white kids” who were “spoiled” or “privileged.” It was typical for non-white students to identify “being white” as a way of telling whether someone at Ranch High was affluent. Low-income whites were rarely discussed or acknowledged in interviews unless I explicitly inquired. As Irving, a higher-income white student, explains, low-income students on campus exist but aim to keep their status invisible—and understandably so:

Interviewer: Are there any low-income white kids here?
Irving: Probably. They probably don’t want to say it because that would be a very different situation for them to be in because they won’t fit the stereotype and they’d be estranged—an outsider. I wouldn’t think they would advertise it.

While Ashley’s experience as a low-income student in a high-status social group on campus is an extreme example of how low-income white students can mask their low-income statuses, low-income white students who are not in the most “popular” crowds articulate similar experiences. Like Ashley, their struggles associated with being low income are often experienced internally, and unlike their non-white counterparts, they are free of the external social stimuli that stigmatize and make salient their low-income status. Christina, a low-income student who was abandoned by her mother and currently lives with her financially struggling father, explains the challenge of being low-income in a school context where she feels the need to conceal her low-income status:

Christina: I just know from living with my dad, it causes a lot of stress. I think about it at school a lot. I just feel like sometimes I should have the responsibility of taking care of my family because my dad can’t take care of all of us. It actually makes us grow apart more as a family—the fact that we’re struggling a lot. We barely talk to each other. My dad’s always working, my stepmom doesn’t want anything to do with me. I feel sometimes I should just be responsible for it and getting a job, even though I’m not. I just don’t have the schedule to have a job. I’m always worrying, like, how are we gonna get through the next month? Like, I don’t even know. Because my dad is such a bad money manager. As soon as he gets money, it’s gone. He has a lot of debt and really bad credit. We had to downsize and move because he couldn’t afford it.

Interviewer: How do you deal with those feelings? Who do you talk to?
Christina: I don’t really talk about it with people. I don’t want to get that kind of attention. I just keep it to myself, and this year, I’m trying to think of it as a motivator.
It used to put so much stress on me that I wouldn’t be able to focus at all. The last couple of years, my grades were so so bad.

In addition, though not all low-income white students are in racially homogeneous groups as Ashley is, even the few who have mixed-race friendship groups are shielded from the assumptions or stigmas endured by their non-white low-income peers. In fact, as with Ashley, being white acts as a signal of being at least middle class. Griffith, a low-income white freshman whose friendship group includes some black and Latino students he met in his lower-track classes, explains how his friends assume he is “rich” because he is white:

Griffith: My friends from soccer, the black and Mexican ones, think I’m rich. Like sometimes they’re like, “Ey, can I borrow a dollar?” and I’m like, “No, I don’t have money.” And they’re like, “Huh? But you’re rich!”
Interviewer: Why do they think you’re rich?
Griffith: I don’t know! Probably because I’m white [laughs].

Low-income white students at Ranch High thus occupy a unique position relative to other low-income students. Though they often have characteristics—such as popularity, trendy (enough) clothing, and living in or near the Ranch neighborhood—that help them pass as higher-income, it is their race, first and foremost, that acts as the most powerful and salient signal of middle- or upper-middle class status. Unlike their non-white counterparts, their struggles as low-income students are experienced almost exclusively internally, and their income status is not questioned, contemplated, or negatively judged by their schoolmates. In these ways, they are stripped from the stress of stigma management that, as seen above, is often socially and academically debilitating to their non-white low-income peers.

*Low-Income Exceptions at Ranch High*

While being non-white signaled low-income status at Ranch High, some low-income students of color are able to escape from assumptions of their income status. Most of these
students became accepted into popular or respected social circles for reasons such as athletics or other extracurricular activities. Some attributed their popularity or higher social status to their physical attractiveness. Xiara, a half Latino and half middle-Eastern junior who lives at the outskirts of the Ranch community, is an exceptional case of a low-income student whose income status does not play a significant role in her social status or well-being at school. Since childhood, she was raised in a single-mother household after her mother left her highly abusive father (who physically abused and starved his family). Prior to entering Ranch High in tenth grade, Xiara lived in subsidized apartment housing in Country Oaks, a nearby neighborhood known for its pompous mansions and extreme wealth. Because she came from Country Oaks High School, she was assumed to be affluent. This perceived affluence, combined with her racially ambiguous “exotic” phenotype (which won the admiration of many of the football players), made her not only accepted by her peers but also well-known as one of the popular juniors at school:

Xiara: Apparently being with a football player makes me popular, which I don’t see how that could make me popular, but apparently it does.
Interviewer: Tell me the whole story about how you became popular.
Xiara: They thought I was like different. They thought like, they’re like, “Oh that’s so cool, like, exotic.” And I was like, okay. Like that was they told me the first day they saw me. They were like, [the football player] introduced me and all of they’re like, “Oh my God, you’re so exotic”—I’ve never heard of that before…It was like a petting zoo. Almost like everyone was like, “Oh what’s your name? Oh that’s right, the rich girl from Country Oaks.”
Interviewer: They thought you were rich?
Xiara: People categorize me thinking I was rich because I came from Country Oaks.

For Xiara, being accepted immediately by the popular crowd and dating football players served as extra insurance that helped her conceal her low-income status. Indeed, most low-income minorities who were able to pass as middle-class were students who were able to infiltrate popular groups—for example, because of sports or perceived physical attractiveness. Since the
A common practice among low-income minority students who are socially respected on campus is an explicit dissociation from one’s co-ethnics. Joe, a Latino senior who attributes his popularity to his outgoing personality and good looks, explains how his co-ethnics’ sensitivity and lack of confidence prevents them from being accepted into more “mainstream” (majority white) groups on campus:

I just like—I’m a nice person to [the wealthier students]. I don’t give them reasons not to like me. Other [low-income] kids—it’s just they don’t make an effort. They feel like those richer people are better than them or they think that they’re not good enough for them, so they don’t even try or attempt to make friends with them. To me, it doesn’t bother me that I’m like low income so I don’t really mind. So, I’m just fine too with whoever wants us to be friends and whoever doesn’t. I don’t let it get to me. But for the other low-income kids, it gets to them and they get intimidated. Either that or some of them are awkward and try too hard and act like posers. Be something they’re not, just to try to be accepted.

Similarly, Hector, a low-income Latino senior who is known for wearing his distinct baseball caps backwards, explains the importance of dressing and acting appropriately to earn the respect of his more affluent peers. He states that decent, respectable attire and demeanor are things that many of his fellow minority peers lack:

Style is important. It comes down to how you look. How you carry yourself. I also hate when there’s like a pair of people, like say two girls, who just speak Spanish so loudly in class. I think it’s annoying because people are gonna look at them and be like, “Pft, Mexicans.” When they’re doing that illiterate stupid stuff, it makes other Mexicans look bad. Like when they go like “Eyy!” or make stupid sounds or they’ll yell out or just their ways of talking. It’s the same thing with black people. There’s a difference, you see. Between a “black guy” [gestures air quotes] and a nigga, between a “Mexican” and a beaner, a “white person” and a redneck. It depends on how you carry yourself.

The tendency to blame the victim for school segregation at Ranch High demonstrates how socially successful low-income minorities help maintain the status quo by identifying the
locus of change in low-income minorities themselves rather than in larger forces at the structural or school cultural level. This practice of “defensive othering” (Ezzell 2009; see also Wacquant 1996) also partially explains why, according to student accounts, the group segregation “has always been this way.” Low-income minorities who wish to achieve high social status, aware of the negative assumptions about them, feel compelled to prove that they are unlike their “typical” co-ethnics. By dissociating from their co-ethnics and then achieving upward mobility in social status, they learn—and communicate—that the only way up is to dissociate. This, in turn, creates within-race and within-income status rifts, and also confirms the dominant majority’s view that “typical” minorities are deficient and not “one of us.”

In summary, low-income status is experienced differently at Ranch High depending on one’s race/ethnicity. By and large, being non-white signals low-income status, since most residents in the Ranch community are middle- or upper-class white families. For non-white low-income students, low-income status is salient and intertwined with non-white status in different ways for each racial/ethnic group. Low-income white students have the ability to conceal their income status, since being white signals middle-class status at Ranch High. These students often experience feelings of relative deprivation and low-income struggles internally; they feel unable to talk openly with peers about their life challenges for fear of exposing their unusual status. Some low-income minorities are able to achieve higher social status through extracurricular activities, idiosyncratic physical or personality-based characteristics, or posing as affluent (e.g., in the case of Xiara, moving from an affluent neighborhood). However, for many of the low-income minorities who achieve high social status, social respect comes at the cost of racial/ethnic identity and cohesion, as they dissociate themselves from co-ethnics to achieve more respect from the dominant social groups on campus.
At 4’11”, Luciana is a petite and soft-spoken girl who moved from Guatemala with her father and brother (the rest of her family—mother, two older sisters, and an older brother—came later) when she was four years old. Though she comes from a two-parent household with four other siblings, she endured physical and psychological abuse from her father, who used to whip and starve her for not being able to translate the nightly local news on American television for him. Now a senior in high school who works almost full-time hours at a local supermarket, she still endures emotional abuse from her father, who calls her a bad daughter and who constantly demands larger and larger shares of her minimum-wage earnings. She often wakes up with headaches from sleep deprivation and stress, and has lost a lot of weight in the past couple years from the stress of dealing with her family issues. Often working until midnight on school nights, Luciana speaks of convincing the store manager (who wanted to decrease her hours out of concern for her schoolwork and sleep deprivation) to let her keep her long hours because work is a nice escape from the daily yelling and fighting at home. “I prefer working,” she reports telling her manager, “because I feel so comfortable here.”

School is also an oasis from her troubled home. As she says, “I am so comfortable here. I can just be myself. Like just have fun. Just be a student and learn.” With her cheerful smile and strong work ethic, Luciana has earned the support of many teachers at Bonita High. She still speaks on the phone once a week with a teacher—whom she calls her “third parent”—who left Bonita High to teach at another school. From these teachers, Luciana receives not only advice on success in high school and college—she also gains an entire support system of adults who help
and guide her through her ongoing turbulence at home. For example, the teacher who moved to another school volunteered to let Luciana stay with her temporarily when times were tough at home. She sounds disappointed when she reveals her 3.5 GPA, but she explains that there are tradeoffs to having to work seven hour shifts after schooldays. A history buff, she wishes she took AP classes but purposely avoided signing up for them because she knew working would take away from her study time.

In addition to the adult support at school, Luciana receives support from her social circle, which spans diverse racial groups and social backgrounds. This mixing, Luciana explains, is one of the things she enjoys most about Bonita High:

Luciana: I like this school. I really like it because there’s so many different backgrounds that you never know what’s out there and then you just meet people and then they’re like, ‘Oh I’m from this’ and I was like, ‘Really?’ So I like this school because there’s the diversity. It’s nice. I really like this school. Because it’s all like mixed up [racially].
Interviewer: So tell me about your group of friends.
Luciana: Yeah we’re all mixed.
Interviewer: Really?
Luciana: Yeah. One of my best friends, she is from Guatemala too, and my other one is from Columbia and then Vietnamese and then Japanese.

Though her friends are supportive, however, Luciana still feels compelled to keep most of her family and financial troubles to herself. Because Bonita High students generally mix socioeconomically and because income status is not salient at Bonita High, Luciana is hesitant to draw attention to herself by “complaining” about her struggles to others—even her own friends. If she did, Luciana laments, she would unnecessarily bring light to her low-income status—a status that currently is not relevant or salient in shaping her social status at school.

As she reveals her family and financial problems during the interview, her voice begins to shake and her tears begin to well up in her eyes. She hastily wipes them away with the back of her hand and quickly apologizes, explaining that she has nobody to confide in about these issues.
Luciana describes a time when she tried to confide in her friends when her father was no longer satisfied with half her paycheck and demanded to receive more. As she explains, however, her friends are supportive but not quite on the same wavelength with such issues:

Luciana: I was like, ‘What am I going to do?’ I don’t know, it’s just so hard. Then, after a while, I can’t think no more. It’s just too much. I want to tell someone. I don’t know. Sometimes I tell someone, like I tell my friends, but their parents are so different. It’s hard for them to relate because my friends work and they keep all their money. So they tell me, “Why do you even give your family half your money?” I was like, “Oh, I don’t know. I have so many reasons. I need to help my dad because he has done so much for me.” So it’s time for me to give back, but not everything.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.
Luciana: Yeah. They were like, “Oh you know…if I were you I would’ve moved out.” I was like, “Well I’m not ready yet to move out.” I’m barely still in high school. I haven’t graduated. So it’s really hard to find someone who I feel comfortable talking with about this stuff—someone who understands.

In many ways, Luciana’s narrative is reminiscent of those articulated by low-income white students at Ranch High who also “pass” as middle-class. Like those students, Luciana’s low-income status is largely unnoticed—or at least not viewed as relevant—in the eyes of her peers. Thus, just as the white students at Ranch High struggle privately with their low-income status for fear of being “outed” as low-income, Luciana also keeps her problems to herself in order to maintain the status quo in her current social status, where her low-income status is muted. Importantly, while the white students at Ranch High conceal their income statuses to avoid the stigma of being “outed” as low-income, Luciana conceals her income status to avoid being marked as different. As will be discussed later, statuses like race and income status generally act as stratifying forces at Ranch High and as differentiating forces at Bonita High.

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In general, almost all low-income Latino interviewees report that their income statuses carry very little importance in their identities and everyday lives at school. The collective consensus that “everybody is broke” and that nobody lives a perfect life was powerful at Bonita
High, and perhaps stems from the strong presence of racial minorities on campus (but not from a stronger immigrant presence, since Chapter 2 shows that Ranch High and Bonita High share comparable proportions of immigrant students). While the “ghetto” and “ratchet” rhetoric still exist in everyday language, they are typically used to describe styles of dress rather than used as deeper representations of assumed poverty, as was the case at Ranch High. As a low-income Latino student explained, “Dressing ghetto doesn’t mean you’re poor or anything. Some richer kids dress ghetto too.”

The “laid back” school culture at Bonita High, where income status was not a relevant status marker, surprised some incoming students who were new to the Bonita community. Julie, a low-income student who was bussed to Bonita High from a rough, high-poverty neighborhood, explains how Bonita High’s student culture disproved her assumptions about suburban schools. Her new peers’ general disregard for income status obviated her need to use her fighting skills to protect herself from the discrimination and bullying she expected:

> When I came I thought it was gonna be like in the movies, they were gonna say stuff. I was actually worried because of my temper, like I don’t wanna get in trouble [by getting into a fight]. But it’s a really nice school, there’s not much of that stuff…before, I was so good about being fit for my protection. But [once I started at Bonita High] I…got no more exercise, which is why I’m now fat [laughs].”

Unlike the minority students at Ranch High who resorted to self-defense adversarial orientations and withdrawal in response to exclusion and feelings of inferiority, Julie had an opposite experience: she was able to lower her defense mechanisms due to the lack of perceived threat or uncertainty at Bonita High. This evidence supports past researchers’ (Lee 2001; Dijker 1987; Islam and Hewstone 1993; Stephan et al. 2002) argument that decreasing perceived threat and uncertainty is the most important strategy necessary to forge positive intergroup relations.
While low-income Latino students generally reap the benefits of being immersed in a school culture that overlooks income status as a relevant status marker, there is one notable exception. The few low-income Latino students in high-track classes have a noticeably bleaker experience in the classroom compared to their middle- and lower-achieving counterparts. Some high-track low-income Latino students experience feelings of exclusion in their high-track classrooms.

Gloria: In my AP classes and just any advanced class I always feel like the minority. Like a lot of times, I was really the only Mexican. I’d always feel kind of excluded. Not only because they were all Asians but also because they all went to the same church which was for Asians. They would always be talking to each other like ‘Oh you go into Sunday school or whatever.’ And then I got when I would try to kind of be part of the conversation, they would just be like, “Oh…” Like blow me off.

Interviewer: Why?
Gloria: They go way back. They’re a tight group. They kind of stuck together—to whoever they knew like from the other AP classes over the years. They’re like, ‘Oh you know, flashcards from this class and that class’ because they have all their classes together. I wouldn’t be part of that group because I haven’t been with them that long in all those classes. A lot of the AP kids, they look down on people who are not as smart or whatever. It’s all about academics. Like with people who take AP classes for four years, six periods I realize that they really do look down on people who take regular classes and I take some regular classes. I take regular contemporary voices. That’s like just really basic because it’s not like advanced or anything. So one time I remember Mr. Gilbert [an AP teacher] was telling us a story about how in his old high school there were no AP classes, it was just those regular classes. He’s like “Oh yeah you know everybody there was dumb and I wanted to get out of there.” And then people are like, “Yes!” But I’m like, “They’re not dumb. I take some of those classes!”

At least two factors contribute to these feelings of exclusion. First, though students at Bonita High have some (limited) agency in choosing to take advanced-level classes, Latino and black students remain significantly underrepresented in the most advanced classes. Moreover, these racialized patterns in tracking occur long before high school, as most students were placed in special accelerated programs in middle school, or in some cases, even late elementary school. Secondly, low-income Latino students in high tracks—many of whom were high-achieving
students in regular classes whose counselors encouraged them to challenge themselves with more advanced classes—have the added disadvantage of being underprepared to succeed in advanced classes relative to their classmates. While many of their classmates were in accelerated or gifted programs since middle school or even elementary school, many low-income Latinos in high tracks lack this early preparation and priming at school—typically because of late arrivals from other countries or other neighborhoods. Their disadvantage is therefore twofold. First, they experience the social strain of being newcomers to a group that has been taking classes together in accelerated programs for years. Their fellow high-achieving classmates make up a social group who has been known as the top scholars for years, and permeating these deeply-rooted social boundaries can be a taxing process for newcomers. Secondly, they begin high-track classes already academically behind their peers, who have been accumulating academic and cultural capital necessary for success in high-track classes long before they have.

Because of racialized patterns in tracking, their ethnicity as Latinos becomes the most salient difference between them and their classmates. They suddenly become, for instance, the only Latino student in a sea of whites and Asians—an unusual occurrence elsewhere in Bonita High. For some, the salience of their ethnicity makes them assume that their feelings of exclusion are tied to ethnicity (e.g., “It’s because I’m Mexican.”). However, though they often do stand out ethnically, it is the factors associated with low-income status (discussed above), coupled with structural practices that facilitate racialized tracking long before the high school years, that truly deepen their differences from their peers and intensifies their feelings of exclusion. Notably, unlike in Ranch High, their classmates who were interviewed did not voice negative sentiments against them or their perceived intelligence, even when probed. Moreover,
the few Latino and black students who have been part of the high-achieving group since middle school did not voice concerns about exclusion or feelings of intellectual inadequacy.

Bonita High: Low-Income Black Students

With his dimply smile, hazel eyes, and closely-shaven hair, Travis is a charmer with the ladies at school. He strides into the interview room confidently, wearing dark pants and a gray Bonita High hoodie that reads, “Bonita’s Stars”—the hoodie rewarded to all students who achieved high scores on last year’s standardized state test. Travis wore this outfit every day throughout the chilly winter season.

Raised in one of the most crime-ridden neighborhoods in the entire metropolitan area, Travis jumped around schools for years, alternating between schools in his high-poverty neighborhood and suburban schools he gained access to through borrowing friends’ and relatives’ addresses. At age 17, he already has a long criminal record. Though he hesitates to give details, he discloses that he was heavily involved in gang and drug activity, and admits, “The FBI was after me for a while.” Though he generally speaks openly throughout the interview, he is also cautious when speaking of his past, ending his interview by pointing to the recorder in the room and stating with a serious face, “There’s way too much information about me on that recorder.” Travis speaks cryptically about his parents—likely involved in drug activity—who “do not make the best decisions.” He moved to the Bonita community to live with his adult siblings towards the end of middle school.

Travis’s beginnings at Bonita High were turbulent. He recalls a counselor who pulled him out of class during his freshman year to tell him that he should drop out of high school since he

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14 The visible and public recognition of “Bonita’s Stars” via these hoodies is a strategy used by the principal to motivate students to maintain and increase Bonita’s high test score average.
was failing. He says, “I mean, a couple of years ago—not now because now I have more self-control—but if somebody would have said something like that to me, I mean of course not a woman, but if someone would say something like that to me, I’d probably cut their throat.” Shortly after that incident, Travis had an epiphany and decided to “straighten up.” His risk behaviors tapered and his academics gradually improved. He laughs as he recalls how he used to covertly write his AP English essays on his cell phone while hanging out with his old friends from his old neighborhood. When they asked what he was doing, he would lie and say, “I’m textin’ my girl.” Now a senior in high school, Travis boasts a 4.5 GPA and the respect of many of his teachers. With their help, he is applying to some of the most selective universities in the nation.

Travis enjoys being a student at Bonita High, where his peers are down-to-earth and, unlike the overly sheltered and spoiled kids from other suburban schools, have had a “taste of life” (they have had—and/or understand—struggle). He appreciates that there is more diversity and mixing of people from different race/ethnicities and social backgrounds, and attributes the mixing to the fact that there is no need to band together with one’s “own kind” for protection from other groups, as is the case with “schools in the ghetto” or even in majority-white affluent schools.

Though he does not report trouble adjusting to school in the Bonita community initially, he did struggle a bit once he started taking AP classes which, as discussed above, serve majority white and Asian students. Many of his high-achieving classmates knew about his troubled past and risk behavior—characteristics not typical of a “good” student. Thus, Travis explains, “I had to basically prove to them that my intelligence can hang with their intelligence.” On one hand, Travis’s experience is similar to those of low-income Latino students in high tracks, as discussed
above: as a black student in advanced classes, he is a visible minority; as a low-income student, he is underprepared for success in the advanced tracks, relative to most his peers. However, because he was known to be a troublemaker, he had the extra burden of proving he was “good enough to fit in” with the academic “nerds.”

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Travis’s general comfort at Bonita High and his appreciation of the diversity and open-mindedness of his peers are echoed by many other low-income black students as well. As Shana, a soft-spoken cheerleader, reflects when asked what things would be like if she attended a school like nearby Hollyvale High (majority white, majority affluent), she reflects, “I’d be shier for sure. I’d probably have trouble making friends because of confidence issues.” Kayla, an active leader in student government, cheerfully states that she is proud and happy that the group dynamics at school are the way they are. However, she points out that black students at Bonita must ensure that they don’t act “like a [black] stereotype”—loud and obnoxious—so as not to be mistaken for a “ghetto” black person. She recounts a time when she was walking with friends at school and a black girl passed by, shouting something loudly. Her friend joked, “There goes Kayla!” Kayla recalls, “I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, that’s not me! That’ll never be me!’” Because black students only make up 7% of Bonita High’s student population, there are fewer opportunities for non-black students to interact with black students. Thus, black students work harder than other students to overcome negative stereotypes through their interactions with other-race students, since the burden of dispelling negative stereotypes is greater for them than for other races that (due to their greater representation on campus) have more interaction opportunities to dispel stereotypes.
In the advanced academic track, there are even fewer black students. Like Travis, black students who only recently began taking classes in the high academic track, regardless of income status, often report feeling that their peers question or undermine their intelligence. As Zora explains:

I’m in like AP and Honors classes. There aren’t that many black people there, like in fact my AP Language class I’m the only black person there. One common stereotype that I notice Asians have or whites have with black people, they think that we’re dumb which we’re not. But I guess I don’t think I’ll ever understand stereotype, it just really pisses me off how they assume that they’re higher up because that’s basically all they’re known for. Academics. They’re like really smart, so they’re pretty racist I guess. Like when we group up no one wants to group up with me and because they have seen that I’m not the smart one. I see that it has a lot to do with skin color, but if they actually knew my grade percentage on the class, they might change their mind.

Unlike Travis and the low-income Latino students in high tracks discussed above, Zora already identifies as a high achiever and scholar, since she had years of experience in accelerated tracks back in Georgia (where she moved from a little over a year ago). She is thus able to quickly dismantle her classmates’ initial assumptions by demonstrating her academic prowess. However, low-income black students in advanced classes carry the extra disadvantage of being underprepared relative to their classmates, like Travis and the low-income Latino students discussed above. Because they are newcomers both socially and academically, and have never identified as one of the “smart kids” in the past, they are at greater risk of feeling as if they may indeed be less intelligent than their classmates.

**Bonita High: Low-Income Asian Students**

Tall in stature and animated in demeanor, Michael is known by his teachers as among the brightest and most hard-working students on campus. He has been in the accelerated program since middle school, and was a GATE student (Gifted and Talented Education) in elementary
school prior to that. Flashing his braces as he smiles, Michael brags that adults tend to “love” him—not only the teachers at school, but also his friends’ parents and the adults at church—because of his respectful and sociable personality, and also because he is a star student who always helps others. His fluent Vietnamese causes teachers to frequently call upon him for translation help, and the younger English Language Learners who he tutors at school proudly regard him as a role model. On Sundays, he is at church from 8:00am until 4:00pm because he stays behind and tutors students with disabilities.

Michael lives in the Bonita area with his mother—who paints nails at a local nail salon—and his older brother—who is a student at a nearby state college. Their father, who is a bus driver, left the family when Michael was 12, after what Michael calls “the incident” (he did not want to reveal the exact details of this but hinted at gambling, infidelity and spousal abuse). This “incident” split up not only his parents, who used to own a small nail salon, but also severed his once-strong ties to his paternal extended family. He is not in touch with his father anymore. He summed up succinctly, “My family…dropped.” Though his family’s income status qualified him for free lunch even before his parents split, Michael discusses the difficulty adjusting to a single-earner, single-parent household. To avoid homelessness and sustain the household, his mother worked long hours, learned to cut coupons, and traded her occasional department store splurges for needs-based shopping at discount stores. Seeing his mother struggle to provide for her family, Michael says as his eyes welled up with tears, was one of the hardest things he has ever witnessed. Speaking of his mother’s ability to sustain the family with a single low salary, he says, “Little do [people] know, my mother has to carry it all on her shoulders.”

Despite the downward mobility and turbulence in his personal life, his social and academic life at school barely flinches. Michael’s narrative reveals three main reasons why his
social and academic well-being remain intact despite struggles at home. First, he explains that income status is not a relevant status marker at school. People typically do not know someone is low-income unless it is explicitly revealed. He half-boasts that, to this day, almost none of his peers know about his family’s downward mobility and loss of their small business. Getting free lunch, he adds, is common at Bonita High, and perhaps because of its widespread nature, it is not interpreted as an indicator of low-income status. In fact, Michael explains, students who do not get free lunch are sometimes laughed at for paying for something others get for free:

Oh, we do make fun of the rich kids. We always say, “We have free lunch and you don’t.” And they’re eating the same thing as us every day. They have to pay $2.50 or they eat their peanut butter and jelly sandwich. So you can see where the fun comes in making fun of them.

Secondly, because his low-income status does not matter at school, he is able to make friends from different social backgrounds without the limits that class—or other social—cleavages often impose. A self-described “floater” who gets along with people from all walks of life, Michael explains:

I’ve been everywhere. In middle school I was asked how I got popular in one year. I was asked that. It’s because I liked to spread out and a lot of kids knew me and I was also one of the cool kids. I didn’t even know I was “popular.” I thought it was just me making friends. For me, it’s like, you got your academic friends—the friends you play around with. And then you got [the jocks]—who are pretty cool! People have misconceptions about them. I actually made some friends in band this year and I started going into the band room recently. When I took AP Spanish last year, I had a lot of Mexican friends. My Vietnamese friends who just came from Vietnam, they tend to mingle with each other only in Vietnamese. When I go there, I speak Vietnamese. And my Hispanic friends, I tend to greet them in Spanish. And they always speak Spanish. And oh! The friend I was just texting—we call him White-Out. It’s because this one friend of ours—she started giving people names. Mr. Kenya, Panda Express, Barbie, White-Out. She called herself Ms. Africa.

For Michael, his low-income status rarely enters his school life. He reports rarely thinking about his—or his peers’—income status, except when teasing his more affluent friends. When he does feel the need to talk to someone about problems related to his home life, he typically seeks his
older church friends. His ability to mingle with friends from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups further protects him from being pigeonholed into any single stereotype.

The third resilience factor that allows Michael to maintain a strong social and academic life at school despite his struggles as a low-income student is the support of his teachers. Throughout his years at Bonita High, he has “bonded” with several of his teachers, who have been instrumental in his high school and college application success. He recalls receiving a life-changing pep talk from a history teacher when he was overwhelmed with stress during the college application season (he was deeply worried about disappointing his mother, which he deemed as the greatest possible failure, after all she has sacrificed for him and his brother). He explains, “When my friends at school couldn’t [help me] and my academics were slowly dropping, she was like, ‘You could do it!’ All I needed was a little push and she gave me the push.” An English teacher stayed behind after school on several occasions to help him improve his writing. Despite experiencing personal hardships he could not bear to articulate in detail during the interview, Michael’s low-income status did not have a meaningful impact on his social or academic life at school. Michael was able to thrive as one of the top students in his graduating class.

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Other low-income Asian students at Bonita High echo similar narratives as Michael’s: their low-income statuses do not significantly impact their social or academic lives at school. Because income status is not deemed an important differentiator at Bonita High, they don’t strongly identify as, and rarely think about their status as, low-income students. Many identified as “middle class” in interviews, despite having family socioeconomic backgrounds and experiences (e.g., being on the brink of homelessness) that suggests otherwise.
Kevin, a high-achieving student whose parents are currently unemployed, succinctly explains why his peers do not care about each others’ income statuses:

Kevin: Race is not really like something that is a big issue here. Like, no one really there’s, like, no racism. People won’t be like talking down about people, other races. So it’s kind of—it’s easier to just make—like, just have fun and joke around a bit as long as it doesn't get too far.

Interviewer: So why do you think people here are comfortable joking about race?

Kevin: Mostly because like everyone is around the same level here in like, say, income and I guess their status. No one really, like, makes fun of a race and says they’re poor and stuff.

This perception that everyone is roughly at the same level and has their own struggles is representative of the general belief held by Bonita High students across groups. Maurice, a low-income student who immigrated from the Philippines in seventh grade, provides a further explanation of the unusually low levels of tension and exclusion at school. When asked about group tensions at school, Maurice contrasts Bonita High’s group dynamics with nearby Hollyvale High’s dynamics, and attributes typical high school group conflicts to racial tensions that stem from perceived racial hierarchies (whites on top vs. others below)—something that does not exist at Bonita High:

There’s lots of Asians so you can’t really act like that [whites can’t act superior]. Because whites are a minority so you can’t be like, “I’m the boss,” you know. It’ll be like, “Are you serious? Do you see all the Asians around you? Naw, get out of here.” So that probably helps put into account that. Because Asians are kind of in the middle. They don’t really care I guess…the majority of people in Bonita High are Asians. Like if the majority of the people here were black there would be more tension…but [for] Asians it’s just like, study, I guess.

As Maurice suggests, the strong presence of racial minorities at Bonita High is a significant contributor to a school culture where low-income status is overlooked. However, the origins of this unique school culture stem deeper than simply the fact that Asians just “study” and “don’t really care” about racial tensions. Most students from immigrant origins at Bonita High have witnessed—or experienced firsthand—humble beginnings, the struggle to find employment in a
new country, and government aid. This intimate understanding of struggle, a commonality among the many groups of immigrant students at Bonita High, takes income status out of the limelight.

Bonita High: Low-Income White Students

Aside from being a star football player at Bonita High, Jake is also well known throughout campus for his friendly and cheerful demeanor. With his ruddy complexion, cherub face, and towering size, he is hard to miss on campus. Jake comes from humble beginnings, yet unlike equally-popular Ashley at Ranch High discussed above, he does not feel a need to conceal his income status. He lives in the Bonita community with his “tough military guy” father, his stay-at-home mother, and his younger brother. His parents both came from extreme poverty, where being hungry was not unusual. As he explains later, this shapes a large part of his worldview and who he is today. Because of his father’s military career, Jake has lived in seven different cities around the country. He calls Bonita his true “home,” however, for two reasons: he has spent the most time there (a total of seven years, with a gap in between), and he loves it most. His family owns a second-hand car that they bought from Jake’s uncle, and when Jake got his license, his father bought a bike for himself and let Jake take the car for school.

Jake’s jovial, gentle-giant demeanor makes him well-liked across many social circles on campus. He explains that circles of cliques throughout campus literally open up for him when they see him approaching:

Jake: I hang out with, like, everybody, and am really friendly and easy to get along with. Maybe I wouldn’t be like the most popular kid out there you know, but I’m everybody—like, if I would walk by a group of people they would be able to know me and, like, I guess accept me.
Interviewer: How would you be able to tell?
Jake: Because let’s say if there’s a group and everyone’s standing like in a circle, if I had
to walk up, they would probably open up.

In short, Jake thrives at Bonita High. Academically, he averages a solid 3.5 grade point average and takes a mixture of AP and regular-level classes, and admits that his grades are not always as high as he hopes because he gets “lazy” with school or overwhelmed with church and football commitments. Socially, he is surrounded with friends from diverse backgrounds. His closest friends are “full Hispanic, and full white,” and his other friends are “every single mixture and full and everything.” His friends come from different economic backgrounds, and his girlfriend is from a much more affluent family than his. As Jake explains, however, income status is not something people care about at Bonita High:

Nobody cares. I have never really seen anyone say, “Oh you’re poor.” [pauses, reflects] Yeah, I don’t think anyone has even said like, “Oh you’re poor.” I’ve heard people call themselves poor and like, “Oh, did you get your financial aid yet?” Everyone always says, “Did you sign up for FAFSA? The AP waiver?” Everyone’s saying that.

Though income status is not a relevant status marker at Bonita High, white students are sometimes assumed to be wealthier than other groups—an assumption borne out of both the general media and the fact that Hollyvale High (Bonita High’s nearby rival, and notoriously affluent—school) is predominantly white. As Jake explains, “For white people, people like to say, ‘Oh, they’re rich’ or whatever. Like, I’m not rich at all!” Jake does not hesitate to correct those who assume that white students at Bonita High are affluent.

Unlike students like Ashley at Ranch High discussed above, Jake’s low-income status is not at odds with his social status or psychological well-being at school. He does not perceive a need to conceal his income status. He is not only open and forthcoming about his family’s financial situation, but explains how it is a part of who he is:

My dad takes time out of like the day to talk to me about my future. It’s not like—happy and I support you so much, it’s like, you better get this done, you better do it now, but he’s like the big stern marine guy. And my mom, she’s always been like the quiet one,
For Jake, having parents who rose out of extreme poverty influences his identity and general outlook on life. Instead of acting as a stigma, his family’s socioeconomic background is simply a part of who he is, and motivates him to appreciate what he has and to succeed in school.

Like Jake, most white students on campus—regardless of income status—report that race and income are not what groups students at school, nor do they serve as markers of status:

I think race has nothing to do with it at all. Definitely not...I think everyone is just diverse and have different cultures in their groups and I think [groupings] really fit their personalities and personal interests. For example, the kids who love to party, I always look at it like high school is their kingdom. And then people who are more religious, you can say, affiliate themselves with friends with the same beliefs. So I guess it has more to do with personalities and interests and stuff like that. It’s not really a search of someone who’s the same race as you or anything, that all kind of just blends together. And I would say even the lower income group is [made up of] different groups of people. It’s from the high achievers to the partiers to the faith-based to athletics but it’s the character of those people that really defines what group they’re in.

Similarly, Jonas, a middle-income half-white half-Filipino student, provided the following explanation when asked to elaborate on how income matters at school:

No! No! No one cares about that. And usually if you don’t have money, it doesn’t determine your popularity. I guess the people here understand that money isn’t happiness. I guess money is a prop for being able to take friends out and just paying for their lunches and stuff like that. But it’s just a prop. No one really cares if you live in a big house or anything or a small tiny apartment. It doesn’t really matter to them. It’s just something to have on the side. If you have a lot of money then yay, you can buy a lot of food and hang out with friends all the time, all the time! So like maybe one friend doesn’t have as much money as you, you hang out with one friend, then you have another friend, and you hang out with them the day after because the other friend can’t hang out every day.
As articulated by Bonita High students across racial, ethnic, and income lines, students at Bonita High do not shy away from receiving financial aid for lunch, AP or SAT tests, college applications, or other academic programs. Instead, students are open about receiving aid, viewing free lunch more like finding a discount or good deal rather than a stigma. A common response to “Tell me about free lunch” was, “Oh! I get free lunch!” Students also enjoy bragging about receiving free lunch in interviews, as Michael (Asian student) does above. For example, Robert, a low-income white student, says, “I get free reduced lunch so my AP tests aren’t like a hundred bucks like a lot of people. They’re only five bucks!” Moreover, there is some “jealousy” surrounding the fact that some students receive financial aid while others do not, as Jonas rants:

Some of my friends can take as many AP classes as they want because they get the free fee waiver [for AP tests]. Five bucks instead of the 89? The heck! The heck!! Like, can I have the fee waiver? I get mad! I’m just like, “It’s not fair!”

Many white students acknowledge that Bonita High’s culture is not representative of other schools’ cultures, and surmise that they would be more close-minded or less tolerant if they attended another school. Robert, a low-income white student from a single-parent household, credits his ability to get along with diverse people to his experience at Bonita High—an experience that he believes will get him far in life.

Interviewer: Would you send your kids to a school like Bonita High in the future?
Robert: Yeah, because then they would get a good feel of what—for all the ethnicities and they will learn not to be biased and stereotypical and that's a pretty good skill to have in life.
Interviewer: Is that something you learned from your mom?
Robert: I learned that from being here. Being here. Being around everybody. If I were at Hollyvale or something, I’d probably think I'm better than everybody. Something like that. That's what I would feel like.

In sum, as is the case for their other-race counterparts, low-income white students at Bonita High do not report their family income background as a relevant force that impacts their
lives at school. Their low-income statuses do not conflict with their social, academic, or psychological well-being at school. In place of income, extracurricular activities, grade level, and general personality sort cliques at school. Like other low-income students on campus, low-income white students are not reticent to admitting that they receive financial aid. On the contrary, their low-income status aligns with the overall school culture’s valuation of hard work and earning—rather than being handed—privileges in life. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, it is the higher-income students, whose family background is at odds with Bonita High’s school culture, who have more to conceal and more to prove.

While the racial dynamics at Ranch High means that the experiences and outcomes of low-income and higher-income students of color is hardly differentiable, this is not the case at Bonita High for any racial/ethnic group. At Bonita High, the main difference between low-income and higher-income co-ethnics is that the former grapple with the typical struggles associated with being low-income (e.g., worrying about not being able to attend Prom, football games, or other school activities) while the latter do not. While middle-class students across racial/ethnic groups at Bonita High are like the middle-class white students at Ranch High—comfortable at school, and free of the burden of stigma management—the low-income students at Bonita High across racial/ethnic groups are similar to the low-income white students at Ranch High—able to mute their income status. However, unlike the low-income white students at Ranch High, the low-income students at Bonita High do not feel compelled to conceal their income status.

Conclusion
Demographic shifts in U.S. suburbia call for a more nuanced and updated understanding of low-income students’ experiences and outcomes in suburban schools. The heterogeneity among low-income students in suburban schools is much greater than extant research suggests. In this chapter, I explore this heterogeneity by using an intersectional approach that considers how race/ethnicity, income status, and context intersect to jointly contribute to differences in how low-income students experience their low-income statuses at school. I find not only within-school differences in the salience and meaning of the low-income status, but also between-school differences in how the same racial/ethnic groups in different schools experience their low-income statuses.

Specifically, at Ranch High, where non-white status signals low-income status, students of color are automatically assumed to be lower-income, and not from the surrounding Ranch High community. For the most part, black, Latino, and Asian students are marked as outsiders, socially marginalized and segregated from the white-dominated mainstream. In response, low-income students of color typically adopt strategies of withdrawal, defense, or anger, which further cements the stark boundaries already present in school. Low-income white students, on the other hand, are often able to mute their low-income status and pass as middle-class, since being white signals (at least) middle-class status (McIntosh 1988; Morris 2005; Stuber 2011b). For these students, their low-income status is almost exclusively experienced internally, manifesting itself in feelings of relative deprivation (e.g., not being able to afford as much nice clothing as one’s more affluent peers) rather than as public stigma. Because their peers rarely perceive them as low-income, the salience of their low-income status in their everyday lives at school is very low or non-existent.
In contrast, low-income status is not assigned to any particular racial or ethnic groups at Bonita High. Low-income students at Bonita High, across racial/ethnic groups, do not bear the burden of managing stigma (Goffman 1963) as their counterparts at Ranch High do, since there exists at Bonita High a collective understanding that everyone has their share of struggles, and for some, these are financial. The question of whether low-income students “pass” as middle-class or work to downplay or conceal their low-income statuses is not applicable here as it is at Ranch High, since income status does not carry the same stratifying power as it does at Ranch High. Exceptions to this finding are low-income Latino and black students who recently entered the advanced academic track, as these students often report feelings of marginalization at school. Though these students attribute their feelings of marginalization to their race/ethnicity—the most salient difference they perceive between them and their peers (and a differentiating force typically more salient in Americans’ consciousness than income status (Bettie 2014; Stuber 2011b))—their feelings of marginalization are actually a product of both their low-income status and a racialized tracking system at the structural level.

Past research tells us that who you go to school with matters for students’ experiences and outcomes (Coleman et al. 1966; Crosnoe et al. 2008; Frost 2007; Goldsmith 2004; Cooley 2009; Jencks 1972; Antonio 2004; Vigdor and Nechyba 2007; Davis 1966). Thus, it is likely that the stronger presence of racial minorities (versus whites) at Bonita High, and the reverse at Ranch High, drive the results foregrounded in this chapter. What this chapter contributes, however, is a better understanding of some of the possible mechanisms through which school-level characteristics such as peer composition shape student experiences and outcomes. As I show, contextualized hierarchies, boundaries, and systems of meanings, forged under the influence of more macro forces such as peer composition and other school-level characteristics,
exert a powerful influence on how traditionally disadvantaged students integrate into more affluent suburban schools.

In applying intersectionality theory—an approach first used by scholars of feminism to study the oppression of women (Crenshaw 1989)—to study low-income students in suburban schools, I add to both the literature on intersectionality and on school integration. First, while the intersectional approach studies how the intersection between social categories contributes to inequality, I argue that an additional dimension of intersectionality must be considered in studies of inequality: the intersection of social categories and social context. In essence, whether and how being low-income matters is contingent up on a combination of who you are (intersection of social categories with each other—in this case, race/ethnicity and income status) and where you are (intersection of (intersecting) social categories and social context). Second, findings from this chapter contribute to the school integration literature by illuminating the heterogeneity among low-income students who attend suburban schools. Contrary to existing research and public discourse, I find considerable diversity in this population. While being low-income is an inescapable stigma endured on a daily basis for some, it hardly matters for others. Findings in this chapter thus question the utility and productivity of discussing low-income students in suburban schools as a cohesive, homogeneous unit in the 21st century, and stress the importance of a more nuanced understanding of low-income students in suburban schools in order to better serve this burgeoning population.
Chapter 5

Immigrant Incorporation in the Suburbs: Diverging Pathways into the Minority Middle Class

Discussions of low-income students in middle-class suburban schools cannot overlook the roles of immigration and immigrant students in shaping the social landscape and relational dynamics in suburban schools. Suburbia is increasingly becoming home to both immigrant families moving from central cities and new immigrant families settling in the suburbs rather than traditional immigrant gateway cities as their first destinations (Wilson and Singer 2011; Massey and Denton 1988). Alba and Nee (2003) find that 48% of immigrants who arrived in the 1990s, and who settled in metropolitan areas, resided in suburbs rather than in central gateway cities—an important deviation from the path of earlier European immigrants.

Immigrants in middle-class suburbia have received some attention in recent scholarship (e.g., Neckerman et al. 1999; Vallejo 2009; Vallejo 2010; Vallejo and Lee 2009). Accounting for the upward mobility of middle-class minority immigrants and their children, Neckerman et al. (1999) offer an expansion of segmented assimilation theory (Portez and Zhou 1993). While segmented assimilation theory offers three main paths of immigrant incorporation—incorporation into a middle-class white mainstream, incorporation into a minority underclass, or selective acculturation whereby immigrants hold on to elements of their home culture which simultaneously slows some aspects of acculturation while also offering protective factors—Neckerman et al. (1999) argue that a fourth path is possible: incorporation into a minority middle class. As they state, “In this menu of paths of adaptation, there is a curious omission: the minority middle class. Portes and Zhou do not suggest that middle-class African Americans, for
instance, might provide immigrants with a cultural framework or even a destination for assimilation” (Neckerman et al. 1999:946).

While Neckerman et al. (1999) provide a compelling argument about this fourth incorporation pathway, little is known about the processes through which immigrants incorporate into the minority middle class. In addition, though Neckerman et al. allude to variation in the minority middle-class pathway that stem from differences in middle-class minorities’ demographic and economic conditions (Neckerman et al. 1999:956), current research lacks empirical examinations of such variations.

In this chapter, I empirically explore multiple paths of incorporation into the minority middle class. I argue that, in addition to demographic and economic characteristics, school experiences and context powerfully shape paths of incorporation into the minority middle class, since schools are often key initial sites of incorporation and socialization for immigrant youth. This, in turn, leads to key differences in the process and meaning of incorporation into the minority middle-class.

I spotlight Asian and Latino¹⁵ 1.5- and second-generation immigrants and children of immigrants at Ranch High and Bonita High, and explore their formation and maintenance of what I heretofore call the immigrant work ethic identity. More than just a work ethic, this set of beliefs is often discussed by respondents as a collective identity—shared interracially and interethnically by recent immigrants and those raised by immigrants—that stem from struggles unique to the immigrant experience.

This identity is composed of at least three main components. First, struggles in both the sending country and/or as immigrants in the U.S. inform immigrant youth on “what it’s like” to

¹⁵ Majority Mexican, Vietnamese, and Filipino, though respondents’ countries of origin also include Guatemala, El Salvador, and Korea. My sample also includes a very small (n=2) sample of students with middle-Eastern (Lebanon, Iran) origins.
be socially and/or economically disadvantaged, and living in difficult circumstances (or, in the
case of the second generation, witnessing or hearing about their parents’ difficult circumstances)
motivates them to escape from their positions of disadvantage. Second, education is viewed as
the primary vehicle through which to escape positions of disadvantage and achieve upward
mobility, and a decidedly instrumental purpose is attached to school. Third, expending maximum
effort for academic success is seen as more than just an individualistic goal. Instead, working
hard in school is seen as a way to “give back” to parents and family for the sacrifices made
through the immigration process. Thus, academic effort is more than simply an investment in
one’s own future, but a duty to parents and family for the hardships that enabled opportunity.
These general beliefs are not unique to my respondents, have been documented and
foregrounded by past scholars (e.g., Suarez-Orozco 1987; Vallejo and Lee 2009), and is not
unanimously shared by all immigrants and children of immigrants (e.g., Portes and Rumbaut
2001; Portes and Zhou 1993).

I find that, while the immigrant work ethic identity is similarly present among immigrants
and children of immigrants in both schools, its framing vis-à-vis the “mainstream” population on
campus differs in noteworthy ways. In addition, I find between-school differences in how
immigrants of different nativity and class backgrounds relate to their coethnics. Differences in
these two types of relations, which are cited by past research (Neckerman et al. 1999) as
important types of relations that shape the minority culture of mobility, carry implications on
immigrant incorporation and identity formation more broadly.

At Ranch High, where immigrants (and racial minorities in general) are of lower social
status than the white native-born majority and the perceived immigrant-native divide is largely
determined by race, the immigrant work ethic identity represents a case of difference as a
Immigrants use the identity to create an alternative value system in response to one that subordinates them, and they deploy the identity as a reactive strategy to compare themselves favorably to native-born white students. The immigrant identity is constructed in strict opposition against native-born whites. Native-born white students, in turn, view immigrants as anti-social recluses or foreigners who lack efforts to assimilate, and who lack school spirit and participation in school activities (such as school dances and football games). The immigrant work ethic identity thus acts as a moral boundary that separates minority immigrants and native-born white students. Amidst these tense racial dynamics, immigrant coethnics across generational and class status establish a collective identity based on their shared ethnicity and shared marginalization.

While the immigrant work ethic identity similarly exists at Bonita High, where the immigrant-native divide is determined by nativity, the immigrant work ethic represents *difference as positional variation along a spectrum* of immigration trajectory or social mobility. In other words, immigrants at Bonita High are viewed as newcomers who are beginning the processes of upward social mobility and incorporation into U.S. society—processes familiar to many Bonita High students across race/ethnicity and economic background. The version of the immigrant work ethic identity at Bonita High is articulated as an identity in itself rather than an identity that is purposely in contrast to the native-born. Moreover, their native-born peers (both white and non-white) often acknowledge the immigrant work ethic identity, in part because many view the immigrants as reminiscent of themselves, their parents, or their relatives at an earlier time (either based on the immigrants’ immigrant status and/or their economically humble beginnings). However, the decreased dividing power of race/ethnicity obviates the need for immigrants to “band together” in solidarity in the face of marginalization as they do in Ranch.
High. Thus, although a mutual sense of empathy exists between recent immigrants and their native-born coethnics, generational status boundaries are more rigid in Bonita High.

Given immigration patterns and history in both the Ranch and Bonita communities, the overwhelming majority of the Asian and Latino immigrant students in my data are 1.5- or second-generation immigrants. Specifically, about half of all youth in the city of South Haven, where the Ranch and Bonita communities are located, are either immigrants themselves or are the child of immigrants. Of the immigrant population, about three-quarters immigrated after 1980. Moreover, the immigrant population at Ranch High and Bonita High share similar characteristics. For example, for the graduation cohorts of 2010-2015, 65% of Asians at Ranch High and 74% of Asians at Bonita High spoke a language other than English at home. Similarly, 66% of Latinos at Ranch High and 61% of Latinos at Bonita High speak a language other than English at home. The immigrants in my sample also share similar levels of parental education. Forty-one percent of Asians at Ranch High and 46% of Asians at Bonita High have at least one parent whose highest education level is college or above. For Latinos, 21% at Ranch High and 23% at Bonita High have at least one parent whose highest education level is college or above. Because they reside in the same metropolitan city (albeit in different communities), are immigrants from similar and recent waves of immigration, and share family background characteristics, I argue that the immigrant groups at Ranch High and Bonita High are comparable. Despite their similarities in origin and demographics, however, I show that their incorporation experiences, paths, and outcomes are powerfully divergent.

**Literature**

*The Minority Middle Class: An Expansion of Segmented Assimilation Theory*
For decades, immigration scholars have theorized about immigration incorporation pathways taken by post-1965 waves of immigrants and their descendants, whose paths and reception differ substantially from those of early European immigrants generations ago. Portes and Zhou (1993) introduce the concept of segmented assimilation, where contemporary immigrants take multiple paths to incorporate into different destinations—the white middle class, the minority underclass, or, in the case of selective acculturation, a simultaneous adoption of some host-society practices and the maintenance of some origin-culture practices.

Neckerman et al. (1999), however, point out a notable omission in the menu of incorporation destinations Portes and Zhou (1993) offer: incorporation into a minority middle class. Rather than assuming that incorporation into a minority destination necessarily means incorporation into a disadvantaged underclass, the authors propose an expansion of segmented assimilation theory that includes the minority middle class, where groups like middle-class Mexicans (Vallejo 2012), who are able to both achieve upward mobility and retain their ethnic identities, are a feasible incorporation destination. Rather than being a separate culture, the authors argue, the middle-class culture of mobility is a set of cultural elements that stems from a unique set of structural disadvantages, problems, and struggles associated with minorities’ upward mobility in U.S. society as they (a) come into contact with the white majority and (b) manage inter-class relations among coethnics. Moreover, this culture increases in salience with the racialization of identity (as minorities realize that their racial minority identities are relatively durable), increased movement into the mainstream (where subtle bias, exclusion, and marginalization affront them), and class formation (as emerging class differences groups begin to cause tension among co-ethnics). While Neckerman et al. (1999) argue that most non-white
immigrants experience these phenomena to some extent, the intensity of these experiences and struggles are contingent upon one’s demographic and economic circumstances. Though the authors acknowledge variance in the “minority middle-class” and the “minority culture of mobility,” little is known about (a) the differences in orientations, identities, and frames of understanding among the minority middle class, and (b) the processes that shape what “version” of the minority middle class immigrants end up in. For example, Neckerman et al.’s (1999) formulation of the factors that prompt some immigrants to adopt a minority culture of mobility leaves room for different levels of hostility. While the authors identify interactions with the white majority and managing interclass relations with the minority community as two important “classes of problems” (Neckerman et al. 1999:946) that ultimately give rise to the minority middle-class culture, they implicitly assume uniformity in how immigrants experience—and are shaped by—these relations. For example, it is likely that much variance exists in the degree of marginalization and hostility upwardly-mobile immigrants face in interactions with the white majority, as well as in the scope and depth of issues in managing interclass relations with the minority community. As such, given the likely variance in how upwardly-mobile immigrants experience these “classes of problems,” it is reasonable to expect diversity in the incorporation paths, experiences, and destinations of the minority middle-class.

Through their school experiences, immigrants and children of immigrants at both Ranch High and Bonita High, by and large, partake in incorporation into the minority middle class, as described by Neckerman et al. (1999). As students in middle-class suburban schools with sizable proportions of both middle-class minorities and middle-class native whites, they experience regular contact with whites and negotiate intra-class relations in their ethnic community—experiences that, according to Neckerman et al. (1999) argue, give rise to distinct problems faced
by upwardly-mobile minorities (such as pressure to conform to white “mainstream” norms and managing relations with poorer, and possibly resentful, co-ethnics). However, as other chapters illuminate, the “problems” that stem from increased contact with whites and increased exposure to intra-class relations differ in intensity between the two schools. For this reason, it is reasonable to expect that there is variance in incorporation pathways into the minority middle class that scholars have yet to fully examine. In this chapter, I study the construction and management of the immigrant work ethic identity as an illustration of how context influences upwardly-mobile immigrants’ identity formation and framing, which in turn leads them to take different incorporation pathways into the minority middle-class. These orientations and identities, forged during formative years, have the potential to be durable over time and into the life course (Crosnoe 2011).

How Immigration Influences Identity

A wealth of literature illuminates the powerful role of immigration in shaping the ethnic identities of immigrants and their children, especially during the formative adolescent years. As Rumbaut (2008:110) explains, “youths see and compare themselves in relation to those around them, based on their social similarity or dissimilarity with the reference groups that most directly affect their experiences—especially with regard to such socially visible and categorized markers as gender, phenotype, accent, language, name, and nationality.” Through these social comparisons, he argues, youth forge representations of who “we” and “they” are.

Crucial in this process of comparison and identity construction is the role of social context. Contexts of immigration influence the salience of ethnic self-awareness, such that experiences and expectations of discrimination typically set the stage for more salient ethnic
identities (Rumbaut 1994; Rumbaut 2005; Rumbaut 2008). Thus, many second-generation immigrants paradoxically have a more acute sense of ethnic identity than their parents—whose ethnicities were largely “taken for granted and assumed implicitly”—due to heightened experiences and feelings of marginality (Rumbaut 2005:126). Immigrants and their children who experience a hostile context of reception may forge a reactive ethnicity, where ethnicity is heightened in response to perceptions of threat, persecution, marginality, and exclusion (Aleinikoff and Rumbaut 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Rumbaut 2005; Rumbaut 2008).

Context of reception in the immigration experience shapes ethnic identity through both its macro components—such as demographics (Jimenez 2008; Waters 2009) and political climate (Massey 2007; Menjivar 2006; Portes and Borocz 1989; Zolberg 1999)—as well as its micro components—such as culture and boundaries (Alba and Nee 2003; Waters 2009). In his analysis of CILS data, Rumbaut (2005:144) identifies contextual factors that matter for ethnic identity formation—including regional location and type of school (inner-city/suburban; public/private)—and argues the significance of context lies in its power to “delimit youths’ exposure to social worlds; shape differential associations with peers in those contexts, and influence attendant modes of ethnic socialization and self-definition.”

While much is known about how immigration shapes ethnic identity formation, less is known about how the immigrant experience shapes the formation of identities beyond ethnic identity. Just as immigrant youth forge ethnic identities in context, and vis-à-vis their surrounding peers, they also forge other aspects of identity. For example, many immigrant groups are faced with reconciling the individualistic-focused ideologies of American culture with the more collectivist ideologies of their ethnic culture (Rhee et al. 1995). The individual versus collective orientations have important ramifications on identity, as they make up the ideological
backbone in the development of goals, financial decisions, and the extent to which one feels obligated to “give back” to one’s ethnic community (Dawson 1994; Hochschild 1995; Lamont 2000; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis et al. 1990; Vallejo and Lee 2009).

The Immigrant Work Ethic Identity

The work ethic among immigrant populations has often been explored in studies of immigrant incorporation. Employers’ preference for immigrants over their native-born co-ethnics, due to their perceived higher productivity, stronger work ethic, and willingness to do undesirable work, is well documented (e.g., Lee 1998; Waldinger 1997). In schools, an explicit valuation of education serves as a mobility-promoting factor for many immigrant populations who view education as their primary opportunity to achieve upward mobility (e.g., Caplan et al. 1992; Kao and Tienda 1995; Rumbaut 1990; Sue and Okazaki 1990). Even in general public opinion, immigrants are assumed to work harder than natives (Lapinski et al. 1997; Segovia and Defever 2010).

To be sure, the importance of work ethic as a powerful shaper of identity and dignity is not unique to immigrant populations, as work ethic is a source of meaning, self-worth, and identity among general populations in contemporary society (Cheney et al. 2008; Dutton et al. 2010). In her study of working-class men in the U.S. and France, Lamont (2002) finds that working-class men maintain dignity and a sense of self-worth by constructing alternative hierarchies of worth based on moral responsibility and discipline as an alternative to economic standards of success, which relegates them to subordinate positions of the social hierarchy. Like Lamont, Lucas (2011) finds that blue-collar miners construct a sense of dignity and identity based on moral standards and work ethic. In their study of “dirty work”—work that is commonly
perceived as “disgusting or degrading” (Ashford and Kreiner 1999:413), Ashford and Kreiner (1999) find that workers strive to achieve dignity and a positive identity through ideological reframing and strategically selective social comparisons.

While work ethic as an identity component is not unique to immigrants, I focus on immigrant work ethic as it pertains to immigrant identity formation. Specifically, I foreground what I call the *immigrant work ethic identity*, a collective identity shared across racial and ethnic lines, that is believed to stem from struggles unique to the immigrant experience. This collective identity consists of three main components that have been discussed in past research. First, the experience of immigration, or of hearing parents’ immigration stories, inform immigrant youth on the hardships of being socially and/or economically disadvantaged, which in turn pushes them towards escaping their positions of disadvantage. Suarez-Orozco (1987:295) finds that the “hard existence” and “misery” associated with immigration often motivates youth to move upwardly mobile to escape such circumstances. Other scholars reach similar conclusions (e.g., Yoo and Kim 2010; Zhou et al. 2008). Second, the functional role of education is emphasized, as it is viewed as the primary—if not sole—means of achieving upward mobility for immigrant youth. The weight placed on education across different groups of immigrants is well documented (e.g., Kao and Tienda 1995; Rumbaut 1990; Schneider and Lee 1998; Sue and Okazaki 1990; Suarez-Orozco 1987). The third component of the identity is the idea that goals of upward mobility reflect more than simply individualistic goals, but rather, duties to “give back” to the family (and sometimes even the community) for the sacrifices that enabled better opportunities (Suarez-Orozco 1987; Vallejo and Lee 2009; Yoo and Kim 2010). Importantly, not all immigrants and children of immigrants share this identity, as past research points to a plethora of immigrant
orientations, including oppositional orientations that facilitate downward mobility (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993).

**Findings**

In what follows, I present the findings in five sections. First, I show evidence that, in both schools, immigrant students articulate sentiments consistent with the three components of the immigrant work ethic identity I describe above. Next, I detail immigrants’ framing of the identity at Ranch High, and follow it with a section that details native students’ perceptions of immigrants in relation to the immigrant work ethic identity. In doing so, I show how the identity distinctly shapes the immigrant-native divide. I then do the same for Bonita High school in the two sections that follow.

*The Immigrant Work Ethic Identity at Both Schools*

Immigrants at both Ranch High and Bonita High articulate the three components of the work ethic identity described. First, there is the general belief that the immigrant experience grants immigrants and their children an intimate familiarity with struggle and hardship, which can serve as a powerful motivating factor that propels one to overcome obstacles in hopes of a better or “easier” future. Many immigrant students explain that they—or their parents—have seen “what it’s like” to struggle, and this first-hand knowledge motivates them to deviate as far as possible from those familiar economic and social hardships. Omar, a lower-income Latino male, explains:

I guess that the ones that are like, just came here or their parents immigrated here, and are lower income—they study more because they want—no, they *need*—to succeed. I guess they want to do more help their parents out. They just want to succeed, they don’t want to be living in those conditions anymore. And they just try to get something more for the
future and stuff I guess. The richer white kids, they’re kind of “whatever” but they still do their work. They’re already, like, looking forward to, like, “Oh, yeah, my dad owns this, my parent owns that, and like I could just get a job there.” So it’s not as pressing to work really hard. Some people, like, they already have scholarships, because they know people and stuff. But for people like us, we always want to have better grades than the majority of the students, because we want to succeed.

Angelo, a middle-income Latino male who is one of the few non-white members of a well-recognized group of jocks on campus, explains that the majority of immigrant youth occupy both extremes when it comes to academic effort—maximum effort (most immigrants) or minimum effort. Which end of the spectrum immigrants occupy, Angelo explains, depends on how immigrants make sense of their (typically) low-SES origins and struggles:

Angelo: Well, the people who come from lower backgrounds and are newer arrivals, they either enjoy school a lot or they don’t enjoy it at all. They either try a lot or not at all. It’s kind of like they’re either stuck in a rut or they want to get out. For people who come from a wealthy white background they just want to have a good time so they’re somewhere in the middle.

Interviewer: Why are the less fortunate students on the two extremes and then the wealthier ones in the middle?

Angelo: I think it's because the wealthier students didn’t have to make a choice to, like, dig themselves out, or they haven’t had to make the choice yet to dig themselves out or to stay where they are. Whereas the people from the lower backgrounds—they either had to make the choice to dig themselves out, go to college, do really well in school, or they just give up and say, “This is where I am so I’m just going to mess around and screw up.” Of course there can always be exceptions. But in general, the wealthier students—they’re okay with where they are. They’re not motivated in the same way and by the same things that the lower background people are.

Secondly, education is viewed as a crucial if not sole vehicle through which to achieve upward mobility and rise from humble beginnings. As such, education and academic success carries heavy weight, as students see education as their only chance of upward mobility. Amid (a middle-income middle-Eastern male), one of the most admired students among Bonita High’s teachers, and also a student leader in multiple academic circles and organizations, explains how his parents’ immigration struggles shape his identity and motivation as a star student:

Interviewer: Who makes up your biggest support system? Who encourages you to
succeed the most?
Amid: My mom.
Interviewer: How does she do it?
Amid: Well, she uses herself and my dad as an example. Like, “We didn't study. Now, we have to worry about these bills here and there.” It’s like a, “You have to do well in school and do better than us” kind of thing. They had to sacrifice their education because of what was going on back at home. To immigrate here. So they never got a good education, and that’s why they’ve had difficulty with money and stuff earlier on. And so they want me to protect myself from all that by getting a good education and good grades. So I have expectations to meet.

This narrative, repeated often by his parents, is at the heart of Amid’s identity as a scholar, and is one that he plays back again and again to himself throughout his academic endeavors—both during times of triumph and times of struggle, when he is in need of a reminder of why he must persevere. Magdalena, a low-income Latino female, similarly discusses how her late grandmother often stressed to her and her siblings the instrumental role of school as the key to upward mobility:

She would just come and visit. And every time she did, she always inspired us and gave us good talks. She understands us. She told us, “I went through so many hardships and difficult and terrible things and I don’t want this to happen to you guys and I want you guys to have a better life than we did, and a better life than your mom too, like have a better education, focus on school.” She’d say, like, it’s the only way to get a better life than her or my mom.

Finally, a key component of the immigrant work ethic identity is the idea that goals of success and mobility are more than simply individualistic goals. Instead, just as academic success is viewed as the only way to achieve upward mobility, so too is upward mobility deemed the only way to “give back” to parents and family for the sacrifices made throughout the immigration process. In other words, immigrants and their children feel a binding obligation to succeed not only for their own sake but also for the sake of their families and communities. Michael, the low-income Asian male whose mother was forced to work overtime and sacrifice her health to provide for the family after his father left them, explains how his goals of becoming
a doctor are directly tied to his mother. More than just for his personal fulfillment, Michael’s goals are for the greater purpose of honoring, “paying back,” and eventually providing for, his family.

Interviewer: Who motivates you to succeed?
Michael: My mother. My mother, she always said to be a doctor and I really didn’t take that to account at first. That was actually my personal statement for college. If I had my personal statement I would show you. I pretty much wrote about how I wanted to be a doctor after my dad left. Because I had no way to pay my mother back for all she did for us. So I guess this is me—I’m traditional. My friends consider me traditional. I’m cultural. I see it as a way of paying my mother back for what she’s done for me.

At first glance, there appears to be little that is remarkable or noteworthy in how immigrants in both schools similarly conceptualize their academic work ethic vis-à-vis their (or their parents’) immigration experience. Accounts of the immigrant work ethic identity echo narratives, sentiments, and themes already widely discussed by scholars throughout decades of immigration research. However, though the general components of the identity are similar, it is the framing of the identity that differs markedly between immigrants at the two schools. The framing of the immigrant work ethic identity drives differences not only in how immigrants and children of immigrants relate to white and black natives, but also in how immigrants at the two schools forge identities vis-à-vis groups perceived as in- or out-groups. More than just temporary phases of adolescence, these identities—forged partially through group relations—carry important ramifications into the life course (Crosnoe 2011) and powerfully shape youths’ conceptions of what it means to be an immigrant (or a child of immigrants).

Ranch High: The Immigrant Work Ethic Identity

At Ranch High, the immigrant work ethic identity is typically expressed in terms of social comparison, where immigrants contrast their strong work ethic and valuation of education
to their native peers’ weaker work ethic and penchant for prioritizing their social lives and hobbies over academic excellence. As Chapter 4 outlines, Asian and Latino immigrants are marginalized as subordinate Others in the Ranch High social hierarchy. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, immigrants describe their work ethic and goals of upward mobility in strongly comparative terms, contrasting “us” (immigrants and minorities) with “them” (middle-class whites). In reaction to the marginality and discrimination they face at school, immigrant students, through strategies such as the management and maintenance of the immigrant work ethic identity, construct an alternate moral hierarchy where they compare more favorably to their native peers.

Implicit in the moral social comparison is the notion that there are fundamental and inherently unique facets of the immigrant experience to which “they”—the white natives—simply cannot relate. Specifically, immigrants at Ranch High rely on two main explanations, grounded in the immigrant experience, of why their work ethic differs markedly from their native peers’. First, there is a general consensus among Asian and Latino immigrants—a majority of whom originate from low-income backgrounds—that natives do not “know what it’s like” to be poor, or do not understand the struggles associated with being a low-income immigrant (or child of immigrants). As Vanessa, a middle-income Latino female, succinctly summarizes, “Rich white people just have everything handed to them throughout their lives so they don’t know what it’s like to work for it.”

The idea that immigrants and natives at Ranch High live drastically different lifestyles is a commonly expressed one, as Jackie, a low-income Asian female, illustrates.

Jackie: I think a lot the kids here get bored and so they like partying until drunk because they don’t have anything better to do. I think I would be like that too if I was, like, comfortable at home and there was a lot of money and I knew I’d be fine. I would definitely not try so hard. But for me, there’s more of a push for me to get out of my situation and I just want to learn to be a better person and, like, I just want to do a lot. I would say I think that I have a lot more experience with like knowing like the
realities of life compared to them. Like maybe they haven’t really been exposed to those things that I have and so I know what I actually kind of want and they’re kind of just, like, floating by like living more in like the moment, whereas I’m like trying to work for my future.

Interviewer: Right. So when you said the “realities of life,” what do you mean specifically?

Jackie: Just like hardships that people go through. What it’s like to live in hardship. Like, deeper issues. Like, well my dad growing up he was like—he had a lot of problems. There was a gambling problem and then an alcohol problem—like, he used to be an alcoholic when I was a baby and, like, then there was like a drug addiction and like my nephews, they get into a lot of trouble. And my half-sister ran away from home. And my nephew that’s the same age as me, I think he might be in juvie right now. He got expelled from school and then was involved in gangs and he was in juvie. Then he got into different juvie and like my other nephew, I used to be close to him but he’s getting into that stuff now too.

As Jackie’s account suggests, immigration and poverty interact to produce worldviews that native students are distanced from, and the lack of an intimate familiarity with hardship translates to lower motivation to work hard in school.

As Norman, a low-income Filipino male, explained, immigrants have far more distance than natives to cover in their path of upward mobility, and thus must necessarily adopt stronger work ethics and expend more effort at school to succeed.

We actually work harder than the rest of the kids here. We have somewhere to move up to. Other kids, they’re already born into wealthy families or their families have been here for a long time, like many generations, so they don’t have much to move up. So our parents are pushier to push us up. Like my dad for example. He was really involved in getting my brother to go to school in the Philippines after high school because he was against him going to community college because my dad saw from my cousins that people don’t have good finishing rates if they just go to a community college.

In short, the general immigrant perspective on their work ethic identity is reminiscent of the African-American proverb, “You have to work twice as hard to get half as far,” or the “black tax” (Bond et al. 2010)—the idea that disadvantaged groups are “taxed” for their membership in a low-status group and thus must work harder than more privileged groups to achieve the same levels of success. Because immigrants perceive that the difference between where they are and
where they wish to be socioeconomically is far greater for them than for their native peers, they also perceive that the purpose and goals of attending high school also differ between them and their native peers:

Amanda: My parents push me hard in school because they don’t want me to live the way we live right now. They want me and my sister to get out of it. Get out of it and do better. To do much better on my own, get a job and support the family back because they've been supporting me since I was a kid. And the wealthy kids, they don’t have to do that because they’re already fine. And that school wise, they’re popular. They have friends. All they care about is having fun, partying with all friends. High school for them is about friends, partying, having fun.
Interviewer: And for you?
Amanda: For me it’s going to college. I would like to have fun too but can’t have as much “fun” as them. That’s not my first priority.

As Amanda reports, school serves an almost exclusively instrumental purpose for her and her fellow immigrant students, and she is not afforded the luxury of building a social life or partaking in extracurricular activities the way her native peers do. This sharply dichotomous contrast between “us” and “them” represents the stark social and moral division between immigrants and natives at Ranch High. To be sure, such dichotomies and narratives are often exaggerated, as we have already seen. However, they serve the important purpose of positive representation as a self-defensive response to perceptions of marginalization or subordination (Lamont 2009).

The second often-articulated explanation of why immigrants at Ranch High claim to exhibit stronger work ethics than natives is that the parents of immigrant children are stricter about academic achievement than the parents of natives. As many students explain, this discrepancy in parental pressure to succeed in school stems from cultural differences and/or the fact that, unlike their middle-class native peers, immigrant students have less to fall back on if they fail.
Amanda explains the cultural differences that drive differences between immigrants’ and natives’ work ethics:

Asian parents are strict and want us to have higher education—to be better than wealthy people. Just want everything to be like 100% A or stuff like that. High expectations. So we work harder. We are pushed by our parents and are pressured by them. And wealthy kids, they maybe get a little punished when they don't do homework, but that's it. We get—they *nag*. They nag us everyday. But the wealthy kids, they only get punished for a day or two. But not like us. We—Asian kids get lectured every day until they finish school. And I don't see the wealthy kid get lectured or anything like that. They don't care if their parents yell at them or they have low grades in class and stuff like that.

Amanda’s sentiments echo those common in public and scholarly discourse, though empirical research challenges such simplistic cultural explanations (Lee and Zhou 2015; Lee 2007; Lee and Zhou 2004; Zhou et al. 2008). The idea that immigrants’ parents value education more than natives’ parents likely stems from a component of the immigrant work ethic identity itself: the belief that education offers the greatest opportunities of upward mobility.

As Amanda suggests, part of natives’ parents’ leniency towards academic success is explained by the perception that, given their already-comfortable life circumstances, natives have more “air bags” (Putnam 2015) to fall back on if they fail. Trung, a middle-income Asian male, further explains this sentiment.

Asian kids, especially the ones from poorer families, they tend to do better in school. We get hit if we don’t! And higher income white kids, their parents are rich, so their parents are planning out their future. All their activities up to college. And if they fall back in school it’s okay because they could have connections to college and good jobs and stuff. And us Asians, our parents tell us like, “You have to study and we want you to be rich and successful for *us*.” And others, the wealthy parents, they are really easy with their kids. Spoil them more. Wouldn’t hit them. And they have more money and time to do hobbies instead of schoolwork, so their grades are more average.

According to Trung, pressures to succeed academically are lower for natives because their parents are actively involved in—or even dominate—their post-secondary and career planning. Immigrants, on the other hand, not only lack the cultural capital, but bear the additional burden
of repaying their parents, through academic success, for the sacrifices endured in the immigration process.

Importantly, these findings apply similarly across generational status, as generational status is not a significant dividing force among Asian and Latino students at Ranch High. While generational status-based boundaries typically exist in contemporary school contexts (as in Bonita High, discussed below; see also Pyke and Dang 2003; Talmy 2004), immigrant students at Ranch High rarely identify this differentiation. Instead, race trumps these differentiations, as coethnics regardless of class or nativity are viewed as fellow in-group members who are similarly marginalized as foreign Others on campus. In the eyes of disadvantaged and/or recent immigrants, American-born coethnics represent their ultimate incorporation destination: a group who, despite their adaptation progress, remain foreign and excluded from the mainstream (Tuan 1998).

In sum, the immigrant work identity at Ranch High is presented by immigrant students as an identity exclusive to immigrants and children of immigrants who share the struggles and hardships that are inherently unique to the immigrant experience. Typically articulated through exaggerated dichotomous portraits of “us” versus “them,” the exclusivity of the immigrant work ethic identity is a reactive response to the social exclusion that many Asian and Latino immigrants at Ranch High face. By employing extreme social comparison to conceptualize the immigrant work ethic identity, immigrants use the identity to construct an alternate morality-based hierarchy (Lamont 2009) where they rank higher than their native peers.

*Ranch High’s “Mainstream”: Perspectives of Immigrants*
Alba and Nee (2009:12) define the mainstream as “that part of the society within which ethnic and racial origins have at most minor impacts on life chances or opportunities.” I thus identify the “mainstream” of each school by studying the extent to ethnic and racial origins impact the opportunities and statuses of different racial/ethnic groups. Specifically, I focus on who occupies high-status groups and organizations on campus (e.g., based on general popularity, student leadership and student government, etc.), as well as which group(s) exhibit a sense of entitled belonging and ownership of their school.

Ranch High’s immigrant-native relations are strongly reminiscent of early accounts of straight-line assimilation, where mobility meant assimilation into a “mainstream” (white) society. Quantitative, ethnographic, and interview data quickly establish that this “mainstream” at Ranch High is indeed unequivocally (middle-class) white, both numerically and socially. Numerically, middle-class whites make up the largest group at school—a fact explicitly emphasized on the front page of the school newspaper when the school released its new demographic statistics for the year. Socially, middle-class whites disproportionately receive the limelight in pep rallies, school news, student leadership, and everyday conversation.

The immigrant work ethic identity, as it interacts with Ranch High’s social context, alienates immigrant students from natives. For Asian immigrants, the identity is interpreted by natives as an unhealthy work-life imbalance, as Asians are seen as an anti-social, odd group that studies excessively and does not make efforts to mingle or socialize with other groups. For Latino immigrants, the immigrant work ethic identity is in constant opposition to the negative work ethic stereotypes held against them by natives. These negative stereotypes are partially perpetuated by the low numbers of Latinos in the high academic track—an observation reported by many natives in interviews. As a result, Latino immigrant students often grapple with the fact
that an aspect of their identity that they have internalized as real and meaningful is at stark odds with how they are perceived by native peers. Below, I discuss the interaction between social context and the immigrant work ethic identity separately for Asians and then Latinos.

Asians at Ranch High, as discussed in other chapters, are known to cluster in the hallway behind the front office. Often described as the most “sticky” (social cohesive) racial group on campus, they are viewed as overly “clique-y” and uninterested in interacting with other groups:

Kiera (middle-income white female): Well, our Asians are kind of all—no, I don’t want to say all—but like they’re in a lot of clubs together like the Key Club and Asian Club and stuff. Like in a way I think they’re kind of just separated. They keep to themselves, and like they’re quiet in classroom and stuff. But, they’re not like weak or anything and that’s not the right word but they’re like on a different—they kind of just keep to themselves a lot. And they don’t want to make the effort to mix with other groups. They just stay with each other and study and do their own thing near the office.

Abby (middle-income white female): Well, they’re smart. They study a lot. They’re really—they’re really—I guess you can say anti-social. Like, they’re always together. You don’t ever see any Asian people mixing with Mexicans or blacks. Everyone else will mix or at least talk to others. Like, most people will have a Mexican friend or black friend. If you’re white. But it just seems kinda like, the Asians stick to themselves. They’re their own group. Like, we don’t even really know them. It’s hard to know them if they stick to themselves.

These sentiments are almost unanimously voiced by white students at Ranch High. As Abby’s quote reveals, Asians are often frowned upon for stubbornly sticking to their “own kind” and refusing to assimilate—or even incorporate—into the mainstream. The irony in Abby’s definition of “mixing,” however, is notable: according to Abby, simply having one friend of a different racial group—which she incorrectly accuses Asians of lacking—constitutes “mixing.” Abby’s account thus illustrates that even though Asians are not the only group that “stick[s] to themselves,” they are the most visible group with the most visibly detectable segregation. Their segregation is starker to their peers for several reasons.
First, from the middle-class white students’ perspectives, Asians are much more physically visible than other groups, since the hallway where the majority of Asians congregate is adjacent to “white” spaces (see Chapter 6). Second, while Latinos and blacks sometimes do mix, due to residing in the same urban neighborhoods and taking the same busses together, Asians’ mixing—when they do mix—typically occurs only within pan-Asian groups (e.g., Filipino, Vietnamese, Chinese) that look phenotypically similar and thus is not perceived as “mixing.” Third, Asians, as a group, have lower participation rates in “visible” extracurricular activities\(^\text{16}\) such as sports—activities that do include a small number of Latinos and blacks.

Because Asians cluster among themselves and study excessively, many natives report, they are often perceived as odd or “not normal” by their native peers. Images of the socially awkward nerd are evoked as natives describe their Asian peers. For example, Natasha, a mixed-race (non-Asian) low-income female reports:

The Asian kids here, they’re kinda weird. They’re interesting…like they speak to themselves. And like they play Pokémon or Yu-Gi-Oh. Like, oh my God, they play Yu-Gi-Oh in the library. Yeah, like typical Asian nerds with rolling backpacks and stuff.

As Natasha illustrates, perhaps because little is known about the Asian students on campus, stereotypical interests of anime (Japanese animation) and stereotypical images of the nerd are attributed to them.

Another related portrayal of Asians at Ranch High is that, because they study so much, they “stay out of your way,” unlike other racial minorities on campus. Both Ivan’s and Wayne’s nonchalant accounts are representative of those of their native peers:

Ivan (middle-income white male): I think they’re quieter. Because the school came out with the Racial [Demographics] Report. There’s actually a lot more Asian kids than black kids. So I think they’re quieter and just kind of school-oriented. They definitely stick to

\(^{16}\) Extracurricular activities that have high Asian membership include: the Key Club (and other community service/volunteer organizations that are known to look good in college applications) and the badminton team.
themselves. But like, no, I think it’s good if you stick to your own kind and keep quiet and have your own opinions. Fine by me.

Wayne (middle-income bi-racial black/white male who identifies as white): Asians, they’re in their own world and keep to their own groups more. But I don’t have a problem with them, like they don’t get in my way or anything.

While such accounts are typically presented with positive tones (e.g., Asians are better than Latinos and blacks in that they “keep quiet” and stay out of one’s way), they ultimately paint the portrait of Asians as the non-disruptive, yet still foreign, Other. Though they are “weird,” they are also applauded for their general tendency to not disturb the fabric of everyday “mainstream” life.

While Asians at Ranch High are viewed as non-disruptive yet slightly off-kilter nerds who keep to themselves and study all day, Latinos are perceived quite differently—though still very similarly “other.” Like Asians, they are often described as sticking to their own kind, making little effort to mix or mingle with out-group members:

Peter (middle-income white male): You can walk across the quad and see so many people you've never seen before. Just from a few feet to a few feet in another direction you will get to a completely different conversation, a completely different topic, a completely different set of transcripts and GPAs, family backgrounds. It’s very interesting especially from a people-watching standpoint. Sometimes it can be difficult to move in that kind of “know where you're at whether or not you're in troubled water” so to speak. It’s definitely a racial thing. I think the Hispanic students stick together a lot. Part of that is I hear a lot of them speak Spanish to each other, so part of it is a language thing. It’s like their thing. To speak Spanish. They always speak Spanish together.

As stated about Asians above, Latinos are not more likely than other racial/ethnic groups to cluster homogeneously at the highly-segregated school. However, as with Asians, Latinos’ clustering is salient for a number of reasons. First, almost opposite from Asians, their sheer numbers on campus make them a more salient, ubiquitous, and potentially threatening group. At 32%, their representation trails behind that of whites by only 10%. Second, as Peter articulated above, the Spanish language plays a powerfully significant role in the perceived salience of
Latinos’ clustering. The perception that they “always speak Spanish together” both further marks them as outsiders and, more importantly, represents an exclusivity that natives resent. The use of Spanish, from natives’ point of view, excludes those who do not understand the language, and is often perceived as an indicator that Latinos (like Asians) do not care to mix with others. Third, Latinos are a politically-charged group in the community, due to local politics revolving around busing, national discourses on immigration and legality, and the generally politically conservative community members who reside in the Ranch community. These three factors thus load Latinos’ clustering with significant meaning and salience.

While Asians are presumed to be academically-savvy, socially-awkward bookworms, Latinos are seen as academically-struggling underachievers who do not prioritize education. Natives often report that Latinos’ alleged disregard for education stems from their disadvantaged backgrounds, where poverty, broken families, and “distractions” from living in bad neighborhoods consume their lives and bar them from focusing on schoolwork.

Patrick (middle-income white male): Traditionally, we do get a lot of immigrants and they’re just either a) started off and b) they’re kind of like not in good situation at home. I met a lot of kids I know that—I don’t know them personally, but I’ve heard that there are some kids who, like, have to work after school and do other things. And that takes away from schoolwork.

Samantha (middle-income white female): The Mexicans at our school tend to come from less well off families. People from families that don’t make a lot of money also have more distractions and stuff happens at home, so they don’t always do the best in school.

Andy (middle-income white male): Lots of the Mexicans here are neglected by their parents and they’re sort of taking it out on you. They’re troubled. You can tell that they have problems other than having a bad attitude. Like there’s something at home. So they cause trouble and do poorly in school.

Natives implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) suggest, however, that poverty and family structure alone do not completely account for Latinos’ weak academics. Patrick, the middle-income white
male who discussed above how Latinos’ busy schedules conflicts with their schooling, offers genetic explanations of why Latinos are unable to overcome their disadvantaged backgrounds and hardships to prioritize school:

Interviewer: So you mentioned earlier that some of the immigrant kids have to work after school and it messes up their schoolwork. How about you? You seem to have a busy schedule too, being on the swim team and all the clubs you’re in.

Patrick: Well, like, I personally think that intelligence is kind of genetic. My dad is really, really smart. And so like I never had a problem with school, even when I’m busy. Like, I haven’t gone straight A’s but then again, like, I also have this problem of not applying myself. Like I get really lazy and I take naps a lot. But if I wanted to, I’d be a better student.

Interviewer: How about the immigrant students? Those who have to work and stuff?

Patrick: They might not be as genetically gifted with, like, just picking up stuff as fast.

Importantly, not all natives believe that their Latino peers have poor work ethics. However, the small number of native interviewees who report that Latinos work hard in school typically shrug off or dismiss their peers’ work ethic, as Ray does:

My Mexican friends, they tend to work a little harder than I do. I think it’s because they have less stuff to distract them at home. Like, I get easily distracted by my iPad and other technology like video games and stuff, but they don’t have as much of those kinds of distractions at home so they’re able to do better in school.

Natives at Ranch High rarely view their Latino peers as hard workers academically, and when they do, they are quick to downplay it or explain it away. In sum, though the majority of both Asian and Latino students similarly adhere to the immigrant work ethic identity, their native peers perceive their work ethics very differently. For both groups, the identity is a social liability. For Asians, the identity comes at a cost of their social lives, as it is seen as the reason for their anti-social and “weird” behavior. For Latinos, on the other hand, it is an identity that they are not granted rights to—regardless of whether or not Latinos possess the identity, they are regarded as underachievers who do not prioritize or work hard enough in school.
Bonita High: The Immigrant Work Ethic Identity

Immigrants at Bonita High typically articulate the immigrant work ethic identity through detailed personal reflections, where they offer self-reflective narratives of how their immigration experiences shaped specific facets of their choices, struggles, and identities. While Ranch High immigrants presented their immigrant work ethic identity in terms of social comparison, Bonita High immigrants presented their identities in and of themselves, and void of comparative claims against their black and white native peers’ work ethics.

Descriptions of the immigrant work ethic identity typically emerge as personal accounts of one’s struggle and obstacles, or in discussions of what motivates one to work hard in school. For example, Raquel, a low-income Latino female, exhibits the identity as she discusses her segmented involvement with athletics at Bonita High.

I never struggled in elementary school. In middle school I had like 3.8s and stuff. Then I got to high school. I got distracted. I mean I’ve never gone below like 3.0. I don’t know. I think my lowest one was like 2.8. That was freshman year. I don’t know. I know that’s always been because I was distracted. Friends and boyfriends and like…I don’t know. High school really like…freshman year I had so much fun. I did so many things. I joined track. I made new friends. It was fun. It was a fun year. It did kind of affect my grades. So obviously this year I’m taking school really seriously and stuff. I can’t afford to have fun and just join a sport. I don’t have that freedom now—that freedom to just play and have fun.

Importantly, Raquel’s account, unlike those of many Ranch High immigrant students, does not carry undertones of resentment or out-group judgment or exclusion. Instead, she presents the immigrant work ethic identity by telling a narrative of how the identity concretely impacted her school life, without making social comparative claims that present her native peers in an unflattering light. Whereas the immigrant work ethic identity framing necessarily relied on social comparisons that present natives in an unflattering light at Ranch High, the identity in Bonita
High stands as an identity in and of itself, and its framing does not strictly rely on negative portrayals of the “Other.”

Magdalena, a low-income Latino female, echoes similar themes as she discusses the identity through her account of her struggles as a 1.5-generation immigrant.

Juggling school and work hours affects my health and schoolwork sometimes. My well-being overall. My friends don’t really understand why I still work so hard to help my dad and family even though my dad, he’s crazy. Yeah, they don’t understand. They tell me, “Why?” Like, why do I still give him so much of my work money and please him? I was like, “Oh, I don’t know. I have so many things. I need to help my dad because he has done so much for me.” So it’s time for me to give back. For all they went through for us.

Despite an emotionally distressing and abusive father, Magdalena’s commitment to repay her parents for their sacrifices (such as leaving everything behind in Guatemala and struggling to provide for their families) via academic success runs deep, as is the case with many of her immigrant peers. She discusses many struggles that stem from her low-income immigrant background, such as getting whipped as a five year-old by her father for not being able to understand and translate the English news on television and working almost full time at a local grocery store to help support her financially-struggling parents who have trouble finding stable jobs in the community, partially due to their poor English. However, though it is tacitly understood in the interview that these circumstances are atypical for middle-class native students, never in her account of struggle does Magdalena make assertions about her more privileged native-born peers.

In addition to stories of struggle, Bonita High immigrants also exhibit the immigrant work ethic identity through their accounts of the motivation factors behind their academic effort. For example, Kevin, a low-income Asian male, describes what motivates him to have one of the best academic records in his graduating class and pursue dentistry:
Well, I wanted to do something like—I mean I kind of want to have the—I know people say like money isn’t everything, you know, like you’re not necessarily going to be happy when you have money but then like I feel like money—I mean, I kind of like want to like a life where I could, like, it’s really easy. My family didn’t really have that when I was growing up, because my parents had to work so hard at their shop and never had a break. Money wasn’t—isn’t—super easy to come by. So I know I’ll have to spend a lot of time in school I guess, and dentistry school is like another four years, but after that I would want to live like a life where I can do whatever I feel like, without the worries my parents have to worry about.

Kevin’s narrative, as he tells it, embodies all three components of the immigrant work ethic identity: watching his immigrant parents struggle though their trinkets shop to make barely enough money to send Kevin to SAT-prep courses instilled within him a commitment to repay them for their hard work through succeeding in school and establishing himself in a career that can grant him and his parents an “easy” life—something they have not quite yet encountered. Like other immigrant students in Bonita High, Kevin presents the immigrant work ethic identity as a foundational part of his identity and motivation as his scholar, but does not discuss it in opposition to white or native-born students as Ranch High immigrants do. In contrast to many immigrant students at Ranch High, Kevin does not present the immigrant work ethic identity as an alternate moral hierarchy constructed in response to feelings of marginalization. For most Bonita High immigrants, the immigrant work ethic identity is simply a foundational facet of their personal narrative that shapes their worldview, choices, and scholarly pursuits.

_Bonita High’s “Mainstream”: Perspectives of Immigrants_

Employing the same definition and methods to discern who makes up the “mainstream” on Bonita High’s campus as I do with Ranch High’s campus above, I find that the mainstream at Bonita High is starkly different. Though Asians make up the numerical majority, the group dynamics at the school (see Chapter 4) create a context where, in contrast to Ranch High, there is
no single race/ethnicity that is considered the obvious “mainstream” native group. Perhaps because the numerical majorities (Asians and Latinos are the two largest groups on campus, at 48% and 21%, respectively) are composed of almost-exclusively 1.5- and second-generation immigrants, the conception of a white “mainstream” is not present on campus.\footnote{Importantly, while students acknowledge the cultural significance of whiteness as representing “American-ness,” as depicted by the media and larger society, whites are actually not seen as the dominant group. This is likely because of the smaller proportion of white students (17%) and the integrative group dynamics at school. Observational data generally confirm the students’ claims.} Unlike at Ranch High, the students who are of high social status (e.g., in student leadership, pep rallies, everyday conversation, etc.) are racially and ethnically diverse. Thus, the “mainstream” at Bonita High is more akin to the “tossed salad” conception, where it is composed of a conglomerate of races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds that speak fluent English (e.g., not in the ESL curricular track) and adopt popular culture, such as music and styles of attire.

For empirical purposes, I begin my discussion of Bonita High’s mainstream with native white students’ perspectives, even though the mainstream at Ranch High and Bonita High are starkly different. In doing so, I allow for the comparability of native white students’ perspective at the two schools. For the most part, white students at Bonita High articulate perspectives of immigrants that are similar as those articulated by their non-white native peers. However, non-white (mostly second-generation) natives’ perspectives often echo additional sentiments that are concretely grounded in personal experience, which adds dimension to the mainstream perspective. I thus complete my analysis of Bonita High’s mainstream perspectives with non-white natives’ voices.

While white natives at Ranch High dismiss their immigrant peers’ work ethic as non-existent (Latino immigrants) or as a cause of their anti-social (Asian immigrants) or non-
assimilatory (both Latinos and Asians) behavior patterns, white natives at Bonita High generally acknowledged and spoke highly of their immigrant peers’ work ethic and valuation of education.

Though pointing out that her immigrant peers are diverse in their work ethic orientations, Candace articulates the valuation of education held by most of her immigrant peers at Bonita High. Moreover, while many white natives at Ranch High cited their Latino peers’ lower academic achievement as evidence of their poor academic work ethic, Candace explains that “success” is relative and variable across individuals from different life circumstances:

Candace: There are some immigrants who come from low-income families where they think they can just settle for that [low-income] lifestyle. That that’s what they’re gonna end up with and they’re fine with it. But mostly you have kids from other countries who come from low-income families that take every chance that they can with their academics and opportunities to get out there so they can have the best future they can make for themselves. With education and with money and stuff like that. Some of them may because they have nothing at home and this is their only way to get away from their personal life or the chance to get some kind of education to go out there and get a job at least or make some money on their own. And as for the ones who are bussed from the South [of Bonita’s community], they’re probably here at Bonita because their parents know that their community has the school that’s known for being full of kids that are troubled or involved in fights or drugs or whatever, and that maybe putting them in a school here who’s known for being diverse, good kids decently, high standards for academics, maybe that will balance them out. I think that would make sense—if I was a parent—to do.

Interviewer: And how does it work out for them? Are they successful?

Candace: It’s all different for people, you know, the level of success. Some people’s level of success is just being that top scholar, straight As all the time, scholarships, best university. Some of them it’s going to Community College and transferring over, getting a job, just at least making the effort to take care of themselves later on.” I think people do a good job at their version of success here, and I think Bonita High gives people a good platform to figure out and achieve their own version of success.

The high value immigrants place on education, native white students explain, stems from their disadvantaged backgrounds, which leaves them little choice but to invest in education as their only realistic means of achieving upward mobility. As Glenda, a middle-income white female, explains,
Some immigrant parents, especially Asians, are very—I guess not all of them have a lot of money so their parents don’t get like the best jobs so they have to work in grocery stores, which pay minimum wage. So there’s not a lot of money to put for you on the table if you have a big family. I noticed with [immigrants] they work extremely hard so they can get them to a good college, get a good scholarship, and they don’t have to squeeze their parents, versus the white people, who are like, “Oh I already have money so I don’t have to work that hard. My parents can take care of me.” *Because when you come from nothing, you work harder to have something.*

In contrast to Ranch High, both immigrants and natives at Bonita High similarly acknowledge that immigrants’ perception of limited safety nets, their typically humble socioeconomic origins, and their new beginnings in a new country jointly fuel them with a fervent version of motivation that sets them apart from their peers. Discussions of immigrants’ lack of safety nets, backup plans, and handouts were commonplace among native whites at Bonita High, who articulate that the cost of academic failure (or even mediocrity) is far worse for immigrants than for natives. Thus, more than simply acknowledging the existence of the immigrant work ethic identity, natives and Bonita High validate it as a sensible strategy taken by their immigrant peers.

This intense work ethic, some white natives point out, is not without its flaws. Specifically, some claim that their immigrant peers’ overly intense work ethic and narrow focus on academic success makes them lead unbalanced lives, or makes everyone else feel academically inferior. Nevertheless, despite the downsides of the immigrant work ethic, the majority of native whites report feeling grateful for the positive peer effects largely brought on by their immigrant peers. In their eyes, the work identity held by their immigrant peers raises standards and expectations for all; fosters a collective school culture that values motivation, hard work, and drive; and largely keeps their schoolmates out of trouble and risk behavior. As Dylan, a middle-income white male, explains,

> We have lots of Asians here who study a lot. Even the ones who just came from Asia. I feel, like, lower than them in academics because they are like all study, study, study. Get good grades. That’s all that they need to do for their parents to please them. Yeah, 4.0,
that’s all they care about in school. So then for me, when I think about it, I feel less—what’s the word? Smaller than them I guess. I feel like I have to live up to their expectations sometimes, but I also think that I should be who I am. But in a way it’s good. I’d rather have it this way. Because I like how they don’t do anything bad. They just stay on the right track, just go to college and stuff. I like that about them but I don’t like how all they care about is grades. I think the groups here care about their education, care about getting higher and getting into and staying in college and stuff and that’s good for everyone.

Similarly, speaking about taking higher-track classes with mostly Asian students, Heather, a middle-income white female, explains,

I always say that even if you’re not usually the type that can excel in the high achieving classes...what’s nice is you have certain kinds of people in there, with motivation to excel and do well in school. And usually they’re smarter and have good morals and values. When you’re around people who are as motivated as you, it helps you do better. When you’re not, it just makes you think, “I’ve already done enough, and why should I do more? Everyone else doesn’t.”

Elizabeth, a middle-income white female who has diverse groups of friends from both her high-track AP classes and her athletics, states,

Yeah, having all those overachievers in my classes impacts me in a way [chuckles]. Like, I have to work hard to keep up. Which, to me, is good for me. Like, I have a lot of friends from softball who go out literally everyday of the weekend, or even in some of the weekdays, but I don’t because my dad is really strict and like, I’m not dumb [laughs]. I still like never—even last year in my junior year, which is the hardest year of high school, they were going out all the time, and I was feeling like, ewww, like do something with your life!

In short, Asian immigrants at Ranch High redefine achievement standards and reconfigure academic-based hierarchies on campus (Jimenez and Horowitz 2013). While the immigrant work ethic identity, which contributes to “amplified version of high achievement norms” (Jimenez and Horowitz 2013:849), is sometimes viewed with a critical eye, it is generally perceived by native whites at Bonita High as an element of school culture that raises the bar for academic effort and success for all.
Unlike at Ranch High, Bonita’s High “mainstream” also includes native-born students of color, as evidenced by the diversity among high-status students who are well-known for being leaders in student government, admired as Homecoming or Prom royalty, and/or otherwise typically mentioned in interviews as being well-known or “Facebook famous.” While articulating sentiments similar to those of their native-born white peers discussed above, native-born Asians and Latinos also bring an additional dimension to the mainstream in Bonita High. In addition to converging with native whites on the belief that their immigrant peers hold a strong work ethic that permeates Bonita High’s school culture, they also express a personal sense of empathy towards their immigrant peers, largely rooted in their own experiences of witnessing (or hearing accounts of) their parents’ and/or relatives’ immigration experience.

For example, native-born students of color at Bonita High often view recent immigrants’ clustering together with an empathetic eye, explaining such group behavior as part of the immigrant adjustment process reminiscent of their own parents’ or relatives’ experience:

Delia (middle-income second-generation Latino female): It makes sense for them to stick to each other at first. Usually it’s like, their families know each other, have known each other for a long time, they have similar family lifestyles, activities, cultures, and religion. It’s kind of like why all the Asians hang out together. I see why they do that. Because people are more connected with people like them when they first come. People who have the same religion, same culture, same family, same everything. Makes it less of a culture shock.

Linda (low-income second-generation Latino female): Well there are a lot of groups of Asians or Mexicans who just came to America, and they tend to hang out with their own kind. I guess because of the language and culture. Sometimes, they do speak some English but they like speaking in their own language. Like a lot of Asians hang out at the brown tables I think and they always speak about their Anime and manga and all that stuff. And all us Mexicans we always talk in Spanish, we don’t talk with each other in English. It’s easier for people to be able to speak their own language at first when they come. You shouldn’t just suddenly go into English.

Similarly, Tony, a second-generation Filipino male, explains:
The fobs—at first they would only want to hang with fobs because that’s their sense of home, sense of self-worth or whatever, and you can talk in your native tongue and you get along with each other more easily. That way, when you’re still adjusting, it still feels like home. It’s a safe place. That’s how my cousins were when they first came. And now, they’ve got all kinds of friends.

Notably, though native-born students of color at Bonita High are generally empathetic to recent immigrants’ adjustment processes, they often signal some social distance from them—for example, through referring to recent immigrants as “fobs” (a term that stands for “fresh off the boat”). This nativity-based boundary, not present to the same extent at Ranch High, reflects the distinct group dynamics at Bonita High. Whereas intra-generational status solidarity at Ranch High arises from Asian and Latino students’ need to band together in response to their race-based marginalization (regardless of generational status), this need is obviated at Bonita High. Instead, the fact that students of color occupy the “mainstream,” and that race does not mark students as outsiders as it does at Ranch High, allows for nativity to have more salience as a differentiator and social boundary. In short, with the loaded significance of race lifted, co-ethnic immigrants and children of immigrants at Bonita High seek another status on which to socially differentiate themselves (Purser 2009).

In sum, while clustering and foreign language-speaking among immigrant students at Ranch High are interpreted critically as a refusal to assimilate, such behaviors among immigrants students at Bonita High is viewed as a normal part of the immigrant adjustment process at Bonita High. A powerful ramification of this between-school discrepancy in how immigrants are viewed is that, at Ranch High, negative judgment is already prematurely passed on them—even before they gain a foothold in their new receiving societies—and thus has the potential to stunt the remainder of their incorporation process. This is not the case at Bonita High.
Conclusion

Immigrant incorporation into the minority middle-class has received recent scholarly attention as an overlooked yet emerging immigration pathway (Neckerman et al. 1999; Vallejo 2010; Vallejo 2012). As yet, however, little is known about the variance in the forms or “versions” of minority middle-class destinations, the paths that lead them to those different forms, and the attitudes and dispositions they adopt in the process. Based on the premise that context constrains and shapes immigrant socialization, incorporation, and identity (Rumbaut 2005), this chapter empirically explores how school context shapes and yields different incorporation pathways into different versions of the minority middle-class. In short, the destination and meanings of the minority middle-class, as well as the incorporation pathways into it, rely heavily on social context.

While the immigrant work ethic identity exists similarly among immigrants and children of immigrants at both schools, I find that its framing and role in shaping immigrant youths’ identities vary in noteworthy ways. At Ranch High, the identity is framed in opposition to the middle-class white native majority as an alternate hierarchy constructed by immigrants in response to their feelings of subordination. At Bonita High, the identity is not discussed in contrast to natives, but instead is discussed in and of itself (as an aspect of one’s own personal narrative). The “mainstream” at both schools also differ in their reception and perception of immigrants. At Ranch High, immigrants are generally seen as anti-social, non-assimilatory, socially awkward due to being academically obsessed (Asians), and/or underachieving (Latinos). At Bonita High, the identity is viewed with empathy and sometimes admiration, as immigrants are seen as newcomers with a unique set of struggles. The immigrant work ethic identity widens and maintains the immigrant-mainstream divide at Ranch High, but not at Bonita High.
Findings from this chapter suggest a cyclical relationship between context of incorporation, the forging of moral identities and boundaries, and immigrant incorporation, which ultimately crystallizes and makes durable the immigrant experiences and group dynamics I observe at both schools.

First, context shapes how students develop and frame identities, and how they erect moral boundaries. At Ranch High, a decidedly white mainstream, coupled with the racialized subordination of non-whites as foreign Others regardless of nativity, facilitates both immigrants’ oppositional framing of their work ethic identity and natives’ critical view of immigrants as non-assimilatory. At Bonita High, a diverse mainstream and a school culture that embraces hard work in light of struggle (see Chapter 4) facilitates blurred boundaries between immigrants and natives, and the immigrant work ethic identity is not framed in opposition to natives. At Ranch High, the native/immigrant divide is based on race; at Bonita High, it is based on nativity.

Second, moral identities and boundaries shape immigrant incorporation. Though immigrant youth at both schools share the immigrant work ethic identity, the framing of the identity by immigrants at Ranch High creates a situation where, by definition, native whites and immigrants never achieve a common ground, and where membership into the “mainstream” is a largely unattainable position for non-white immigrants. Since the work ethic identity is framed explicitly in opposition to white natives at Ranch High, immigrants and native whites forever remain in separate categories. Furthermore, since the racialization of group dynamics on campus denies even native-born Asians and Latinos legitimacy at school, immigrant incorporation at Ranch High means incorporation into native minority groups that are still viewed as subordinate and Other. In contrast, at Bonita High, immigrants and natives view each other as similar individuals who occupy different positions in the same familiar immigrant trajectory, or as
fellow schoolmates with different types of struggles. Implicit in this trajectory-oriented view of immigrant-native relations is the understanding that immigrant incorporation at Bonita High means eventually becoming part of the mainstream on campus.

Finally, the feedback loop is complete as immigrant incorporation experiences and outcomes shape the context of reception. At Ranch High, immigrants’ incorporation into existing subordinate social categories on campus (Waters 2009) perpetuates and maintains the social hierarchy and group relations on campus. Both native whites and immigrants maintain critical perceptions of each other, and racialized boundaries remain bright and rigid. At Ranch, difference *divides* immigrants and natives (whites). At Bonita High, immigrants shape the campus mainstream as they gradually become a part of it. Natives (of all races) and immigrants maintain their level of understanding, as they perceive their difference as a *positional variation* in the spectrum of immigration (or general struggle) rather than a true difference that divides.

The between-school differences in each element of the cycle suggests that scholars must pay more attention to the contextualized meanings and contextualized hierarchies that play active roles in immigrant incorporation. It is not enough to discuss immigrant incorporation as a single and uniform concept, even within racial, ethnic, or national groups, nor is it sufficient to discuss the minority middle-class as a uniform destination. As this chapter shows, immigrants at both Ranch High and Bonita High generally incorporate into the minority middle-class, but into decidedly different forms of the minority middle class, and through diverging incorporation pathways.

This chapter expands on the new body of research on the minority middle class. While scholars argue that a particular set of experiences unique to upwardly-mobile middle-class minorities—namely, interaction with the white majority and management of inter-class relations
with the minority community—give rise to a distinct minority middle-class culture, research has not yet considered how diversity in these types of interactions may yield differences in both the paths of incorporation into the minority middle-class, as well as in the types or “versions” of minority middle-class destinations and outcomes. Specifically, evidence in this chapter suggests that immigrants in the two schools differ in how they relate to white natives. At Ranch High, white natives make up the dominant mainstream and represent a social status that both immigrants and native-born children of immigrants cannot ever achieve. Consistent with research on the middle-class minority (Neckerman et al. 1999), Ranch High immigrants’ struggles with feelings of marginalization in interactions with white natives leave a formative impact on their identity formation. At Bonita High, on the other hand, immigrants’ relations with white natives are far less tense and loaded with power dynamics than they are at Ranch High. At Bonita High, white natives do not hold the sole rights to the mainstream or dominant majority, and many immigrants do not generally report strained power relations or feelings of marginalization in immigrant-native white relations.

Moreover, immigrants in the two schools differ in how they relate to coethnics from different class backgrounds. At Ranch High, the heavily charged salience and meaning of race marginalizes students of color as “Other,” regardless of nativity or class background. Thus, immigrants and their native-born coethnics share collective solidarity that stems from their similarly low social status, and both class and immigrant-native boundaries among coethnics are blurred. In contrast, the fact that race does not automatically signal foreignness at Bonita High, and that the diverse “mainstream” includes native-born children of immigrants from different class backgrounds, obviates the need for coethnics to band together in solidarity and leaves room for distinctions based on other differences like nativity. Despite native-born students’ empathetic
eye towards immigrants, a brighter boundary between immigrants and native-born coethnics exists at Bonita High. Thus, coethnics have more intra-ethnic relational dynamics to “manage” in Bonita High than in Ranch High.

Given these differences in immigrants’ interactions with native whites and in their management of intra-ethnic relations, it is reasonable to expect these differences to yield outcomes in the minority middle-class that diverge much more than extant research suggests. This chapter addresses the gap in the literature on the upwardly-mobile, middle class-bound minorities (e.g., Neckerman et al. 1999; Vallejo 2009; Vallejo 2010; Vallejo and Lee 2009) by elucidating how context shapes boundary formation and meaning making among both immigrant and native youth, which in turn influences how immigrant youth form their identities in the context of their relations with natives. In short, I argue that we cannot conceptualize the “minority middle-class” as a uniform construct or incorporation destination, since structural situation and context powerfully construct different possible “versions” and paths into the minority middle-class. For example, given the empirical evidence presented in this chapter, it is reasonable to expect that an immigrant student from Ranch High and her demographic counterpart from Bonita High would differ notably in who they perceive as the “mainstream,” how they relate to the “mainstream,” and what it means to be an immigrant.

These findings point to new avenues of research. Past studies (e.g., Crosnoe 2009) suggest that social experiences in high school have the potential to affect identities and life chances well after high school. As with most research on relatively recent immigrant populations, more research is needed to study the long-term effects of the findings I foreground. How durable are the consequences of the dynamics I find? In addition, more scholarship is needed to determine how the immigrant work ethic identity—developed in youth but likely
salient beyond it— influence youths’ post-secondary and career outcomes? Some teachers at Bonita High applaud the tolerant and supportive inter-group dynamics on campus but worry about minority students’ likely disillusionment when they enter the “real world” outside the Bonita community, where many will likely experience social subordination and exclusion for the first time. More research is needed to systematically analyze a wider array of outcomes in order to gain a more holistic view of how context shapes different paths into—and incorporation destinations of—the minority middle-class. Finally, while the findings from this chapter are limited to 1.5- and second-generation immigrants due to the immigration patterns of the Ranch and Bonita communities (both whose immigrant populations are disproportionately composed of recent immigrants), future research should expand on the generational diversity of the immigrant population studied and explore how context, boundary-making and framing, and incorporation interact differently in contexts with more generationally diverse immigrant groups.

While limited in scope, this chapter illuminates the importance of seriously considering the complexity in how schools—the first institutional site of socialization and incorporation for most immigrant youth—shape immigrants’ incorporation pathways, destinations, and outcomes. General discussions of immigrant groups’ incorporation pathways and destinations based solely on demographic categories such as generational status or racial minority status no longer suffice amidst changing demographics and immigration settlement patterns in the U.S. metropolitan landscape. Moreover, findings from this chapter are based on schools that embody characteristics typically lauded by educational researchers and practitioners—the schools are demographically diverse, well-resourced, and located in middle-class suburban neighborhoods, and serve predominantly middle-class populations. Nevertheless, some immigrant students still struggle with exclusion and feelings of subordination despite attending a school that appears ideal “on
paper.” From a policy standpoint, therefore, attendance in an “ideal” school—whatever that entails—is insufficient for ensuring immigrants’ social integration and positive social and academic outcomes. Instead, as this chapter highlights, immigration processes are highly complex and strongly contingent upon contextualized hierarchies and systems of meanings.
Chapter 6

On Common Ground: How Spatial Layout Facilitates Schools’ Power to Segregate Students

An extensive amount of scholarship examines how organizational level processes—such as tracking, school policies, and school personnel attitudes—exert a powerful influence on integration processes and outcomes. However, in their focus on the intangible, subtle, and often complex ways schools influence integration processes, researchers overlook a simple yet crucial means through which organizational forces influence integration: the physical layout and organization of space on campus.

In this chapter, I argue that space and school-level decisions about space jointly structure social boundaries and social relations. Drawing on a year of ethnographic fieldwork, I compare two suburban schools with similar compositions of low-income students but different spatial layouts and school-level planning decisions. I find that spatial layout and organizational-level planning interact to exert an instrumental force on social processes—specifically, how students use, subdivide, and attribute meaning to space through boundary negotiation. This, in turn, allows for physical boundaries to translate to social boundaries in ways that are potentially deleterious for school integration and group relations. In other words, boundary work mediates the relationship between space and social relations.

Although spatial arrangement is not deterministic, the data show that some layouts are more conducive to stratification than others. I introduce the terms hierarchical and egalitarian to represent the two types of spatial layouts foregrounded in this chapter that differentially predispose schools to unequal group relations. These two types of spatial layouts vary in their stratifiability, a concept I introduce as a property of physical space that matters for the social
processes explored in this chapter. Stratifiability, based solely on the physical properties of space, reflects the extent to which space is easily stratifiable by students. Attributes such as sequentially arranged hallways and the unequal distribution of resources (desirable or undesirable) throughout campus may increase the stratifiability of a layout, as youth are quick to pick up on such cues and establish hierarchies based on them (Holt 2007; Sibley 1995). A hierarchical school layout, which is easily stratifiable, preemptively sets the stage for unequal group relations more so than an egalitarian school layout, which less easily stratifiable.

In the hierarchically-arranged school, buildings are sequentially aligned from the front to back of campus, valuable resources are concentrated at the front of campus, and undesirable facilities like dumpsters are concentrated at the back. Campus space is easily stratifiable to students, since both the quality and nearby facilities progressively worsen as one approaches the back of campus. Moreover, organizational-level planning marginalizes lower-performing students and students who are bussed from less-privileged neighborhoods. Group boundaries and hierarchies are rigid, and groups rarely interact despite a diverse student body. Together, the hierarchical spatial layout and organizational-level planning at this school facilitate segregation and strained group relations.

In the school with an egalitarian school layout, buildings are arranged in a circle, and resources are distributed evenly throughout campus. Campus space is less easily stratifiable to students, since no spaces stand out as obviously more or less desirable than others. Classes are arranged into buildings by subject rather than academic track, and spatial planning encourages students bussed from less privileged neighborhoods to mingle in shared space with non-bussed students. Group boundaries at this school are more fluid, and students often congregate in diverse
groups that traverse racial and class distinctions. At this school, the egalitarian spatial layout and school-level planning jointly promote integration and positive intergroup relations.

Findings from this chapter offer two main contributions to current research. First, this chapter considers space as an agentic and “purposeful social product” (Wolch and Dear 1989) that structures and regulates social processes. In doing so, it builds on sociological accounts of how students’ use of space at school influences integration, which takes for granted the physical layout of space. Secondly, it argues that, while spatial layout itself is an important force that differentially predisposes schools for unequal group relations, it is the interaction between spatial layout and organizational-level planning decisions that exerts the most powerful influence over boundary work and social relations. In making this argument, this chapter both updates and synthesizes literatures in architectural planning, geography, and sociology to merge theories of how both spatial layout (planning and geography) and organizational-level forces (sociology) jointly shape social relations.

**Literature**

*Space and Boundaries at School: Sociological Perspectives*

Space has long been considered an important element of analysis in sociological inquiry (Feldman and Tilly 1960). Critiquing sociology’s modern fixation with variables abstracted from social context, Abbott (1997:1152) argues for a more contextualist approach to sociology that focuses on “social relations and spatial ecology in synchronic analysis.” He contends that “social facts are located,” and that “no social fact makes any sense abstracted from context in social (and often geographic) space and social time” (Abbott 1997:1152). Though Abbott presents these insights as the Chicago school of thought, this place-based focus on sociological processes is not
exclusively a Chicago insight (see Logan 2012). Sociologists are increasingly devoting more scholarly attention to what Logan (2012:3) terms “spatial thinking,” or the “consideration of the relative locations of social phenomena, the causes of the locational pattern, and its consequences.”

A number of qualitative studies in schools—well-known sites of social reproduction—illuminate the complex ways in which students’ groupings in space matters in structuring social relations and group dynamics. Gaztambide-Fernandez’s (2009) study of an elite boarding school highlights the role of space in establishing and maintaining group hierarchies and dynamics. Students at the elite school form identities and draw rigid boundaries based on the spaces where they eat, live, and hang out. He argues that “these spatial arrangements ‘naturalize’ social boundaries, making the internal hierarchies of distinction appear organic, as if they should be taken for granted” (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009:98). He finds that students identify with their unofficial territories, and the unspoken spatial boundaries in campus space reify—and are reified by—social boundaries.

Other scholars (e.g., Bettie 2003; Eckert 1989; Milner 2006) similarly find that the spaces students occupy at school shape their social identities in important ways. Eckert’s (1989) ethnography of Jocks and Burnouts at a high school finds that students learn to be managers and subordinates through their negotiations and maintenance of spatial territory at school. Almost a decade later, Olsen’s (1997) study of immigrant students at a culturally diverse high school finds that spatial segregation and spatial territories at school influence how immigrant students perceive interracial relations and learn to situate themselves in the U.S. racial hierarchy. Almost a decade later still, Milner’s (2006:54) study of status processes among adolescents finds that physical boundaries represent social boundaries, as “spaces are assigned different identities and
different statuses” and one’s status is signified by the space one inhabits.

Given the importance of space in shaping social relations and identities, social scientists studying space in schools emphasize the importance of understanding “not only…how physical space is divided and inhabited but also…how that space is understood and…what kind of relations take place within it (Lewis 2003:52; see also Bettie 2000). Though social scientists are committed to studying boundary work and meaning-making processes in school spaces, less work has been done that explicitly studies how distinctions are formed and made bright or blurred (Alba 2005) in space, or the conditions under which differences translate into inequalities (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnar 2002). Moreover, while the studies above illuminate how student groupings in space influences boundary maintenance and segregation patterns, they often take for granted the spatial layout of buildings and physical structures on campus that underlie the dynamics they foreground in their analyses. For this reason, it is necessary to synthesize interdisciplinary literatures.

*How Space Matters: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*

Much of what we know about how spatial layout structures social relations stems from research in architectural planning and geography. Studies in geography find that spatial configurations have the power to further distance subordinate groups as “other” or minimize differences to foster a better sense of inclusion (see Kitchin 1999 for an overview). Similarly, space syntax analysis, developed by architectural planners, is driven by the idea that spatial arrangements have social ramifications (Hillier and Hanson 1984). For example, spatial layout influences patterns of exclusion and otherness, which are reified through seemingly mundane everyday practices (Holt 2003; Holt 2007; Legeby 2010). In space syntax analysis, the
organization of space is not treated as abstract or given, but rather as a “purposeful social product” that regulates life and reinforces power relations (Wolch and Dear 1989:6). Evidence suggests that built environments in cities have the potential to ameliorate or exacerbate segregation patterns (Legeby 2010).

Space syntax analysis has also been applied to study the social effects of spatial configurations at schools, though to a lesser extent (Collins and Coleman 2008; see also de Jong 1996 for an overview). Research in geography and architectural planning indicates that spatial arrangements of school campuses influence social relations between and among students and staff in complex ways (de Jong 1996; Holt 2003; Holt 2007; Moore and Lackney 1993; Sibley 1995), shaping both academic and non-academic outcomes for students. Studies of students’ everyday sociospatial practices show that even children are quick to establish hierarchies and draw boundaries between “self” and “other” through their everyday interactions in space (Holt 2007; Sibley 1995). While space syntax is useful in highlighting the relationship between spatial layout and social dynamics, however, it neglects the role of organizational-level processes in mediating the relationship between space and social relations. In addition, space syntax approaches also lack the detailed and nuanced accounts of the mechanisms through which this relationship occurs—details that in-depth sociological studies offer. This chapter thus bridges space syntax analysis and sociological studies of space in school by exploring how spatial layout interacts with organizational-level spatial decisions to shape group relations and segregation patterns at school.

*Space as a School-Level Organizational Influences on School Integration*
A wealth of evidence suggests that organizational arrangements at the school level play an instrumental role in shaping students’ educational experiences and outcomes, and in shaping the context of integration in schools serving diverse student populations, less is known about how schools as organizations structure segregation patterns through spatial planning and decision-making. In her study of students in a predominantly-Latino urban high school, Flores-Gonzalez (2005) finds that academic tracking relegates students to different social and physical spaces on campus. She finds that tracking and differences in extracurricular involvement allowed high-achievers to “find shelter” in academic and extracurricular settings with better resources while exposing low-achievers to unprotected spaces that put them at risk of trouble (Flores-Gonzalez 2005:632). In her study of social categories at a high school, Eckert (1989:45) similarly finds that Jocks and Burnouts in her study “live in very different parts of the school” and explains that, “to a certain extent, this is a function of the courses they attend.” She finds that the Burnouts occupy marginalized spaces in the school while the Jocks occupy the most desirable spaces. In both studies, school-level decisions to spatially cluster classes by academic track create a pattern of “illusory contact” (Clack, Dixon, and Tredoux 1995; Taylor, Dubé, and Bellerose 1986; Taylor and Moghaddam 1994), where high and low achievers occupying the same school campus rarely interact. Institutionally maintaining illusory contact in such settings is particularly harmful for group relations, since positive contact has been found to be constructive in decreasing uncertainty and perceived threat between groups (Dijker 1987; Islam and Hewstone 1993; Lee 2001; Stephan et al. 2002).

Thorne (1993) offers another example of how schools promote segregation through managing the spaces that students use. In her study of elementary school gender divisions, she finds that school personnel not only take for granted gender divisions during playtime, but that
they themselves monitor and maintain gender divisions through their everyday interactions with students. For example, it is not uncommon for playground aides to refuse to lend jump ropes—assumed to be girls’ play items—to boys, accusing them of intending to “give it rope burn,” or to shoo boys away from spatial territories that are assumed to be girls’ spaces (Thorne 1993:45). By affirming and maintaining such gender divisions, schools structure gender segregation by communicating to students that such distinctions in gendered activities and territories are normal, natural, and desirable. Moreover, since girls control less spatial territory than boys, and engage in activities that are more “interruptable” (Thorne 1993:83), the organizational-level maintenance of these gender norms reinforce gender inequalities at a young age.

Findings

In what follows, I discuss each school separately and analyze how spatial layout and school-level spatial decisions contribute to different integration contexts on campus. For each school, I begin with an overview of their spatial layout and discuss two examples of school-level spatial decisions: spatial tracking and the placement of bus stops for bussed students. Next, I discuss how spatial layout and spatial decisions jointly influence boundary work on the ground, which mediates the relationship between space and social relations. Finally, I illustrate how social relations fare amidst the spatial backdrop I foreground. Table 15 summarizes the spatial layout and school-level spatial decisions by school.
Table 15. Summary of Spatial Layout and Organizational-Level Spatial Decisions by School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Spatial Layout</th>
<th>Spatial Allocation of Classrooms</th>
<th>Placement of Bus Pickup Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ranch High</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Placement of classrooms based on academic track</td>
<td>• very front of campus, atop a long staircase, and adjacent to a narrow sidewalk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(high stratifiability)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• farthest possible point from most bussed students' classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• students march, en masse, across campus, eventually bottlenecking in a single file line up the stairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonita High</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>Placement of classrooms based on subject</td>
<td>• side of campus, adjacent to spacious grassy area where both bussed and non-bussed students congregate after school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(low stratifiability)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• bussed students are inconspicuous and often mingle with non-bussed students as they wait for their busses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ranch High School

Hierarchical Campus Layout, Spatial Tracking, and the Busing March

Ranch High’s spatial layout features five sequentially-aligned hallways that span the front to the back of campus (see Figure 11). While the pristine Hall 1 is quick to greet visitors with its cheerful appearance and school spirit, the hallways progressively worsen in quality and condition as one approaches the back of campus. To reflect the easily discernable inequality in the quality of spaces on campus, I employ the term hierarchical to describe Ranch High’s spatial layout. Moreover, I discuss how spatial tracking—the practice of assigning tracked classes to different and unequal areas of campus—enables spatial layout to stratify students at Ranch High.

Halls 1 and 2 exude the beauty and pride of a typical wealthy suburban school. School colors are gloriously displayed on walls, windows, and doors. Student work is showcased
Figure 11. Ranch High School Campus Map
Figure 12. Bonita High School Campus Map
prominently from classroom windows. Most college-preparatory classes are held in Halls 1 and 2, which are in close proximity to resources such as the library, Career and Counseling Center, and administrative offices.

As one approaches the back of campus, the luster present in Halls 1 and 2 begins to fade. Hallways are dirtier, and vandalism and litter are more prominent in Halls 3 and 4, which make up the middle of campus. Though these halls are worse in quality than the front halls, they are still close to The Quad, a nicely landscaped quadrangle where pep rallies and other school spirit activities typically take place. Halls 3 and 4 house mostly regular-track classes and art classes. Science, engineering, and computer classes—the exception to the track-based physical segregation patterns on campus—are also located in Halls 3 and 4, due to specific facilities needs (such as labs, sinks, and technological equipment).

Almost hidden at the back of the school is Hall 5, where vandalism and litter are more visible than displays of student work. The Quad is hard to access—and almost not visible—from Hall 5. Hall 5 is home to the school’s auto shop garage, the janitor’s storage area, and two massive dumpsters. The hallway is dirtier than the other hallways because the terrain at the back of the campus is unpaved. There is little or no adult supervision in Hall 5 during non-instructional hours, making it the prime location for planned fights and other deviant behavior. Hall 5 houses career readiness classes, and is academically divided in a noteworthy way. The half of Hall 5 that is closer to the rest of campus consists of classes such as photography and graphic arts, which cater to both regular-track students and high-track students. The half of Hall 5 closer to the back of campus, because of the physical placement of the auto shop garage and weight room, houses the Auto Shop classes and the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) classes, respectively, which are rarely taken by high-track or white students at Ranch High.
Finally, a cluster of portable classrooms, brought in to accommodate growing cohorts of students, sits at the side of campus on unpaved, dusty terrain. The portables also house regular-track classes, mostly for underclassmen, and most teachers who teach in the portables are newer teachers who have yet to gain the seniority for a classroom on the main campus.

In addition to spatial tracking, the placement of bus stops facilitates the power of space to strain group dynamics. School buses that transport students to Ranch High from surrounding less-affluent neighborhoods line up at the very front of the school (See Figure 11). Since most bussed students take regular-track and vocational classes situated primarily at the back of the school, the bus stops are located at farthest possible point from their classes. On any given day after school, almost 400 students—the majority of them racial minorities—walk en masse from the back of campus to the front. This daily mass exodus eventually reaches a bottleneck, causing students walk in single file, since the only direct path to the bus stop is a long and narrow flight of stairs. Atop the narrow flight of stairs is an even narrower sidewalk along which the buses park. Given the limited space, the sidewalk is often loud and extremely crowded, as bussed students elbow their ways into their buses or in search of their friends. Roughhousing, though not unique to bussed students, appears in a more chaotic form here, since roughhousing among non-bussed students is diffused throughout campus space rather than concentrated on one sidewalk.

While the hierarchical spatial layout only sets the stage for unequal group relations, spatial tracking and the placement of bus stops act as powerful stratifying forces that adds an extra dimension of meaning to campus space. Past studies indicate that racialized tracking is a mechanism through which schools communicate powerful messages to minority students that can negatively affect their academic identities (Tyson 2011), which may in turn impact their life chances beyond high school (Crosnoe 2011). At Ranch High, tracking takes on a deeper
meaning: not only is tracking racialized, but lower-track students are generally subjugated to the inferior rear of campus, away from most school resources, adult supervision, and campus activities. Similarly, it is well documented that students who are bussed to suburban schools from high-poverty neighborhoods endure stigma and opposition from the receiving community (Eaton 2001; Wells and Crain 1998). At Ranch High, this ritualistic march further punctuates bussed students’ already-vulnerable status with stigma as they are “outed” under the scrutinizing eyes of their peers, as will be discussed below.

Through these institutional practices, the school reinforces students’ ideas about belonging and legitimacy. With few exceptions, spatial tracking at Ranch High creates a segmented student body where high- and low-track students occupy opposite ends of campus, rarely interacting. The placement of buses marks and already-marginalized population as “Other,” and exacerbates perceptions of minority students on campus. The hierarchical campus layout at Ranch High and the decisions made at the school level are mutually reinforcing forces that work jointly to spatially stratify students in ways that, as will be detailed below, deleterious to group relations and integration.

Space and Bright Boundaries at Ranch High: Africa, Little Chinatown, and the “Wrong Side”

Students are keenly aware of inequality in the condition and desirability of spaces on campus. White students often use terms like “the wrong side of campus” or “ghetto” to describe space towards the back of campus occupied primarily by minorities. Respondents report that even the quality of the bathrooms varies across campus: bathrooms are dirtier and more vandalized towards the back of campus because, as articulated both implicitly and explicitly by white interviewees, students are deviant and “rowdier” at the back of campus, and there is

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decreased adult supervision in those regions. As one interviewee explains, “If someone wanted to tag the bathroom, why would you tag the one right next to the principal?”

When asked about student groupings on campus, almost all interviewees identify the stark racial segregation on campus, though many are quick to add qualifiers to downplay its prevalence. On the surface, the segregation appears to be strictly race-based, though a closer investigation quickly reveals that race, academic track, busing status, and socioeconomic status are treated as proxies for each other at Ranch High. Lunchtime is the starkest example of the degree of racial segregation. The front and center portions of campus are disproportionately occupied by white students, while the back ends of campus are disproportionately occupied by black and Latino students. Most Asian students cluster under a small covered patio nestled behind Hall 1, and remain largely hidden there during lunchtime. This finding is consistent with past studies of student groupings in space, where marginalized groups occupy marginalized areas while higher-status groups occupy center and front areas of campus (Bettie 2003; Olsen 1997). The spatial territories at Ranch High were so well known that there are racialized nicknames for specific regions of campus, such as “Little Chinatown” for the covered patio area where Asians disproportionately hang out. Speaking of the racial segregation on campus, Ashley, a middle-income white female, explains,

I don’t think it’s intentional. As far as I know, there’s no race wars on campus [laughs]. I mean [pause] one half of the quad is known as ‘Africa’ basically. Just because that’s where all the African-Americans on campus congregate, whereas all the whites congregate on the other side. It’s not intentional and it’s not awkward, but it does exist. It’s just kind of how it happened.

Indeed, the race-based spatial distinctions at Ranch High were inherited from past cohorts of students and remained generally durable, unchanged, and largely uncontested over the years. As

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18 For the most part, the groups here are exclusively black or Latino, though there is a notable degree of social mixing between blacks and Latinos at Ranch High.
19 Latinos also disproportionately hang out in this space.
the student above suggests matter-of-factly, these boundaries—as well as racialized terms such as “Africa” and “Little Chinatown” to described campus spaces—are deep-rooted and perceived as organic, natural, and given. Such terms reflect the rigidity and brightness of the boundaries that demarcate the racialized territories on campus as decidedly “Other.” These racialized territories are rarely traversed by white students (and, likewise, minorities rarely traverse “white” territories) and regarded with a sense of mystical exoticism, uncertainty, and even—in the case of “Africa”—a sense of danger. Territories occupied by white students are not referred to with racialized terms, but instead labeled by the common activity or characteristic that united the groups occupying them (e.g., “The Stoners,” “The Partiers,” “The Nerds,” etc.).

Just like spatial quality, distinctions in spatial territories—and in racial groups, which largely determine spatial territories at Ranch High—reflect more than mere differences. Instead, spatial territories and racial groups are value-laden and exert a stratifying power over students. The more desirable spaces at the front and center of the school—occupied primarily by white students—are deemed superior while the less desirable spaces at the back of campus—occupied primarily by non-white students—are assumed inferior. Spatial hierarchy maps onto—and reifies—the social hierarchy at Ranch High, as race was both a differentiating and stratifying force. White students largely ascribe metastereotypes (Torres and Charles 2004) to their minority peers. For example, whites typically describe students in “Africa” as “violent,” “ghetto,” “scary,” or less intelligent, while students in “Little Chinatown” are deemed “anti-social,” “weird,” and “always keeping to themselves.” Resorting to self-defense orientations in response to this well known hierarchy that relegates them to the bottom, minorities in turn describe whites towards the front and center of campus as “stuck up,” “snotty,” and “rich white kids who…always have this stinky look on their face.”
Moreover, the mass exodus of the bussed students from the back of campus to the front in a single-file line serves as a powerfully symbolic ritual, which white middle-class students observe from the seats of their parents’ cars. This daily ritual visibly marks racial minorities as “Other”—low-achieving, visibly different peers who come into “our” school from “ghetto” neighborhoods. Sentiments such as, “This is like one of those high white rich neighborhoods and if they [minorities] didn’t get bussed in, we probably wouldn’t have all those people” (emphasis added) are common. Similarly, Danny, a middle-income white male explained:

Like, my mom has this—she’s not actually racist but she tends to point things out and she pointed it out. Like, I’ve never seen a blonde person walk out the bus. I’ve never seen a single blonde guy or girl, ginger or anything. You always see—it’s always dark. Like obviously white people have dark hair, but it’s always dark hair people and you never seen like—I’ve never seen the blonde person out of the bus and I was like, “That’s really weird.”

Such visible markers, in turn, become associated with typically negative stereotypes, so that race becomes a proxy for behavior, morals, and deviance. Visible minority status at Ranch High is often a package laden with assumptions about neighborhood of residence, behavior, academics, socioeconomic background, and sometimes even undocumented immigrant status.

The spatial conditions for bussed students as they catch their buses on the crowded narrow sidewalk exemplify how space exacerbates unflattering assumptions about bussed students. Because bussed students are forced to congregate on the congested sidewalk, otherwise-normal after school interactions—from after school chatter to playful roughhousing—are concentrated in a tight space. This concentration of social interaction magnifies its intensity, creating a high-voltage, high-energy sea of hollering teenagers claustrophobically crammed into a small public space. This chaotic scene, repeated daily, leads non-bussed students to make assumptions about the rowdiness of their bussed peers. Echoing sentiments typical of her
schoolmates, Tara, a white middle-class female, identified how she could tell if somebody was bussed in from another neighborhood:

I’m not sure if it’s a stereotype but like generally if I saw someone with their group of friends and they were being really rowdy…probably be like laughing really obnoxiously about drugs, that’s where I would start making assumptions [about whether they rode the bus or not].

Tara’s formulated assumptions on bussed students exemplify how spatial arrangements facilitate schools’ power to maintain group cleavages through its spatial decisions. First, the hierarchical spatial layout and the long stairway that leads to a narrow sidewalk are spatial attributes that accentuate the stigma of the ritualistic march. Secondly, the decision to arrange for buses to park where they do, which forces bussed students to travel the longest distance possible en masse, is one made at the organizational level. Together, the spatial characteristics and the school’s decisions on how bussed students navigate campus space after school inadvertently create a daily public ritual that makes bussed students appear louder, rowdier, and more massive in number than they actually are.

In short, more than just characteristics that differentiate students, space and race at Ranch High act jointly as mutually reinforcing powerful stratifying forces that perpetuate segregation and strained group relations on campus. Space at Ranch High acts as a bright symbolic boundary laden with significant meaning and the power to constrain social interaction and generate inequality (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnar 2002).

*Fragmentation and Tension at Ranch High School: Slow Thinkers and Jerks*

The value-laden nature of both space and race at Ranch High contribute to strained and fragmented group relations at Ranch High. Groups at Ranch—which primarily cluster socio-demographically—maintain “illusory contact” (Clack, Dixon, and Tredoux 1995; Taylor and
Moghaddam 1994; Taylor, Dubé, and Bellerose 1986), rarely engaging in intergroup contact despite sharing the same campus. Reports of having “never” seen schoolmates in spatial territories away from one’s own are common at Ranch High. This lack of intergroup interaction despite a seemingly diverse and desegregated school setting is consistent with past research in education and beyond. May (2014) uses the term “integrated segregation” to describe the phenomenon of groups remaining segregated and not making meaningful contact with each other in seemingly integrated settings where diverse groups are in close proximity to each other.

Interviews with students across socio-demographic groups at Ranch High reveal that Ranch is, first and foremost, dominated by the middle-class white students. “Us” versus “them” language was common, and students often describe a dichotomy of “two different worlds” on campus that exist on campus—a middle-class, white, higher-achieving one and a lower-income, minority, lower-achieving one. While few lower-income minority students report experiencing overt discrimination, most discuss experiencing microaggressions and feelings of subordination in everyday interactions (Sue 2010; Solórzano, Allen, and Carroll 2002) that reinforce the existence of dominant and subordinate “worlds” on campus. Evidence suggests that such microaggressions impact identity formation at adolescence—a critical juncture in development—and thus have the potential to have serious ramifications that persist beyond high school and into the life course (Crosnoe 2011).

Though the lack of intergroup interaction means that explicit intergroup conflict is rare, it is common for interviewees to articulate scathing opinions on their out-group peers that fester beneath the surface of a seemingly cordial school environment. This brewing of typically negative stereotypes, coupled with limited intergroup contact both during and outside of classroom time, is a significant barrier for positive intergroup contact in the rare instances when
students of different social and academic backgrounds did interact, as illustrated by Trevor, a high-achieving middle-class white student who took Ceramics, his only non-advanced course.

Trevor: I’m taking a Ceramics class this year. I sort of just wanted to see the other side, you know? And that’s sort of what I am seeing. Just the sort of sketchy kids [chuckles], that’s the truth.”

Interviewer: So what are you learning?

Trevor: That’s where the kids are like, the poor kids…and it’s strange how a lot of the kids have the worst work ethic I’ve ever seen, but that’s to be expected. In Ceramics class, they won’t do anything, they won’t make anything…I don’t understand that. And also what I was confused about was like—I thought well, I’m an AP student, I’m used to being at the top of the class. And I would think coming into a Ceramics class, you know, we’re all on an equal playing field of equal ability, and yet somehow I’ve risen to the top again! Some of the kids, they’re just slow. I don’t know if it’s from drug use, because that can absolutely be part of it. They just don’t know what to do. Even in Ceramics. They’re sort of slow thinkers. Not just slow thinkers. They’re slow to come to conclusions, they’re slow to do anything.

Trevor is one of the few high-achieving white middle-class students in his Ceramics class who does not know most of the other students. Thus, while his lower-achieving peers socialize, he exclusively works. His negative sentiments stem from both his pre-existing stereotypes and his exclusion from conversations and interactions between students who already know each other from their regular-track classes. Instead of promoting intergroup relations, such instances of intergroup contact lead to deeper social segregation. Trevor’s experience of witnessing these schoolmates in his Ceramics class lead him to extrapolate more generally to their work ethic and intelligence overall.

Similarly, limited cross-group interaction posed serious barriers to the minimization of uncertainty and perceived threat that is crucial for positive inter-group relations (Lee 2001; Dijker 1987; Islam and Hewstone 1993; Stephan et al. 2002). Because interaction with peers from different racial, socioeconomic, or achievement backgrounds are uncommon at Ranch
High, students’ perceptions of out-group peers are based on stereotypes that are typically negative. As Bianca, a middle-class white female, explains:

Bianca: I feel like I’m being racist but there some like black people that are here and Mexicans that scare me. I wouldn’t be surprised if they pulled out a gun or a knife.
Interviewer: Why?
Bianca: I don’t know, I guess they might just be acting tough but it’s like another thing that you just want to be tough. Blacks and Mexicans seem to have that thing where they just have to have the demeanor being like super tough, like let’s go let’s get in a fight, I’m going to beat you up. I’m like calm down, calm down!

Further probing revealed that Bianca’s perceptions are not based on actual events that happened to her, and the only known student who threatened to bring a gun to school that year was a middle-class white male.

Minority students are well aware of the negative stereotypes against them, and of where they stand in the racial hierarchy at school. Amanda, a low-income Asian female student, demonstrates the anger and self-defense orientations articulated by many other Latino and African-American respondents through her account of her fellow white peers:

Amanda: I honestly have to tell you that girls here, actually, ‘cause—girls here are bitches. And guys here are jerks.
Interviewer: Tell me more about that.
Amanda: I told you, I think this school is a white school. And majority are white people, white girls who are like the popular white girls. They look down on you. They either tease you, laugh at you.
Interviewer: How do you deal with that?
Amanda: Well, just do your thing. Just do my thing and I don’t jump in random conversations, whatever they talk about. I just sit there and laugh or I just think that they’re idiots in my head [laughter]. I stay out all the problems…avoid drama. Avoid their conversations. Just sit there, laugh, or talk about it when you go home.

Like many low-income students of color, Amanda copes with feelings of oppression at school by adopting an adversarial stance. Spatial layout and school-level practices at Ranch High reinforce deep group cleavages that make minorities feel excluded as inferior members of their school
community. As a result, many minorities withdraw from and disengage with whites socially, even during the few opportunities they have of intergroup contact.

These strained relations and loaded meanings behind race at Ranch High create a school environment where race—and the other social characteristics conflated with it—is a sensitive topic. Though often freely discussed in same-race friendship groups, race is generally taboo among both students and school personnel. Interviewees cautiously tiptoe around the topic of race, often not discussing it fully until probed. Furthermore, regardless of race or income status (though most prevalent among white students), interviewees often preface any racial comment with disclaimers such as, “I’m not trying to be racist, but…,” even if the proceeding comment is merely racial, not racist. Moreover, internal behind-the-scenes attempts by school administration to recruit a Cultural Diversity Awareness Officer in student government to ease the intergroup tension suggest that school personnel are well aware of the racial tension brewing beneath the façade of harmony. Publicly, however, the school keeps quiet about race and avoided discussions of diversity or integration. Racial cleavages thus are stark and salient at Ranch High, and students maintain harmony at school—at least on the surface—by avoiding contact and discussions of race with out-group members altogether.

Unfortunately, electing to disregard or circumvent talking about race is often a recipe for exacerbated group relations (Pollock 2009; Schofield 1991; Tatum 2003). Schools exert an instrumental power to shape school cultures and, through everyday practices and policies, send messages about group relations and hierarchies to students (Schofield 1991; Tyson 2011; Carter 2012). A lack of communication often serves as a powerful message in itself (Pollock 2005; Schofield 1991; Tatum 2003). In this case, the school’s public silence on intergroup relations at

20 Importantly, the student being recruited (a low-income Asian female who was well known at school for her intellectual prowess) turned down the offer because she felt that any attempt of achieving intergroup harmony, though desirable, was futile.
Ranch High maintains the status quo and allow the deep-rooted tension to brew—a dangerous yet common phenomenon (e.g., Pollock 2005).

Integrated segregation at Ranch High is thus normalized through both action and inaction on the school’s part. On one hand, the school facilitates segregation through its decisions on how to allocate classes into hallways and on where to place school bus stops. At Ranch High, not only does tracking shape social groupings because students typically form friendship groups based on who their classmates are (e.g., Hallinan and Sørenson 1985), but the track-based spatial sorting is a further step that ensures that students from different tracks rarely encounter each other—not just socially but also physically (Flores-Gonzalez 2005). Similarly, the placement of bus stops forces bussed students to travel through campus after school in a way that marks them as “Other.” On the other hand, through its lack of action in openly addressing strained relations and in promoting meaningful contact between students, the school implicitly communicates to students that the status quo and all the meanings underlying current patterns of spatial segregation and illusory group contact are acceptable or even normal.

Bonita High School

Egalitarian Campus Layout Without Spatial Tracking or Busing Stigma

Bonita High is composed of six buildings that encircle a large, grassy park-like promenade (Figure 12). Resources are evenly distributed around campus, and facilities like the dumpsters are far from spaces students use. Because the quality of spaces on campus is uniform and spaces are not easily stratifiable, as will be detailed below, I use the term egalitarian to describe Bonita High’s spatial layout.
Of the six buildings, three are academic buildings with classrooms. The other three are the Main Administration Building (A-Building), the library (C-Building), and the gymnasium (E-Building), which each sit between two academic buildings. The buildings are similar in appearance and structure, though the F-Building is a two-story building. Aside from specific features and facilities in some buildings—such as the sound-proof Music Room and Auditorium in D-Building and the stairs in F-Building—the interiors of the academic buildings look similar. The three academic buildings are also uniform in their cleanliness and condition. The same lingering smell of cleaning products fills each building’s hallways. The linoleum floors are well maintained and typically appear glossy, though they occasionally lose their sheen between polishings.

Classes at Bonita High are sorted into buildings by subject rather than by academic track. B-Building contains math and science classes of all levels and grades. D-Building houses the performance and visual arts classes. The ROTC program is also located in D-Building, adjacent to the Music Room. F-Building houses all Language Arts, Foreign Language, and journalism classes. Almost all students enter B- and F-Buildings at some point in their day. The buildings are uniform in their appearance, with the exception of F-Building, which stands tall as the only two-story building on campus. As in Ranch High, litter is scattered throughout campus after lunch. Unlike at Ranch High, however, it is not concentrated in any particular segments of campus.

As in Ranch High, a cluster of portables accommodates the growing student population. Unlike Ranch High, however, the subject matter, track level, and teacher seniority of the classes held in the portable classrooms do not follow a pattern. Also unlike in Ranch High, the portable classrooms at Bonita High are not seen as less desirable, since they are similar in quality to the
classrooms in the main buildings. For example, all portable classrooms at Bonita High have air conditioning, linoleum flooring, and are on the same paved concrete terrain as the rest of campus.

The circular layout of campus, with the Administration Building overlooking the main promenade, means that most activity on campus during non-instructional hours is subject to adult supervision. Perhaps because adult supervision is equally distributed throughout campus, there is no prominent area on campus with more vandalism or deviance than other areas. Since classes are organized spatially by subject rather than by track, students from different social backgrounds, academic tracks, and social groups often encounter each other in the same space, and no student is restricted to a particular segment of campus. Thus, unlike Ranch High, where spatial layout and school-level spatial tracking preemptively set the stage for stratification and inequality, the egalitarian layout and the subject-based organization of classes into buildings at Bonita High eliminates the potential of space to exist as a dimension of stratification. The spatial arrangements and organization facilitate space sharing, as all students travel throughout campus daily and feel equally entitled to campus space.

While bussed students at Ranch High are subject to a ritualistic and stigmatizing walk from the back of campus to the front, bussed students at Bonita High come from all around campus and catch their busses at the side of campus. Because there are four places around campus where students get picked up, the attention to the school buses is diffused. While bussed students in Ranch High are claustrophobically packed into tight and narrow sidewalk spaces, bussed students in Bonita High wait for their buses in more favorable conditions. Along the sidewalk where the school buses park is a spacious grassy lawn where both bussed and residential students congregate after school. It is not uncommon for intermingling to occur
between bussed and non-bussed students. Unlike in Ranch High, where non-bussed students equate bussed status to racial minority status, students in Bonita High typically do not associate busing status with race, even when probed.

*Space and Blurred Boundaries at Bonita High: Differences Do Not Stratify*

The boundary work at Bonita High is starkly different than the boundary work at Ranch High. Unlike at Ranch High, students at Bonita High do not report inequalities in the quality, condition, or desirability of space on campus. Since all students travel throughout campus on any given day regardless of academic track, grade level, or social background, no student is restricted to a particular segment of campus. Therefore, in contrast to perceptions of “right” versus “wrong” sides of campus at Ranch High, there is a general sense that everyone had equal ownership of campus at Bonita High.

To be sure, despite feelings that campus belonged equally to everyone, lunchtime spatial territories exist at Bonita High as they did at Ranch High. Lunchtime social groups are racially diverse and are typically based on grade level and extracurricular activities. While there is some academic track-based clustering to the extent that track coincides with extracurricular activities (for example, most students in the Rotary Club are also in the college-preparatory track), it is not uncommon for social groups to be composed of friends in different academic tracks. Typical social groups associated with lunchtime territories are “the seniors,” “jocks,” “upperclassmen,” “football players,” “basketball players,” “Mormon water polo players,” “the wrestling team,” and “partiers.” Though tracking at Bonita High are also somewhat racialized (though not nearly to the extent as it was in Ranch High), race is not a dominant characteristic on which students based
social groupings. As Shawna, a middle-income white, female described when probed to talk about race:

I think race has nothing to do with it at all. Definitely not…I think everyone is just diverse and have different cultures in their groups and I think [groupings] really fit their personalities and personal interests. For example, the kids who love to party, I always look at it like high school is their kingdom. And then people who are more religious, you can say, affiliate themselves with friends with the same beliefs. So I guess it has more to do with personalities and interests and stuff like that. It’s not really a search of someone who’s the same race as you or anything, that all kind of just blends together. And I would say even the lower income group is [made up of] different groups of people. It’s from the high achievers to the partiers to the faith-based to athletics but it’s the character of those people that really defines what group they’re in.

As Shawna suggests, race and class boundaries are far less rigid at Bonita High than they are at Ranch High, and friendships that traverse socio-demographic categories are common through extracurricular or school activities.

Even the gang presence on campus aligns with these patterns of blurred racial boundaries and egalitarianism. All students are aware of gang territory on campus—two small grassy hills at the side of the promenade, one occupied by the “Asian” gang and the other by the “Latino” gang21. Importantly, other students do not view these small gangs as serious threats, dismissing them as “stupid” or “posers,” since they are small, local gangs whose conflicts are exclusively with each other, and whose fights usually occur off campus. Still, they make up the main deviant presence on campus with intimidating (if cautiously dismissed) leaders to be avoided, and their right to their small territories are uncontested. Unlike in Ranch High, however, where the most dominant groups occupy the most desirable spaces on campus, the gangs at Bonita High are neither seen as dominant groups, nor do they occupy spaces that are perceived as superior. Thus, much like the “jocks” or the “Mormon water polo players,” the gangs at Bonita High are viewed as merely a different group rather than a superior presence on campus.

21 Interestingly, racial boundaries are somewhat fluid even in the gangs, as the Asian gang includes members and leaders who are fully Latino.
Busing status does not exist as a relevant boundary in the minds of Bonita High students. Though some students acknowledge, when probed, that most bussed students are racial minorities, interviewees typically do not articulate value-laden judgments about their bussed peers, nor is busing a relevant differentiating factor like extracurriculars, race, or grade level were. Instead, questions about busing often compel students to report general or miscellaneous information about busing that they thought outsiders like me may not know. Common facts includ reports of students sneaking onto the bus or of the difficulty bussed students have with social life after school:

Interviewer: Tell me about the students who take the bus here.

Steve (middle-income Asian male): Hmm [long pause]. I guess nothing really different… I guess their time management is really—I dunno, they have like a tight schedule so they get here kind of early to school. And then like right after school like ten minutes—they have to be at the bus already…So that’s like very—I guess it’s not as social. They’re not really as social after school and stuff like that. I mean maybe online they are but like they don’t really get to hang out with friends after school and stuff.

When probed towards discussing stigma or status hierarchies associated with being bussed, Steve, like other interviewees, reports that bussed students are not viewed as different from non-bussed students, aside from their means of transportation back home.

Moreover, while differences between social groups are often value-laden at Ranch High, differences between groups at Bonita High do not translate into inequality or ranked according to a dominant hierarchy. For example, though groups like the “partiers” and the “Mormon water polo players” are viewed as distinctly different, it was unclear—and not contested—which groups were superior to which. The coexistence of different yet equal groups occupying different yet equal spaces at Bonita High contributes to an understanding that everyone could find a place to belong on campus, a sentiment many interviewees voiced. In contrast to Ranch High, where
space is an amplified and bright boundary with the power to hierarchalize (Lamont 1992) students, space at Bonita High is a muted and blurred social boundary that only differentiates—but does not stratify—students.

**Solidarity and Commonality at Bonita High: Everyone is Around the Same Level**

In contrast to Ranch High, space and race at Bonita High differentiates but does not stratify students, and students from different socio-demographic backgrounds and academic tracks all travel throughout the entire campus space on any given day. The egalitarian spatial layout and organization contributes to an overall ethos of solidarity and commonality at Bonita High.

Though cliques exist at Bonita High just as they do at Ranch High, there is no clear hierarchy that socially ranks the cliques. Instead, students perceive other-group peers as being different yet sharing similar goals. For example, although income status ranges among the student population, it is assumed that everyone is “generally middle class,” and has their fair share of struggles—be they financial, familial, or psychological. This overall sentiment is embodied in common phrases such as “everybody is broke,” “everybody has their own problems,” “everybody can use help,” and “nobody’s life is perfect,” articulated by interviewees across socio-demographic lines. Thus, while race is a powerfully value-laden characteristic conflated with other socioeconomic characteristics at Ranch High, it acts more like a dimension of difference for Bonita High students. Andrew, a low-income Asian male, explains why race does not carry as much weight at Bonita High as it does in other schools:

**Andrew:** Race is not really like something that is a big issue here. Like, no one really there’s, like, no racism. People won’t be like talking down about people, other races. So it’s kind of—it’s easier to just make—like, just have fun and joke around a bit as long as it doesn't get too far.
Interviewer: So why do you think people here are comfortable joking about race?
Andrew: Mostly because like everyone is around the same level here in like, say, income and I guess their status. No one really, like, makes fun of a race and says they’re poor and stuff.

While the dearth of interracial contact leads Ranch High students to form judgments of other-race peers based on largely negative stereotypes, the opposite is true at Bonita High. At Bonita High, because most students have friends from more than one racial group, levels of uncertainty, perceived threat, and distrust of other races is dramatically smaller compared to Ranch High.

Also in contrast to Ranch High, the commonality of friendship groups that traverse racial and socioeconomic boundaries at Bonita High—partially made possible by an egalitarian campus layout and school organizational policies that promotes intergroup contact—makes race a comfortable subject of discussion and even humor among students and even some teachers. The ubiquitous propensity for racial joking, which targets all races, is a case of difference management via humor (Black 2009; Silva 2013). As Silva (2013) argues, racial humor can sometimes be used to “neutralize differences”—to identify and acknowledge differences, discount them, and thus remove their potential as stratifying forces. In Bonita High, this collective lighthearted approach to dealing with race results in a common goal of assessing each other more as individuals rather than as members of rigid social categories. When asked to explain why racial joking was commonly accepted at Bonita High, Sasha, a middle-class biracial (black/white) student explains:

Sasha: People aren’t offended easily here.
Interviewer: Why not?
Sasha: I think it’s how diverse it is here and everyone has a friend who’s black or is Asian or is white, and so they’ll like just joke about it because they know that their friends aren’t offended so everyone else isn’t.

Thus, while cliques exist at Bonita High, racial and socioeconomic boundaries are not rigid. Race ois perceived as a dimension of difference, and open discussions and joking bout race
acknowledge and neutralize race. Students across groups share a general sense of solidarity, stemming from a common understanding that everyone shares a similar “middle class” status, and nobody is immune to struggles in life. As a middle-income black student summarizes, comparing Bonita High to other nearby suburban high schools, “Students at Bonita have had a taste of life...you’re not at a place where people don’t really understand what a harder life is just because maybe they just had everything given to them...or are extremely sheltered.” The perception that fellow peers share similar morals and goals, despite diverse backgrounds and demographics, serves as a powerful bonding agent at Bonita High.

Conclusion

Past scholarship on school integration has insufficiently explored how spatial layout and organizational-level planning jointly contribute to integration contexts and outcomes. Synthesizing sociological literature with literatures in architectural planning and geography, this chapter considers space as an agentic, active, and “purposeful social product” (Wolch and Dear 1989) that is brought to life by organizational-level spatial planning. Studying two diverse suburban schools with different spatial landscapes, I argue that spatial layout interacts with school-level spatial planning to shape boundary work among students, which in turn influences social relations and integration patterns. I find that spatial layout and school-level spatial planning contribute to bright boundaries and deleterious group relations in one context, while the same forces jointly foster blurred boundaries and a sense of egalitarianism in the other.

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22 I discuss racial humor because of its unique analytical significance in this study. However, though my respondents did not report conflicts or negative feelings arising out of racial joking at Bonita High, I certainly do not recommend it as an ideal or surefire guarantor of positive race relations. On the contrary, racial “humor” to some may be hurtful to others, and detrimental to group relations in many cases. Racial humor should be cautiously analyzed with a careful attention to the pretenses and purposes underlying such “humor.”
School segregation is more than a story of how students occupy different spaces at school. Instead, the data show that segregation is a complex process that involves at least two components: (a) how space is deemed equal or unequal through meaning-making processes, and (b) how groups occupying their respective spaces are perceived as equal or unequal. To illustrate the first component, I introduced the stratifiability of space as a property of physical space. Stratifiability is based on the perceivable physical properties of space—such as the (un)even distribution of resources and facilities throughout a space, or the arrangement of buildings in a space—that precede social processes. While the stratifiability of space is not deterministic, its interaction with organizational-level planning proliferates the process through which space takes on meaning and transforms from a differentiating agent to a stratifying one.

These spatial meaning-making processes, in turn, shape the second component of the process of segregation—how groups occupying their respective spaces are perceived as equal or unequal. Whether space is a stratifying or merely a differentiating force impacts whether the groups occupying their respective spaces are seen unequal or merely different. Organizational-level practices such as spatial tracking and decisions about where buses pick up bussed students inundates space with meaning and allows physical boundaries to map onto social boundaries, and vice versa. At Ranch High, the logical corollary to students’ perception of campus spaces as unequal in quality and desirability was that the groups occupying such spaces were also unequal. School-level factors such as spatial tracking, the placement of bus stops that stigmatized bussed students, and the school’s silence amidst obvious group tensions further reified the correlation between spatial status and group status by sending implicit messages to students about belonging and group hierarchies that proved damaging to group relations. At Bonita High, on the other hand, students perceived campus spaces as uniform in quality and desirability, and viewed the
groups occupying such spaces as merely different. Organizational-level decisions such as spatially grouping classes by subject and the placement of bus stops in places that encouraged mixing between bussed and non-bussed students further promoted an ethos of group equality despite differences.

This work builds on existing studies that examine the power of space in shaping identities, group relations, and integration contexts (e.g., Bettie 2003; Milner 2006; Thorne 1993; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009). While such studies unveil the complex ways group territories in space influence boundary work and generate inequality, they take for granted how the spatial layout and the organizational-level spatial planning of these social reproduction sites precede and set the stage for the group relations and dynamics they foreground.

This chapter underscores the understudied importance of how spatial arrangements and organizational-level planning jointly contribute to contexts of integration, and points to feasible solutions to encourage successful integration and positive group relations. Updating and refining our knowledge of the factors that facilitate successful integration in diverse school settings is necessary in garnering insight to help schools better serve diverse student bodies and, in doing so, avoid reproducing and exacerbating inequalities present in the U.S. today.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

This chapter makes concluding remarks in two main sections. I begin by discussing the theoretical contributions of my findings as they relate to research on educational inequality and school segregation, immigrant incorporation, and discussion of how culture and structure shape inequality. I argue that my findings open the door for more nuanced and complex theoretical insights in studies of ever-diversifying students in the 21st century and in social inequality more generally. Next, I situate my research findings in the bigger picture. Specifically, I discuss the implications of my findings for school policy and reform, lend insights for future directions of research, and reflect on what this study can teach us about society more generally.

Theoretical Contributions

Implications for Educational Inequality and School Integration

From the perspective of educational inequality and school integration research, this study urges scholars to rethink and update our current understandings of how inequality is reproduced in schools. I spotlight how race, class, and context interact to reproduce inequality in important ways that are often missed in traditional methodological approaches used to study educational inequality (e.g., quantitative studies that assume uniformity in the effects of family background variables and interaction terms; qualitative studies that focus on dynamics within one school context).

Decades of research has shown that individual and family background characteristics powerfully shape students’ life chances (Blau and Duncan 1967; Duncan and Magnuson 2011), and that differences in cultural, social, and financial capital tied to these background
characteristics predispose students for divergent school experiences and outcomes. Also well
documented (see Chapter 4 for a review) is the power of the intersectional dynamics of
interrelated social categories like race and class in shaping inequality, such that we cannot study
one—e.g., race— independent of the other—e.g., class. Also foundational in educational
inequality research is the decisive influence of organizational and school-level forces on
students’ experiences and outcomes. We know that forces such as peer composition (e.g.,
Crosnoe et al. 2008; Coleman 1966), academic tracking (e.g., Oakes 1985), school culture (e.g.,
Deal and Peterson 1999; Nunn 2014), and the implementation of school policies (e.g, Carter
2012; Skiba et al. 2002) shape the contours of school inequality in U.S. schools in notorious
ways.

What is missing from this quintessential portrait of American educational inequality,
however, is a nuanced understanding of a race-class-context interaction that abandons the
assumption that race and class intersect to produce uniform effects, and that school contextual
effects are uniform for all students. Specifically, I argue that the interaction between race, class,
and context occurs in a two-layered process. First, an individual’s race and class intersect to
create distinct identities, such as “low-income Asian” and “high-income Latino,” that are greater
in meaning and significance than the social categorical parts of which they are composed.
Accounting for this intersectionality acknowledges, as research has shown (e.g., Pattillo 2013;
Stuber 2011; Vallejo 2012), that race may be experienced differently depending on one’s class,
and likewise, that class may be experienced differently depending on one’s race. Second, this
race-class interaction, in turn, interacts with school context so that individuals who share the
same intersection—e.g., low-income Asian—experience their race-class intersection differently
depending on school contexts. Being a low-income Asian student in Ranch High is a
qualitatively—and sometimes quantitatively—different experience than being a low-income Asian student in Bonita High. The contextual contingency of the race-class intersectionality is a crucial yet missing link in our current approaches to studying educational inequality and school integration.

Moreover, in studying school-level contextual effects, I unexpectedly find, as I discuss in Chapter 6, that the spatial layout of school campuses contributes importantly to the social dynamics I foreground. In Ranch High, a hierarchically-arranged campus layout, coupled with the disproportionate placement of low-track classes at the less desirable back of campus and high-track classes at the front of campus, maintains and reinforces social cleavages and hierarchies. In Bonita High, an egalitarian campus layout, coupled with subject-based (rather than track-based) allocation of classes into buildings, facilitated blurred group boundaries, as students of different demographic and track groups often encounter each other in the same space. The finding that space (in its interaction with organizational practices like tracking) structures social relations and hierarchies challenges researchers to reconsider what contextual elements matter for educational inequality—and social inequality more generally. While continued investigations of how traditionally-studied organizational practices such as tracking and school policies are valuable, so too is an expansion of our current understandings of what “context” entails and what facets of context matter in shaping student outcomes. The fact that other disciplines such as architectural planning and geography have contemplated the role of spatial layout in structuring social relations, but that educational inequality researchers have still not adequately done so, is a testament to both (a) the possibility that we have been too myopic and restrictive in our current thinking, and (b) the need for us to think more creatively and expansively about these issues.
Implications for Immigration Research

Findings from this study complicate the story of immigrant incorporation as conceptualized by segmented assimilation theory. While segmented assimilation theory reduces the heterogeneity in immigrant incorporation processes to oversimplified typologies of incorporation, this study offers a less predictive and more dynamic conceptualization of immigrant incorporation that is explicitly situated in the complex interaction between race, class, and context detailed above.

Segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou 1993) holds that government policies, societal reception (prejudiced or non-prejudiced), and the characteristics of one’s coethnic community together constitute modes of incorporation, which shape immigrant incorporation outcomes. Behavior patterns such as renouncing or clinging to one’s ethnic culture, in turn, occur within the confines of these modes of incorporation to produce incorporation patterns that resemble straight-line assimilation, downward assimilation, or accommodation without assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

While segmented assimilation theory allows for context of reception (on a macro level) to interact with individual attributes, it oversimplifies immigrant incorporation pathways in assuming that a particular mode of incorporation, combined with a particular set of behavioral patterns, necessarily yields a specific incorporation typology. Missing from this theoretical framework is the possibility that micro contexts, such as school context, can confound the predictive pattern that segmented assimilation theory posits and mediate the relationship between modes of incorporation, behavioral attributes, and incorporation pathways. In other words, as this study suggests, it is possible for two Vietnamese students to enter the same macro context of
incorporation (e.g., the state in which this study takes place, and/or the South Haven community) and share similar behavioral attributes (retain ethnic culture), but experience divergent incorporation paths.

As I show in Chapters 4 and 5, these divergent paths are at least partially due to attending schools with distinctly different contexts of reception: at Ranch High, retaining one’s ethnic culture is a liability, since doing so means retaining that which sets one apart as “other” or “foreign,” since non-white status at Ranch High translates to outsider status; at Bonita High, on the other hand, retaining one’s ethnic culture is consistent with the overall collective school identity and pluralism on which Bonita students often pride themselves. In addition, as my findings suggest, behavioral patterns such as the choice to retain one’s ethnic culture also operate dynamically with contextual forces, such that behavioral patterns can evolve or change over time through immersion in specific kinds of school contexts. In short, this study adds complexity to segmented assimilation theory by elucidating how context can produce intragroup differences: two individuals who enter into similar receiving societies and share similar origins and attitudinal inclinations, but who attend different schools with distinct contextual attributes, can experience dramatically different incorporation pathways and outcomes.

Implications for the Culture versus Structure Debate

To the study of social inequality more generally, this study offers a timely and nuanced update in the culture-structure discussion. While scholars debate whether structural or cultural forces have a more profound impact in shaping the contours of social inequality, it is well established that culture and structure interact to jointly produce and reproduce inequality (Wilson 2009). Often, cultural frames and orientations develop in the context of structural conditions and,
in turn, reinforce the structural conditions from which they emerged. For example, as Wilson (2009:134) discusses, the “code of the street” is a cultural code often found in poor inner-city neighborhoods that stems from chronic poverty and deep structural hardship. The presence of the cultural code introduces a (informal) sense of autonomy and regulation in high-crime, low-police protection neighborhoods, yet “deep involvement in the code of the street…ultimately reduces one’s chances for successful integration into the broader society and thereby contributes to the perpetuation of poverty” (Wilson 2009:134).

Findings from this study, however, urge scholars to consider seriously the element of dimensionality when engaging with the structure-culture discussion. That is, structural and cultural forces occupy different dimensional layers of influence. Drawing on the findings of this study, we can revisit Figure 3 in the introduction, this time considering the multiple dimensions of influence in thinking about the culture-structure interaction rather than immigrant incorporation specifically. The top-down directionality of influence, whereby processes occurring at the higher levels (such as policies at the national, state, or city level) influence those occurring at the lower levels (such as the school level) is supported by a wealth of research in policy and education (e.g., Neckerman 2008). However, as I illustrate in Chapters 4-6, lower-level processes are more proximal to individuals and thus have the power to, in turn, either reaffirm or compete with processes occurring at higher levels.

The school-level context of reception that I document in Chapters 4 and 5, along with the role of spatial layout and tracking in structuring social dynamics discussed in Chapter 6, are cultural and structural forces whose influences compete with higher-level forces. For example, the powerfully charged context of reception at Ranch High, along with the campus’s hierarchically arranged spatial layout, are cultural and structural forces at the school level that
compete with the desegregation (busing) initiatives at the city level. Similarly, the decidedly egalitarian context of reception at Bonita High, coupled with the egalitarian spatial layout of the campus, are cultural and structural forces that compete with the more macro U.S. racial hierarchy at the national level—an observation that worried many Bonita High teachers who cared about their minority students’ well-being after leaving the Bonita community. Because cultural and structural forces permeate multiple dimensions of influence, it is crucial to add the element of dimensionality in culture-structure discussions. Failing to explicitly consider the role of dimensionality in the culture-structure discussion obscures our understanding of the processes and mechanisms behind the culture-structure interaction, and consequently, bars progress in targeted and efficient policymaking.

Results from this study also demand more serious attention to the possibility that “one person’s social structure is another person’s culture” (Wilson 2009:76, quoting Erik Olin Wright). Just as employers’ biases against black male job applicants in the inner city is a “culturally shaped practice” that becomes structure to the extent that it is a “pattern of exclusion that is systematically enforced through repeated rejections of their job applications” (Wilson 2009:76), so too is middle-class white students’ systematic social exclusion of minorities at Ranch High a culturally shaped practice that evolves into social structure that constrains and limits the opportunities and well-being of minority students as equals on campus. At Bonita High, too, I show how one person’s culture can be another’s structure. For example, because the majority of (middle-class) Bonita High students come from racial minority backgrounds and/or have parents or family members who rose out of economically humble beginnings, these students

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23 Though the seemingly harmonious group dynamics at Ranch High and the relatively similar representation of Latinos (32%) and whites (43%) on campus suggest that the groups may simply be separate but equal, I argue that white students’ overwhelmingly disproportionate representation in the highest academic tracks, student government and leadership positions, and other groups that are deemed high in social status is evidence that “separate but equal” is an inappropriate and inaccurate conception of group dynamics at Ranch High.
generally exhibit the culturally shaped valuation of hard work, humble beginnings, and struggle. This culturally shaped valuation, in turn, crystallizes into a social structure that facilitates smoother integration of (for example) economically disadvantaged peers whose traditionally disadvantaged origins would typically position them for marginalization in middle-class contexts.

**The Bigger Picture: What Ranch High and Bonita High Can Teach Us**

In this dissertation, I paint a detailed portrait of everyday life at two very small, enclosed social worlds in an attempt to update and refine our understanding of how inequality is produced, reproduced, and maintained in the often invisible or subtle occurrences of everyday lived experiences. My findings offer bigger-picture applications in three main areas. First, I highlight the policy implications of this study as it pertains to how we design, reform, and think about schools in order to best serve diverse student populations. Next, I discuss how findings from this study offer directions for future research. Finally, I situate this study in the broader social landscape (of U.S. inequality) and reflect on lessons that this study offers to us as fellow citizens and neighbors more generally.

*Policy Implications and Lessons for Schools*

We should be alarmed that the patterns I foreground are occurring in schools that, according to the education research, are ideal, based on their relative diversity, high test scores, suburban location, and abundant resources. Despite these characteristics, however, critical problems exist. An obvious lesson from my comparison of Ranch High and Bonita High is that positive intergroup contact, under specific conditions, is essential for student well-being in
diverse schools. As Allport (1954) taught us over half a century ago, positive intergroup contact requires that groups—at the very least—share equal status, share common goals and cooperate to achieve these goals, engage in informal personal interaction, and receive institutional support. There is much for schools to do in fulfilling these stipulations.

First, schools must take the initiative to encourage and facilitate positive intergroup contact, cooperation, and camaraderie through extracurricular and informal activities such as sports, student government, and interest clubs. For example, as past research has already suggested, late busses can be offered to facilitate bussed students’ involvement in sports (Holland 2010), or morning practices (rather than after school/evening practice) may increase the likelihood of girls’ sports involvement, since concerns about safety typically bar female students from participating in sports.

For student-run interest clubs, which have the potential of mirroring the hierarchies and segregation of campus overall, schools should encourage the recruitment and retention of more diversity in membership. Teachers who advise these clubs can also play an active role to this end, and should be mindful in which clubs they advise. For example, a teacher who advises only majority-white or majority-minority clubs may inadvertently encourage group segregation or maintain group hierarchies. Particularly popular teachers may capitalize on their popularity and play an active role in encouraging and incentivizing the formation of clubs with diverse membership. In traditionally larger clubs such as Key Club or similar community service clubs, adult advisors (typically a teacher) can intervene and divide students into diverse smaller “teams” to encourage cross-group interaction and collaboration on a more personal and casual level.
Intervention in student government is more difficult, given that leadership appointments are typically elected by the student body. Moreover, strategies such as Ranch High’s administrators’ attempt to recruit a Cultural Awareness Officer (who would have been the only racial minority in student government, and who would have bore the burden of solving the intergroup tensions in her entire school) are neither likely to be fair nor effective in promoting positive intergroup relations. However, teachers and school administrators can encourage minority students to run for government and/or appoint minority students for other leadership positions or roles in the classroom that allow them to demonstrate leadership and establish more visibility as peer leaders on campus. Such practices may ultimately lend themselves to more representative elected leaders in student government.

School administrators, teachers, and leaders must be critically conscious of group dynamics and hierarchies on campus, and should work actively and creatively to improve them—rather than passively turn a blind eye to them or dismiss them as normative. Relatedly, students’ well-being and sense of belonging at school must be taken seriously. To this end, we must rethink how we evaluate and reward “good” schools. Just as important as test scores and graduation rates is students’ psychological and social well-being (Crosnoe 2011), as problems related to feelings of belonging can extend deleteriously into adulthood. Just as some schools incorporate student/parent feedback in their teacher compensation (Hanushek and Rivkin 2010; Hatry and Greiner 1984; Glazerman et al. 2010), so too should high schools be evaluated (and ranked, and rewarded) based on the degree to which they offer (all groups of) students the best possible social environment in which to develop during their formative adolescent years. If schools are held accountable for facilitating social and psychological well-being across groups, I believe we will more likely see more—and faster—results than if scholars simply continue
lamenting the current state of affairs and making end-of-book or end-of-dissertation policy recommendations towards these ends.

Secondly, Bonita High’s school rivalry with Sunnyvale High brings to light the potentially transformative role of collective identity and healthy school rivalry in fostering positive cross-group relations within schools. The presence of a rival school based on characteristics deemed meaningful to students (e.g., academics and multiple sports) creates a healthy “Other” against which students can establish a collective school identity and sense of camaraderie. Unlike the within-school “othering” behavior I discuss, this school-based “othering” is based on school membership rather than on socio-demographic characteristics and, thus, is unlikely to be damaging from a social justice prospective. School should thus consider forging healthy cross-school rivalries (and not just encourage “school spirit,” which can easily exclude marginalized students) for the purpose of establishing within-school cohesion and cross-group bonding. In short, schools have a responsibility to simultaneously foster both “bonding” (via encouraging school rivalries) and “bridging” (via encouraging positive intergroup relations within schools) capital (Putnam 2000).

Third, as I discuss at the end of Chapter 6, the social ramifications of spatial configurations should be more carefully considered at the planning stages. As Chapter 6 shows, spatial layout, though not deterministic, can preemptively structure social relations in both productive and harmful ways, and precautions should be taken to avoid the latter. For schools that have already been built or that cannot feasibly alter the spatial organization of their campuses, it is important to avoid the deleterious (if unintended) consequences of arranging classes into school spaces by academic track or any other characteristic that coincides with a hierarchy deemed meaningful among students. This applies to both schools with egalitarian
layouts and hierarchical layouts, but is particularly crucial for the latter. For example, it is possible that group relations at Ranch High may have been less strained if classes were organized into hallways randomly or by academic subject rather than academic track. Schools should be vigilant when considering the implicit messages it sends to students through its practices and policies, and should avoid practices such as spatial tracking or spatial decisions that visibly stigmatize already vulnerable groups, such as bussed students. School leaders should ensure that resources and classes should be allocated throughout campus in a non-hierarchical manner.

Of course, the ideal goal should be to dismantle academic tracking, as doing so would eliminate one of the key ways space can be charged with meaning, value, and status. However, since this feat is not likely to be accomplished quickly, schools could, in the meantime (and at the very least) render these inequalities less obvious in the eyes of students. I make this recommendation cautiously: I do not suggest that schools use smoke and mirrors to shroud their continued implementation of inequality-reproducing practices like academic tracking. However, students are quick to both recognize inequality in school space and utilize hierarchical social statuses to negotiate hierarchical spatial territories. Given that detracking schools is not likely to happen overnight, it may be useful to at least avoid the potentially damaging social and psychological consequences that may arise when students keenly see the connections between track, space, and demographics, and then interpret these connections as messages about who is more valued, more highly prioritized, or more deserving of resources than others.

Finally, introducing required courses in sociological and social justice oriented topics may help address and alleviate some of the issues that this study brings to light. Though there are movements to introduce these course topics as more fundamental parts of college curricula (e.g.,
see Sleeter 2011; Humphreys 1997), I contend that, by the high school years, adolescents are ready to begin thinking critically about hierarchies, social relations, power dynamics, and social inequalities. I believe that a simple lack of critical awareness and self-reflection—rather than actual malice or the intent to actively marginalize or antagonize one’s peers—is largely responsible for the dynamics of exclusion/inclusion and of dominance/marginalization I witness at both high schools. Indeed, almost all the students I interviewed were “nice” and well meaning, yet I often experienced dissonance between my interviews and my observations when I observed the “nice” person I interviewed act or speak in ways that were damaging for positive group relations. Given that high school adolescents are more mature and analytical than they often get credit for, I believe that failing to challenge them to be critically conscious thinkers on a social level necessarily means abandoning a key aspect of their social and psychological intelligence and development. If it is true that group dynamics quickly become taken for granted and accepted as given or natural, as I find in both schools, perhaps what students need is an extra push to challenge them to rethink and possibly restructure the status quo. Importantly, such a curriculum should be required of all students and not just minority or underrepresented students.

As we can learn in the case of the well-intentioned community-organized black outreach group at Ranch High, singling out a particular group communicates to all students that only that group needs to be educated about social justice and inequality issues. The result, as in the case at Ranch High, could be further separation, stigmatization, and a misinterpretation of social justice and social inequality causes.

For schools like Bonita High that have school cultures that are more pluralistic and more diversity-friendly than “mainstream” society, the implementation of a sociological curriculum may have the added benefit of preparing traditionally disadvantaged students for the
disappointment or shock they may experience when they leave their communities and enter other communities that are less tolerant, less receptive, and more hierarchical. Exposure to a critically conscious curriculum may help them develop strategies to remain resilient in navigating less nurturing worlds while protecting the positivity and optimism that they gained in their home communities. The last thing we need, given the current state of group relations in the U.S., is for these students to dismiss their nurturing communities of origin as atypical and unattainable anomalies and accept hostility, tension, and marginalization as normative.

**Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

These findings pave the way for new avenues of research. While this study provides in-depth detail into how context interacts with individual/family background characteristics to shape school integration processes, I cannot establish causal arguments in testing whether the processes and patterns I foreground translate to measurable academic outcomes. Thus, a natural next step is to study students’ outcomes as they relate to these contextual differences. Quantitative models may help in establishing causality. Do differences in schools’ contexts of integration translate to how low-income students fare academically, socially, and emotionally? A longitudinal approach that investigates how school contexts affect integration at different stages of the process would also be useful, since integration is a process that occurs and changes over time. Are contextual effects on integration durable over time? Also, since boundaries are not static, what is the relationship between boundary shifts and contextual shifts?

This study focused on two school settings with different school contexts, but other compositional, structural, and cultural arrangements may give rise to other differences in integration not captured here. Additional research on how school context shapes integration
outcomes and students’ social and psychological well-being in different types of schools is needed. For example, both schools in this study were racially diverse. How the story would change in a more racially homogeneous school setting is unclear. Similarly, close to half of the students in each of the schools in this study were low-income. Would a different story emerge with altered distributions of low-income students, and is there a “tipping point” of diversity (e.g., Moody 2001) where the context of integration shifts? More research is needed to discern how much of an effect peer composition has on the dynamics I foreground. Are the types of campus dynamics I spotlight restricted to their respective school composition types (strong minority vs. strong white presence)? Or can a Bonita-like dynamic exist at a Ranch-like school (or vice versa)? In other words, does a stronger minority presence necessarily mean a more receptive school context for traditionally disadvantaged students, and does a stronger white presence necessarily translate to a less receptive school context?

My findings also speak to future studies in immigration and immigrant incorporation. Past studies (e.g., Crosnoe 2009) suggest that social experiences in high school have the potential to affect identities and life chances well after high school. As with most research on relatively recent immigrant populations, more research is needed to study the long-term effects of the findings I foreground. Future studies should work towards exploring how the immigrant work ethic identity—developed in youth but likely salient beyond it—influences youths’ post-secondary and career outcomes over time. As mentioned above, some teachers at Bonita High applaud the tolerant and supportive inter-group dynamics on campus but worry about minority students’ likely disillusionment when they enter the “real world” outside the Bonita community, where many will likely experience social subordination and exclusion for the first time. More research is needed to systematically analyze a wider array of outcomes in order to gain a more
holistic view of how context shapes different paths into—and incorporation destinations of—the minority middle-class. Finally, while the findings from this chapter are limited to 1.5- and second-generation immigrants due to the immigration patterns of the Ranch and Bonita communities (both whose immigrant populations are disproportionately composed of recent immigrants), future research should expand on the generational diversity of the immigrant population studied and explore how context, boundary-making and framing, and incorporation interact differently in contexts with more generationally diverse immigrant groups.

While Chapter 6 offers useful findings for how space may be an important yet overlooked contributor to inequality in schools, more work is needed to expand on the types of campus layouts, organizational-level planning, and student group dynamics studied. Future research may study, for example, hierarchically arranged campuses with egalitarian group dynamics or egalitarian campus layouts that house hierarchical student groups. In addition, more work is needed to explore whether my findings are applicable in school settings with different compositional characteristics. For example, future studies should examine whether there exists a “tipping point” (Moody 2001) in diversity where spatial layout no longer matters, or where the influence of spatial layout peaks.

Though I focus on two high schools to study how space structures social relations in Chapter 6, the chapter’s contributions and applications span beyond educational settings. Future studies should explore how spatial layout and organizational-level planning interact to produce, in other social settings, social processes similar to those outlined in this study. Sites where intergroup contact may be common, such as shared spaces in neighborhoods and communities, as well as institutions such as corporations and workplaces, may be of particular interest. In all, my findings on spatial layout pave the way for a better understanding of how space, in practice,
can be manipulated and employed strategically to promote positive intergroup relations in
diverse schools.

More generally, this research tell us is that we need to rethink what we believe are the
elements that constitute a “good” school. As already discussed, both Ranch High and Bonita
High look “good” on paper, yet they diverge notably in how their diverse students fare in school.
Some scholars have already alerted us to the finding that schools affect students in non-uniform
ways (e.g., Jennings et al. 2015) and that the effects of some school-level variables—such as
peer composition—exert non-uniform influences on different student groups. This study, too,
offers evidence that not all “good” schools are similarly “good” for all students. Future studies
must more seriously probe this question of how schools influence students differently, and what
the consequences of these non-uniform school effects may be.

Finally, results from this study highlight the utility of employing diverse research designs
to study educational inequality from multiple angles. Through ethnography, interviews, and
surveys at two schools, this study shed light on processes that would have been missed with a
purely quantitative approach or an ethnography that focused on dynamics in only one school.
Moreover, future research should explore novel, creative, and/or interdisciplinary ways to study
the manifestation of inequality. For instance, future work could merge campus map data (see
Chapter 6) with curriculum and/or student data to test the impact of spatial configurations on
measurable outcomes.

General Reflections for Society

Class gaps are growing in the United States to a degree we have not seen since the Great
Depression (Piketty and Saez 2003). The residents who make up U.S. suburbia are changing
Non-white births now outnumber white births (U.S. Census 2012). In suburban schools, minorities are slowly becoming the majority (see Krishnamurthy 2014 for a discussion of this pattern in Illinois). Recent changes in the U.S. social landscape make it imperative for us to step back and seriously contemplate what we can learn from Ranch High and Bonita High on a more general level—beyond policy and research.

We often joke about the viciousness of teenagers and high school social life and wince at our high school memories, but experiences during adolescence matter, can be dangerous and damaging, and should be taken seriously (Crosnoe 2011). Suicide rates among U.S. youth aged 15-24 has tripled over the past half century (Cutler et al. 2001), and anti-bullying movements are now concerns at the federal government level and involve the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Education, the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (stopbullying.gov). We can no longer afford to normalize marginalization and exclusion by brushing them aside as typical facets of adolescent life. With increased access to technology, the ubiquity of social media, and changing demographics, marginalization and social hierarchies take on a more compounded, loaded, and impactful significance.

More than merely idiosyncratic or immature behavior that is part of adolescent development, the patterns of exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination I spotlight are an unflattering reflection of our society as a whole. These practices by youth are learned and mimicked—not from thin air or solely from each other, but from adults as well. If one person’s culture can indeed act as another’s structure (Wilson 2009:76, quoting Erik Olin Wright) in constraining ways, then we as a society should not be afraid of changing our culture(s) (e.g.,
outlooks, modes of behaviors, etc.) if they are hampering the opportunities or well-being of others. While diverging from or changing the status quo may cause us to step outside of our comfort zones, this study’s findings lend support to the value of simply being more self-aware and kinder as fellow citizens and community members. We need to make kindness and mindfulness a central part of our agendas in ways that transcend—and that are separate from—our political views. Our political inclinations should not interfere with this agenda, nor should they absolve us from the need to be more self-aware. Conservatives and liberals alike practice behaviors that marginalize others in everyday (normalized) interactions. We need to recognize our positions of power and privilege, be more cognizant of how we behave in light of these positions, treat each other more kindly, and teach future generations to do so as well.

Given the changes of our time discussed above, difference is likely to be the norm in suburban schools, as students increasingly encounter peers who are different from them. In suburban schools, we also are likely to see an influx of populations that look different from the inhabitants we typically associate with middle-class suburbia. Even in well-resourced, high-performing schools in 21st century suburbia, we still are unable to promise our students equality in their opportunities, school experiences, and outcomes. Looking forward, we must develop strategies to best serve diverse populations and foster healthy and positive intergroup relations in schools. How our society progresses in light of demographic changes lies in the hands of both our future generations and, importantly, in the hands of the schools in which they are socialized into becoming the next generation’s leaders.


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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Survey for High School Students in San Diego

Hello! Thanks for taking the time to participate in my survey! This survey asks about high school life in San Diego schools, and it will help me learn more about people’s different perspectives on how different students experience high school.

There are no right or wrong answers. Your answers are confidential and you are never asked to state your name in the survey, so please answer honestly.

If you don’t understand a question or need clarification, please raise your hand and ask me!

--Queenie 😊

First, please tell me a little bit about yourself.

1) School (check one): __________________________________________________________

2) Gender (check one):    □ Male    □ Female

3) What grade are you in (check one)?    □ 9    □ 10    □ 11    □ 12

4) Birthdate (month/day/year): ______/_____/______

5) How many siblings older than you do you have? ______

6) How many siblings younger than you do you have? ______

7) What is your mother’s highest level of education (check one)?
   □ Did not finish high school
   □ Some high school
   □ Finished high school
   □ Some college
   □ College graduate or above

8) What is your father’s highest level of education (check one)?
   □ Did not finish high school
   □ Some high school
   □ Finished high school
   □ Some college
   □ College graduate or above

9) Which best describes your race/ethnicity (check as many as apply)?
   □ White
   □ Latino/a
   □ African-American
   □ Indochinese/Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Malaysian, Burmese)
   □ Asian (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Japanese)
   □ Filipino
   □ Pacific Islander
   □ Native American
   □ Multi-racial/multi-ethnic (please specify): __________________________
   □ Other (please specify): __________________________

10) Are you an ESL (English as a Second Language) or ELL (English Language Learner) student (check one)?
    □ Yes    □ No
11) What language(s) do you speak at home?

12) Before school, do you take the school bus to school?  

13) After school, do you take the school bus home?  

14) Before school, do you take the city bus to school?  

15) After school, do you take the city bus home?  

16) Are you in a school choice program (like VEEP or CHOICE) that allows you to go to this school even though you live farther away?  

17) Do you receive free or reduced lunch at school (check one)?  

18) (If answered “no” above): Some people would qualify for free/reduced lunch (because of their household income) but they don’t use it or they don’t apply for it. Does this describe your situation?  

19) What is your unweighted GPA from last semester? _________ (If you don’t remember, please check the category that best represents it):  

20) What is your weighted GPA from last semester? _________ (If you don’t remember, please check the category that best represents it):  

21) Please check the category that best matches your grades so far in high school (all grade levels overall):  

22) How many AP courses (if any) have you ever taken (including the ones you’re enrolled in now)? _______  

23) How many Honors classes (if any) have you ever taken (including the ones you’re enrolled in now)? _______  

24) Are you in the AVID program?  

25) How would you describe your family’s current financial situation (please check one)?  

_____ High income  
_____ Higher-middle income  
_____ Middle income  
_____ Lower-middle income  
_____ Low income
Personal and Academic History

1) Please check all the grades when you’ve ever received free or reduced price lunch from school (if you’ve never received free or reduced lunch, skip this question).
   - [ ] 1  - [ ] 2  - [ ] 3  - [ ] 4  - [ ] 5  - [ ] 6  - [ ] 7  - [ ] 8  - [ ] 9  - [ ] 10  - [ ] 11  - [ ] 12

26) What was the name of your elementary school(s)? If there is more than one, please list them all.
   Name of school
   City located

27) What was the name of your middle school(s)? If there is more than one, please list them all.
   Name of school
   City located

28) If you’ve ever attended other high schools (besides from the one you’re currently in), please list them here:

29) Please check the category that best matches your grades in 6th grade:
   - [ ] I usually got straight As
   - [ ] I usually got As and Bs
   - [ ] I usually got Bs and Cs
   - [ ] I usually got Cs and Ds
   - [ ] I usually got Ds and Fs
   - [ ] Other: ______________________

30) Please check the category that best matches your grades in 8th grade:
   - [ ] I usually got straight As
   - [ ] I usually got As and Bs
   - [ ] I usually got Bs and Cs
   - [ ] I usually got Cs and Ds
   - [ ] I usually got Ds and Fs
   - [ ] Other: ______________________

Friends and Peers at School

1) What are friendship groups or “cliques” at your school based on? Rank these four items in order from most important (1) to least important (4):
   - [ ] Race/ethnicity
   - [ ] Common interests and extracurricular activities
   - [ ] Family income or financial situation
   - [ ] Grades/GPA people get in class and the types of classes they take

2) Which of the following best describes the free/reduced lunch status of your friends at school (check one):
   - [ ] Most of my friends receive free/reduced lunch
   - [ ] Very few of my friends receive free/reduced lunch
   - [ ] None of my friends receive free/reduced lunch
   - [ ] It’s not clear to me which of my friends receive free/reduced lunch

3) How many of your friends take the school bus to school (check one):
   - [ ] Most of my friends take the school bus
   - [ ] Very few of my friends take the school bus
   - [ ] None of my friends take the school bus
   - [ ] It’s not clear to me which of my friends take the school bus

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4) How many of your friends live far away from school but do NOT take the school bus to school?
   - Most of them, and they get driven to school (e.g., by parents)
   - Most of them, and they take the city bus to school
   - Few of them, and they get driven to school (e.g., by parents)
   - Few of them, and they take the city bus to school
   - None of my friends fit this situation
   - It’s not clear to me whether my friends fit this situation

5) Tell me about two of your closest friends by filling out the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friend 1</th>
<th>Friend 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>How old is he/she?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>How old is he/she?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the questions below, please indicate how strongly you agree/disagree with each of the following statements.

Most of my friends plan to go to college after high school.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

My friends and I get similar grades in school.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

My friends and I take similar classes in school.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

Most of my friends are in the same racial group (e.g., White, Latino/a, Asian, Black) as I am.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

Most of my friends are from families with similar income/financial situations as my family.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

It’s easy to tell at school what race (White, Latino/a, Asian, Black) students are.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

It’s easy to tell at school whether people receive free/reduced lunch.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

It’s easy to tell at school whether people at my school take the school bus to school.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

I think people who qualify for free or reduced lunch try to hide their status from other people at school.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

I think people who are at my school who take the school bus try to hide their status from other people at school.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

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In my school, people from the same racial group (e.g., White, Latino/a, Asian, Black) tend to hang out with each other.
☐ Strongly Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Strongly Agree

In my school, people who receive free/reduced lunch tend to hang out with each other.
☐ Strongly Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Strongly Agree

In my school, people who take the school bus tend to hang out with each other.
☐ Strongly Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Strongly Agree

Life After High School
1) Do you expect to go to college after high school?  ☐ Yes  ☐ No

2) What job or career would you like to have 10 years from now? ___________________________

3) Have the following people given you information about how to get into college (check one for each person)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No information</th>
<th>A little information</th>
<th>Some information</th>
<th>Lots of information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends at school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parent(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My older siblings (leave blank if you don’t have any)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV/movies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My own research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify who: ____________)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4) Have the following people given you information about how to get the job or career you want (check one for each person)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No information</th>
<th>A little information</th>
<th>Some information</th>
<th>Lots of information</th>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends at school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>My parent(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My older siblings (leave blank if you don’t have any)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV/movies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My own research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify who: ____________)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My Experiences at School

Please indicate how strongly you agree/disagree with each of the following statements.
I have good relationships with the teachers at my school.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I feel accepted and included as a member of my school community.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I feel comfortable with who I am at my school.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I feel like people at school judge me because of my race/ethnicity.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I feel like people at school judge me because of my family’s income/financial situation.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I feel like I could totally “be myself” my school.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

If I had a problem and needed support, there are students at my school who I could talk to and could trust.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

If I had a problem and needed support, there are adults at my school who I could talk to and could trust.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I often feel like an outsider at my school.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

People at my school treat others equally regardless of their background.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I would send my own kids to a high school like mine in the future.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

**Others’ Experiences at School**

Please indicate how strongly you agree/disagree with each of the following statements.

At my school, some people assume that certain racial/ethnic groups are wealthy.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

At my school, some people assume that certain racial/ethnic groups are poor.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

All students at my school have very similar opportunities and experiences at my school regardless of whether they come from wealthy, middle-class, or poor families.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I have seen students at my school being treated differently because of their race/ethnicity.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I have seen students at my school being treated differently because of their family’s financial situation (rich/poor).

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I have seen students at my school being treated differently because they live in neighborhoods that others consider unsafe or undesirable.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree
At home, which parent(s) do you live with?
- Mother only
- Father only
- Both parents
- Other arrangement

Do your parent(s) work in the military?
- Yes, both
- Yes, mother only
- Yes, father only
- No, neither parents
- I have a parent(s) who retired from working in the military (please specify which parent(s):
  _______________________

What is your parents’ marital status?
- Married, living together
- Married, living separately
- Divorced
- Separated
- Unmarried, living together
- Unmarried, living separately
- Widowed (one parent deceased)
- Both parents deceased

Father’s occupation (please be as specific as you can): ________________________________

Mother’s occupation (please be as specific as you can): ________________________________

In the past year, how frequently did you and your family experience the following? (Please check one box for each line)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>All of the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disruption in utilities (e.g., water, internet, electricity)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Losing home or threat of losing home (e.g., eviction, house foreclosure)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government assistance (e.g., welfare, food stamps)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not eating when hungry because there wasn’t enough money for food</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not attending school events (like football games or school dances/prom) because I needed to save money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

My name is Queenie, and I’m a student doing a project on high school students. Today we will be talking about your friends, your neighborhood, and your experiences at school.

I have some questions in mind, and I’m sure you will have some things you want to talk about too. So think of this as a conversation between friends, rather than an “interview.” We will be as informal as possible. You can stop talking at any time. If I raise an issue or ask a question you don’t want to talk about, just say so and we will move on to something else.

I’m going to record our conversation because I don’t want to take many notes during the interview. This way, I can really concentrate on what you have to say. If you want me to turn the recorder for any reason or at any time, just say so. No one will hear the interview except me. Nothing you say can be traced back to you, and I will not talk to your parents, teachers, friends, or school staff about what we talk about. Everything will be just between you and me.

I ask people to choose a pseudonym, or a fake name, that I can use for your stories. I will call you by this fake name in the interview. I’ll write this name on the tape and that way your real name isn’t attached to any of this information.

Is it okay if I turn on the recorder now? [GET VERBAL CONSENT.]

The recorder is now on. [MAKE THIS STATEMENT AFTER YOU HAVE TURNED ON THE RECORDER. STATE YOUR NAME, THE RESPONDENT’S PSEUDONYM, THE SCHOOL, AND THE DATE.]

Any questions? OK, let’s start.

TOPIC MODULES

Module 1: PERSONAL BACKGROUND .............................................(3 - 4) 5 minutes
Module 2: ACADEMIC HISTORY ......................................................(4 - 5) 10 minutes
Module 3: FRIENDSHIPS AND PEER DYNAMICS AT SCHOOL...........(5 - 8) 15 minutes
Module 4: SCHOOL CLIMATE..............................................................(8 - 10) 20 minutes
Module 5: POST-SECONDARY ASPIRATIONS AND PLANNING.....(10 - 12) 8 minutes
Module 6: CONCLUSION.................................................................(12-13) 2 minutes
DISENTANGLING RACE, RESIDENCE, AND CLASS
INTERVIEW GUIDE

MODULE 1. PERSONAL BACKGROUND (5 minutes)

1. Why don’t you tell me a little bit about yourself? Maybe you could start off telling me a little bit about your family.
   
   **Probe:**
   
   Your age/grade?  
   Siblings? (Ages)  
   ESL/ELL (at any point)?  
   Language(s) spoken at home?  
   Parent(s)’ highest education?  
   Where did you grow up?  
   Parent(s) working?  
   Live nearby?

[What subjects are you really good at?]  

[What’s your favorite thing to do?]  

[Where is your favorite place to spend time?]  

Are you currently working anywhere right now? Tell me more about that.

2. Tell me about the neighborhood you live in now.
   
   **Probe:**
   
   How long have you lived there?  
   What are your neighbors like?  
   What is the neighborhood like?  
   How do you get to school?  
   How often do you hang out in your neighborhood? What?  
   Do you have friends who live in your neighborhood?  
   What races/ethnicities are most your neighbors? Are they older or younger families? Lower-, middle-, higher-income?

3. Some schools have neighborhood boundaries that determine which students go to which schools. So for [your school], people who live within certain boundaries are allowed to go there, while people who live outside those boundaries typically are not allowed to go there. However, some people are part of a school choice program, which means they live outside of such boundaries. These “school choice” students are allowed to attend their schools even if they live outside the boundaries because they’re part of a program that allows them to do so. Are you one of such students? --Are any of your parents in the military?

4. What other neighborhoods have you lived in throughout your life? Walk me through them all.
   
   **Probe:**
   
   How long have you lived there? | What are your neighbors like? What is

---

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How do you get to school?

How often do you hang out in your neighborhood?

Do you have friends who live in your neighborhood?

What races/ethnicities are most your neighbors? Are they older or younger families?

What school did you go to when you lived there?

What was school over there like? Were you a school choice student there?

When did you move there? When did you move away from there?

Why did you move there? Why did you move away from there?

(Question Intent: Get a sense of interviewee’s residential trajectory and determine if interviewee is a residential or non-residential student.)

5. Of all the schools you’ve ever attended, which was your favorite one? Why?

6. Many students receive free or reduced price lunch, while other students do not. Do you receive free or reduced price lunch?

If No:

Some people qualify for FRPM but they don’t use it. Does this describe your situation? (if yes, include probe below) 

Have you ever received FRPM in the past? Have you ever qualified for FRPM in the past?

Tell me about why this is so. Do you know other people who qualify for— but do not receive—FRPM?

If Yes:

Have you always received FRPM? (if no: in which grades did you receive FRPM?)

Some people qualify for FRPM but they don’t use it. Have you ever been in this situation?

MODULE 2. ACADEMIC HISTORY (10 minutes)

Now, I’m going to ask you to tell me a little about your experience at school.

1. How are you doing in school right now in general?

Probe:

Some students like school, while others dislike it. What are your feelings towards school?

What kinds of grades do you normally get (mostly As and Bs; mostly Bs and Cs, etc.)? What is your current GPA?

What are your favorite subjects in school?

Have you gone to other high schools besides this one?

What would your teachers say

Some people find their schoolwork too
about you as a student? What would your friends say? What would your parents say?
hard, while others find it too easy. What about you? How long do you usually spend on homework?

2. [What classes are you taking right now?] {skip if acquainted}

Probe:
Are you taking any AP classes right now? Which AP classes have you taken in the past?
Are you taking any Honors classes right now? Which Honors classes have you taken in the past?
Are your closest friends taking similar classes as you?

What are your hardest classes? Why?

3. What kind of grades do you get in your typical Math or English class at your high school? How about other students?

Probe:
What kind of grades do the “popular” kids get?
Is it different for boys and girls? Tell me more about that.
Is it different for students who are “residential” and students who are part of a school choice program? Tell me more about that.

Tell me any teasing that happens around grades.
Is it different for FRPM and non-FRPM students? Tell me more about that.
Is it different for students who are of different racial or ethnic groups? Tell me more about that.

4. Let’s talk a little bit about the past. What kind of student were you in the past?
Walk me through how school was like for you throughout your years of school.
(If there was inconsistency in academic history): Why was there a difference? What caused you to do better/worse? How were your friends, academically, at each school? How were your peers, academically, at each school?

5. Tell me about other activities you’ve been involved with in high school – sports, drill team, yearbook?

Probe:
How did you hear about it? What made you decide to do it?
How long involved? Friends also involved?

MODULE 3. FRIENDSHIPS AND PEER DYNAMICS AT SCHOOL (15 minutes)

Now, I’m going to ask you to tell me a little about your friends and peers at school.

1. So you said earlier that you currently [qualify/don’t qualify] for FRPM. How about your friends? Tell me more about that.

(Question intent: To gauge the FRPM “mix” of interviewee’s core group of friends)
2. How about school choice programs? You said earlier that you [are/are not] in a school choice program. How about your friends? Tell me more about that.
   (Question intent: To gauge the residential status “mix” of interviewee’s core group of friends)

3. I’d like to hear a bit about the people you consider your closest friends. I’d like you to take the time right now and think of your two closest friends. (Interviewer: pause and give interviewee time to reflect)
   For each friend:
   - Is this friend a guy or a girl?
   - Does he/she go to your school? What grade is he/she in?
   - How long have you known him/her?
   - What’s his/her ethnicity (or race, if ethnicity unknown)?
   - How are you both similar? How are you both different?
   - Is he/she in a school choice program? (if unknown: does he/she live within his/her school neighborhood zoning boundaries?) Does he/she qualify for/receive FRPM?

4. Tell me about where and how you met your closest friends. Are they friends you know from school or neighborhood friends who go to different school? Or both? (Question intent: To discern whether interviewee’s closest friends are “school” friends, “neighborhood” friends, or both)

5. (If friends are mostly “neighborhood” friends): Tell me more about these friendships and why this is the case.
   Probe:
   - Who do you usually talk to at school?
   - What schools do your neighborhood friends go to? Why are you not at the same schools as those friends?
   - What do you talk about when you hang out? Do you ever talk about school-related things?
   - Tell me about any teasing about school that goes on among your friends.
   - What do your neighborhood friends think about your school and the people you go to school with?
   - Why are you closer with your neighborhood friends rather than your schoolmates?

6. (If friends are mostly “school” friends): Tell me about what you do when you hang out with your friends at school.
   Probe:
   - Do you take the same classes? 
   - Do you get similar grades?
   - What extracurricular activities do you do?
7. [Tell me about what you and your friends do when you hang out outside of school (e.g., on weekends, holidays, after school).]

Now I’d like to talk about how things are like at school—not only between you and your good friends, but among the students in general.

8. How are students divided in your school?
   Probe:
   | Are there cliques? How are the cliques formed? What cliques are there? | Are groups segregated by race or ethnicity? Sports groups/extracurriculars? FRPM or residential status? |
   | Who are the “popular” kids? What makes them “popular”? Are they of a certain group? Tell me more about that. | How do you feel about such divisions? Was it always like this for you throughout school? Were the divisions the same when you were younger, for example? |
   | Do people generally get along? How often do fights happen? Who are the fights between? | What inequalities between students do you notice in your school? What makes some students have an advantage (in popularity, grades, treatment, etc.) over others? |

9. This might sound like a dumb question, but I’m supposed to ask it. How easy is it to tell if someone is [white, black, Latino, Vietnamese, Filipino, Chinese, Asian]? Ask about Asian differentiation and Latino differentiation.
   Probe:
   | Tell me more about how you would tell the ethnicity of someone. | Is ethnicity important in your school? Do people generally know each others’ ethnicities at your school? |
   | Do you feel that people sometimes try to hide or downplay their ethnicities? Tell me more about that. | How would your experiences at school be different if you were of a different ethnicity or race? |
   | Are people in your school excluded based on ethnicity or race? Tell me more about that. | Do you feel that students of certain races or ethnicities are discriminated against in your school? |

10. How easy is it to tell whether someone gets FRPM?
    Probe: Use these probes for FRPM reception and FRPM qualification.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me more about how you would tell whether someone receives FRPM.</td>
<td>Is FRPM status important in your school? Do people generally know whether others receive FRPM?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel that people sometimes try to hide or downplay their FRPM statuses? Tell me more about that.</td>
<td>How would your experiences at school be different if you [were/were not] an FRPM student?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are people in your school excluded based on ethnicity or race? Tell me more about that.</td>
<td>Do you feel that FRPM students are discriminated against in your school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let’s say someone gave you a list of all the students in your school and asked you to identify which ones are FRPM and which ones are not. Explain to me how you would go about doing this.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. How easy is it to tell whether someone is here because they are in a school choice program or if they actually live within the school district zoning boundaries?

**Probe:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me more about how you would tell whether someone is a “school choice student.”</td>
<td>Is status as a “school choice student” important in your school? Do people generally know whether others are “school choice students”?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel that people sometimes try to hide or downplay their ethnicities? Tell me more about that.</td>
<td>How would your experiences at school be different if you [were/were not] a “school choice student”?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are people in your school excluded based on ethnicity or race? Tell me more about that.</td>
<td>Do you feel that “school choice students” are discriminated against in your school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let’s say someone gave you a list of all the students in your school and asked you to identify which ones are “school choice students” and which ones are not. Explain to me how you would go about doing this.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. How easy is it to tell if someone at your school is from a poor or low-income family?

**MODULE 4. SCHOOL CLIMATE (20 minutes)**

Now I’d like to ask you to teach me a bit about the environment in your school and what it’s like. I’m interested in hearing about what everyday life is like here for you as a student. Since I’m new here, I obviously don’t know what things are like.

1. In general, how do you feel when you go to school every day?

**Probe:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Describe what kind of</th>
<th>How comfortable do you feel when</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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### community

If someone was thinking of moving to your school, what would you tell them?

**How safe do you feel at your school?**

[What do you like most about your school? What do you like least about your school?]

What makes you nervous or anxious when you’re at school? What do you worry about most when you’re at school?

Would you move to another school if you could? Tell me more about that.

---

### What are your interactions like with the adults at your school?

**Probe:**

- How do you feel about your teachers here? What are your relationships with your teachers like?
- What is your principal like? Do you know him/her well? Why or why not?
- What is your college counselor like? Tell me about your relationship and interactions with him/her.
- How often do the adults at your school communicate with your parent(s)?

Who’s your favorite teacher? Why?

Who’s your least favorite teacher? Why?

What are the other school staff members (excluding teachers, principals, and counselors) like? Who is your favorite staff member? Why? Who is your least favorite staff member? Why?

In general, how comfortable do you feel with the adults at your school?

What would the adults at your school say about you? (teacher (already asked earlier), principal, college counselor, other staff members)

---

### Tell me about how well your school and the people in your school serve as a support system.

**Probe:**

How well do teachers support students at your school? In what way do they support you? In what way do you wish they'd support you more?

How well do other adults at your school support students? In what way do they support you? In what way do you wish they'd support you more?

How well do your peers or friends support you? In what way do they support you? In what way do you wish they'd support you more?

How well do you support your peers and friends? In what way do you support them?
Who makes up your biggest support system? Who encourages you most to succeed? How do they do it?

4. How comfortable are you with “who you are” at school?

**Probe:** (note: if student is uncomfortable or is having trouble answering these questions, provide them with interviewer’s own personal anecdotes as examples).

Tell me about a time when you felt excluded at school.  
Who gets excluded or mistreated at school?  
Tell me about a time when you felt like you had to hide something about yourself when you were at school. Why did you feel like you had to do this?  
Tell me about a time when you acted “not like yourself” in school.  
How well do you “blend in” with others at school? How important is it for you to “blend in”?  
How hard would it be for a new student to get accepted in your school? Walk me through the steps of how they’d go about doing this. Does this differ by race? FRPM status? Residential status? Other?  
What signs tell you that a student is not accepted by his/her peers at your school? What are some examples you’ve witnessed?  
How have you changed since coming to this school (If came from another high school, pay particular attention)? How might you have been different if you went to a different school?

**MODULE 5. POST-SECONDARY ASPIRATIONS AND PLANNING (8 minutes)**

We’ve already talked a little about your life now. Now, I’d like to talk a bit about your plans and goals for the future.

1. What are your plans after high school?

**Probe:**

Do you plan to go to college? What kinds? Any specific colleges in mind?  
What job or career would you like to have in the future? Why?

2. What sorts of conversations have you had with your friends about the future?

**Probe:**

What kinds of goals do your friends have after high school? Are your friends’ goals similar to yours?  
What kinds of discussions do you have about college? How about careers? How about college-prep (like SATs, ACTs, etc.)?  
Do your friends plan on going to college?  
(If college is salient part of discussion): What kinds of colleges do your friends
3. Most schools have counselors that give students advice about college. What is this like at your school? Tell me about what your school has said to you or all the students about going to college.

   **Probe:** Find out if interviewee has had one-on-one conversations with the counselor or another institutional adult about steps to get into college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do college recruiters come to school (just for local colleges)?</th>
<th>Are college visits set up? Are you encouraged to explore colleges nearby and far away?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How many college counselors are at school? Who is the counselor who works with you? How has your counselor helped you?</td>
<td>Do your counselors talk about applications, financial aid, what it takes to get into college and do well? Have they talked to you about taking specific high school classes to prepare for college? Which classes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often do you talk to your counselor?</td>
<td>How does your school present college-related information to you? Do you have Info Nights? Do you talk about college often with other people at school (e.g., teachers)?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. (If planning to go to college) What steps do you have to take to get into college?

   a. Tell me about how you learned about going to this college and how to apply. Who helped you with the paperwork & told you how to fill it out and apply?

   **Probe:** Get details past vague aspiration language. Find out what steps interviewee has taken so far to get into college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Probe for how much information comes from: teachers, counselors, friends, parents, older siblings, other family members, family friends, the media, own research/internet, other</td>
<td>When did you start learning about how to get into college? Do you feel like you need more information in any way? Tell me more about that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel like you know more or less about getting into college</td>
<td>Why do you feel like you should go to college?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where do you plan on attending? Does this differ among your friendship circle?

Where do you see you and your friends 10 years from now? How do you expect your current friendships be 10 years from now?
b. Tell me specifically about conversations you've had with your parent(s) about going to college.

_Probe:_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel like you know more, less, or about the same about getting into college than your parents?</td>
<td>What conversations have you had with your parents about college? Do they talk with other parents about college-related things? If so, how? (Probe for whether the school facilitates events like Info Nights where parents talk to each other)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you and your parents have any differing opinions about college (e.g., which colleges to attend, how to pay, college major)? Tell me more about that.</td>
<td>If I were to ask your parents about your college plans, what would they tell me? Would they tell me anything different from what you've told me so far? (Probe for any differences in expectations)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

c. How about paying for tuition for college? Tell me about what your plans are for that.

_Probe:_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you had discussions with your parents or adults at your school (e.g., teachers, counselors, college recruiters, etc.) about this?</td>
<td>How do you think your college education will be funded? Are there already plans in place or are you currently unsure?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are some funding options available for you? (Probe for whether interviewee knows about different forms of financial aid: loans, grants, scholarships, etc.) How did you learn about these?</td>
<td>How do you think your friends would answer the questions we just discussed? Are they in similar or different situations? Have you talked to them about this topic?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. What steps do you have to take to become a [insert career/job aspiration here]?

_Probe:_ If interviewee has no career or job aspiration, use probes to figure out how interviewee plans to figure things out.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Be wary of over-probing here): Tests? Test scores? Schooling beyond college? Networking?</td>
<td>How do you know what you know? Where do you get your main sources of information?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe for how much information comes from: teachers, counselors, friends, parents, older siblings, other family</td>
<td>When did you start learning about how to get into this career/job path? Do you feel like you need more information in any way? Tell me more about that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
members, family friends, the media, own research/internet, other

(If interviewee has more than one career/job path): How will you go about deciding which path to take?

Why do you want to go down this particular career/job path? What made you want to do it in the first place? How long have you wanted to do this?

Do you feel like you know more or less about getting on your desired career/job path than your friends? How about your peers? Why or why not?

What do your parents feel about your aspiration? How about your friends? Teachers? Counselor? Other?

MODULE 6. CONCLUSION (2 minutes)

Okay, we’re pretty much at the end here and I just wanted to end our conversation by getting your thoughts on life here overall.

1. Let’s say 10 years from now, someone asks you whether you were “successful” in high school. How would you answer that? What’s your definition of success?
   a) Let’s pretend I asked you to make a checklist of things you must do before finishing high school in order to be fully satisfied with your high school experience. What would be on that checklist?
   b) Do you think this checklist would be different for different people at your school?

   **Probe:**
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Social/relationships/dating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity formation/negotiation</td>
<td>Extracurricular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maturity process</td>
<td>Based on others (teachers, parents)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Overall, would you send your kids to this school in the future? Tell me more about that.

   **Probe:**

   Desires of getting out of/return to this neighborhood (and reasons) | Comfort with this type of neighborhood/school

   *(Question intent: A last effort to get interviewee to express thoughts about the school. A different way of framing the question than above.)*

3. Is there anything else you’d like to tell me before we end? Anything that you think I’ve missed or that I should know?
Thanks so much for talking with me today about your life and your future and for sharing all your great stories with me. I very much enjoyed chatting with you today!

FOLLOW UP/ POST-INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: RECORD THE FOLLOWING AFTER LEAVING THE INTERVIEW:

1. Participant ID #
2. School
3. Location of interview (e.g., administrative office, classroom, etc.)
4. Date, time, and duration of interview
5. People in proximity during interview, activities (if applicable)
6. Respondent: interaction, attitude, notable characteristics
7. Additional comments made after tape stopped rolling
8. Summary of any issues that may make this case notable
Appendix C: Tables

Table C1. OLS Estimates Comparing Low-Income Students’ Weighted GPA in Bonita High, Ranch High, and High-Poverty Schools
(Adding Model 6 for Robustness Check)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
<th>Model 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bonita High</td>
<td>0.314***</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
<td>-0.023</td>
<td>-0.097**</td>
<td>-0.095**</td>
<td>-0.125***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry High</td>
<td>0.092***</td>
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<td>-0.191***</td>
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<tr>
<td>5th Grade Math Score</td>
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<td>0.001***</td>
<td>0.001***</td>
<td>0.001***</td>
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<td>8th Grade ELA Score</td>
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<td>0.006***</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.004***</td>
<td>0.004***</td>
<td>0.003***</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-0.183***</td>
<td>-0.187***</td>
<td>-0.180***</td>
<td>-0.164***</td>
<td></td>
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<td>(0.02)</td>
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<td>-0.006</td>
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<td>-0.002</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class of 2012</td>
<td>-0.081**</td>
<td>-0.073*</td>
<td>-0.071*</td>
<td>-0.062*</td>
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* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001
## Table C2. OLS Estimates Comparing Low-Income Students’ Unweighted GPA in Bonita High, Ranch High, and High-Poverty Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bonita High</td>
<td>0.285*** (0.04)</td>
<td>-0.026 (0.04)</td>
<td>-0.037 (0.04)</td>
<td>-0.107** (0.04)</td>
<td>-0.105** (0.04)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Henry High</td>
<td>0.075* (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.188*** (0.03)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5th Grade ELA Score</td>
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<td>0.000 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.000 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.000 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.000 (0.00)</td>
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<td>5th Grade Math Score</td>
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<td>0.001*** (0.00)</td>
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<td>0.001*** (0.00)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8th Grade ELA Score</td>
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<td>0.006*** (0.00)</td>
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<td>8th Grade Math Score</td>
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<td>0.004*** (0.00)</td>
<td>0.004*** (0.00)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>-0.180*** (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.179*** (0.02)</td>
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<td>-0.310*** (0.03)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class of 2016</td>
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<td>Black</td>
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<td>0.019 (0.04)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
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<td>-0.107*** (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.154*** (0.04)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
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<td>0.137** (0.05)</td>
<td>0.101* (0.05)</td>
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<td>Other Race/Ethnicity</td>
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<td>0.059 (0.06)</td>
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<td>Non-English at Home</td>
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<td>0.066* (0.03)</td>
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<td>-1.237*** (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.996*** (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.750*** (0.08)</td>
<td>-0.761*** (0.08)</td>
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* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001
Table C3. Grade Distribution by School and Low-SES Status

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<td>Ranch High</td>
<td>Bonita High</td>
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<td>% &quot;A&quot; Grades Given</td>
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<td>% &quot;A&quot; or &quot;B&quot; Grades Given</td>
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<td>65.62</td>
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