Academic Profiling
LATINOS, ASIAN AMERICANS, AND THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

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CHAPTER ONE

Framing the "Gap"

Dominant Discourses of Achievement

Joe Berk remembered, "When I was applying for [this position], I said that there were two campuses at this same school—a high-performing campus, which is predominately Asian, and a low-performing one that is predominately Hispanic . . . This is not a [Southern California High School] phenomenon. Hispanics, in general, emphasize putting food on the table over education."

—Field notes, February 1, 2007

While at Southern California High School (SCHS), I frequently heard about "high-performing students," "low-performing students," and the "gap"—determined largely by standardized tests and course placement. Students more commonly described themselves and their schoolmates as "smart" and "stupid." These constant distinctions were made between the two largest panethnic groups at the school—usually referred to by school officials and students as Asians and Hispanics. These two groups were cast in opposition to each other, and analyses of their academic performances were often rooted in supposed biological and cultural differences, as when administrator Joe Berk describes an emphasis among Latinas/os on working to survive rather than working toward educational goals.

For generations, politicians, academics, and educators have offered various explanations for differences in educational attainment. These explanations range from arguments that blame individuals and groups for their supposed deficiencies to ones that critique biased school officials or unequal schooling facilities. The popularity of these theories has fluctuated over time and has varied in scope. However, the biological and cultural deficiency frameworks that are so pervasive at SCHS have been
the most influential in shaping schools and the overall racial, economic, political, and social order (Gonzalez 1990).

Such deficiency frameworks largely dismiss the impacts of historical, structural, and institutional inequalities as well as systems of race, class, and gender on life opportunities. They are what Ruth Frankenberg (1993) labels “power-evasive,” and they are part of a neoconservative perspective. At SCHS, with the exception of a small percentage of staffulty and students, these discourses inform explanations for educational outcomes. Much of the blame is placed on students and their families, deflecting attention away from the role of schools and society in perpetuating multiple gaps.

This chapter analyzes the individual and group-level explanations or frames that are often used by SCHS's staffulty to understand differences in educational outcomes. As Susan Rosenbloom (2010) describes, “Framing refers to the way people label and identify their worldview by relying on interpretations or maps that organize their experiences into discrete chunks of information” (6). Given the prevalence of power-evasive frameworks in the United States that claim we are in a postracial society, assume we have free choice and equal opportunity, and tout that we live in a meritocracy, many like Berk employ biological and cultural arguments. While heard less frequently, some at SCHS adopt what I refer to as power-aware approaches to understanding educational outcomes, where they consider disparities in resources and forms of discrimination. Given the magnitude of power-evasive approaches at SCHS and in U.S. society, they are hegemonic ideologies that shape people's perceptions and structure people's lives. Thus they are centered in this chapter.

At SCHS, Asian Americans and Latinas/os are the focus of these discourses, demonstrating the relational aspects of race/ethnicity—that these categories and racialized assumptions are not fixed or naturally occurring but are given meaning in relationship to one another. In contrast, Whites and Blacks are rarely discussed, but they are not absent in the school's racial/ethnic constructions. In particular, the silence surrounding whiteness—White identity, White privilege, and cultural practices—is considered in this chapter, while the positioning of Whites and Blacks at the school is considered in more detail in chapter 5.1

This chapter details four of the most common power-evasive discourses at SCHS (“the gap,” biological deficiency, cultural deficiency, and the invisibility of whiteness) that set the context for understanding the disparities, divisions, and hierarchies at the school. Given their roles as institutional agents in influencing the school culture, the staffulty's perceptions take center stage. Occasionally, students' views are included, but their narratives are emphasized in subsequent chapters. Throughout this chapter, I highlight some of the factors influencing the staffulty's frameworks and the implications of such perspectives. However, these perspectives are not fixed; people may adopt multiple explanations, or their views may change. Similarly, these perspectives are not simply products of individuals. They are part of the fabric of schools and society and mirror dominant ideologies. They are so entrenched that they may become accepted knowledge that few people question. Thus analyzing the frames that the staffulty use to understand schooling helps uncover the multiple structures and systems of belief that maintain unequal school practices and keep many Asian Americans and Latinas/os unequal and apart at schools such as SCHS.

Framing the "Gap"

A common frame in today's discussions about education is that there is an achievement gap based on race/ethnicity. While grades and rates of high school graduation and college attendance are sometimes considered, scores on standardized tests are increasingly the primary measurement of achievement, and each year newspapers and school marquees across the nation announce test scores—symbolically bolstering their importance. This emphasis on standardized tests emerged during the Reagan-Bush era and intensified with the policies of the federal government's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Accountability is at the core of NCLB, and test performance is used to assess students, schools, and teachers. Among the requirements of NCLB is annual testing in math and reading of children from grades 3 to 8 and at least once in high school. To determine how different groups of students are faring, test scores are disaggregated by race/ethnicity, limited English proficiency, and special education. Schools that do not meet their targeted competency scores or make what is referred to as an adequate yearly progress receive increasingly severe sanctions. These sanctions range from paying for transportation for students who may transfer to other schools to funding private tutoring programs to being taken over by the state or closed entirely (Wood 2004). As well as diverting public funds away from schools in need, these sanctions fuel the movement for school vouchers, school choice, and charter schools (Hursh 2005). Thus these policies are part of a neoliberal agenda to control the curriculum, evaluate teachers, and ultimately privatize public school education. They are fueled by “power-evasive” discourses because typically the extensive focus on the “gap” exists without a simultaneous interrogation of the larger factors influencing disparities and fueling the test-based movement in education.

Within the context of high-stakes testing, SCHS school officials begin each academic year by presenting data on students' performances.
Second-year teacher Laura Cooper explains, “From the moment we step into our teachers’ meetings three days before school starts, it’s ‘results from testing; results from testing!’ ‘We are down again; we need strategies; we need this; we need to get students involved! We need; we need, and we need!’” Each year, this hurried pace of looking at data takes a similar format. Laura Cooper continues,

The principal and assistant principal of instruction show the teachers last year’s test scores and then this year’s test scores. So we see that we went down by fifteen points or whatever. Then they put up a slide and do very little explanation of the slide; [they] just assume that everybody understands it the same way. Next thing that is put up is the achievement at the different grade levels. So three bar charts right next to each other, and you have that for Hispanic, Asian, and White; no other [group is presented]: just those three. Then you go through really quickly and see how the Latinos are performing versus the Asians. [The administration] says, “We’ve got to close that gap.”

In large, rushed meetings, data are presented as accurate, meaningful, and self-explanatory. Limited consideration is given to the various factors influencing test performance, such as the construction of the tests; school and social inequalities; and students’ diverse backgrounds, skills, and experiences.

There is minimal opportunity to digest, analyze, and reflect on the test scores. According to Laura Cooper, with no chance to process the data, discussions about what is even meant by “an achievement gap” are missing:

You understand that there is a gap [when the data are presented], and when [the idea of] an achievement gap is brought up again, you make the association to test scores. But it hasn’t necessarily been defined... It’s glossed over because I don’t think that there is a set definition. It’s mentioned over and over again like it has been defined, and it is just common knowledge at this point about what it’s all about.

Thus while so much emphasis is put on a supposed achievement gap, much is excluded from the presentations that open each school year. Without dialogue, all this becomes “common knowledge” and accepted as the norm.

The racialized associations of achievement also become normalized. Simply presenting data by racial categories without discussion rectifies differences and stereotypes. Laura Cooper illustrates,

You can put graphs up there all day long. But unless you are explaining what we see in the data and then come up with potential reasons why that data is the way that it is and then ultimately what can affect those things that we have identified in a positive way, nothing is going to change. You can say achievement gap all day; we know “achievement,” and we know “gap.” And we see the 150 points that are between our Asian population and our Latino population. I think what it is doing at least for the teachers is reaffirming their stereotypes. It is saying, “Well you know we are going to teach to the Asians.”

When I asked Laura if she hears explicit stereotypes or if there are more subtle messages and beliefs, she clarifies:

No teacher here would say that [they teach to the Asians], and it is not because they don’t want to [say it], but I don’t think that they really consciously think that way. It’s what they internalize. I think most teachers here feel that this is an equal opportunity education and they’re not picking out certain students to teach to, but it is just [done] subconsciously.

When school administrators impart decontextualized and unanalyzed data that supports stereotypes, the internalization of the subconscious beliefs that Laura Cooper describes is facilitated. Similarly, presenting panethnic categories may reinforce the conception that Asian Americans and Latinas/os are diametrically opposed and that these categories are biologically and culturally natural instead of socially constructed as products of human social systems.

Just as there is no definition of the achievement gap or an interrogation of race/ethnicity, there is limited discussion of whether standardized tests are complete measurements of student learning. In fact, decades of research have demonstrated the many biases in standardized tests (see Gonzalez 1990; de León and Holman 2002). Students who have middle- and upper-class experiences are more likely to perform well on standardized tests because they often share the reference points and cultural backgrounds of those constructing the tests (Ochoa 2007, 176).

Not only may such biases skew test results, but also some teachers fear that the extensive emphasis on test performance and school rankings based on test scores is actually overshadowing student learning and personal growth. According to Laura Cooper, with a focus on improving the school’s Academic Performance Index (API), a summary measurement used to evaluate school performance and progress on statewide assessments, the message within SCHS is as follows:
We have this achievement gap. We need to close it so we can bring up our API. So we can win, not so Brian, who is sitting here, can win when he graduates from high school and that a company that hires him that assumes he can write a business letter [wins]. That's what it needs to be.

Seventh-year teacher Beth Hill concurs that the focus is misplaced:

I feel like [the administration] is so focused on [test performance] because they know that if our Hispanic students raise their scores, that will raise our API. That is why they are concerned. I don't get the general "I care about them, and they need to do better."

Fourth-year teacher Michelle Mesa also criticizes this hyperemphasis on API scores and test-taking skills and how it deflects attention away from how students are experiencing the campus:

We are being very blind sighted if we only look at that by test-taking strategies in the classroom. I'm wondering if we didn't start giving a little more attention to the culture that we're providing, to the messages that we're sending, and that perhaps that wouldn't be incentive enough for some of our students that are not performing to want to do better. If I am a student and I feel like I have no worth and there's nobody here that speaks to me on any level whatsoever why should I perform and give you what you want because at the end of the day you don't think I can do well anyway. As administrators and staff, we have to really look at how the subtle or not so subtle messages that we're sending are also impacting things like the API. It's not just all about test-taking strategies.

In such climates, the needs of students are overlooked. When test scores drive schooling, this perpetuates a type of schooling that is based on what sociologist Angela Valenzuela refers to as the “technical” or “aesthetic,” where the impersonal and standardized are privileged over personal connections and human affection (1999, 22). This type of “aesthetic” schooling is “subtractive” and often divests students from what they know and experience. As such, it can push students away from school in the manner described by teacher Michelle Mesa.

Rather than attend to the needs of students, SCHS trumpets an ethos of winning, competition, and rivalry. Returning to her critique of how the administrators present the data to the faculty, Laura Cooper elaborates,

And then the last slide that they put up is our scores in the content areas for the three different groups: Hispanic, Asian, and White for

Our school against [another school in the district]... and the principal [says], "I just wanted to put that up there to see fairly comparable schools. I just wanted to let you know. It is not necessarily a rivalry thing." Of course it is a rivalry thing, of course it is! It is supposed to get us all fired up.

This emphasis on competition may even push students away from one another as they are encouraged to vie for higher scores against other students and schools. In the context of school rivalries fueled by sports, competition on standardized tests may also perpetuate divisions between schools. This overall focus on competition is antithetical to building collaborative and trusting relationships (Johnson and Johnson 2000).

Illustrating the normalization of test scores, their association with racial/ethnic groups, and how they foster divisions is the way that some students, typically Asian Americans enrolled in honors and advanced placement (AP) courses, comment on the school's API. Without prompting, students explain how teachers’ remarks, administrators’ announcements, posters around campus, and public rankings of schools have made them aware of the value the school places on doing well on standardized tests.

Junior Carmen Chu details,

We know about our API scores because we have video bulletins every Monday, and sometimes they'll talk about how the API scores are going down. [They tell us,] "We want to bring them up. This is our goal to have this certain amount when it comes to STAR [Standardized Testing and Reporting] testing."

Similar to their teachers, students also feel the pressure to do well for the school, and they hear racial/ethnic correlations on test performance and which groups are supposedly hurting the school's ranking. Senior Patty Song explains how some of her teachers even joke in class that “the Asian kids help us have a high API.” She believes that “teachers and the administration kind of have it in their heads that the Asians are the smart ones, like they are the ones that make our API go high.” In conjunction, students like junior Tommy Huie are “hearing from people outside our school that our API is kind of low because the Mexican people are dragging it down.” Drawing on racist assumptions of academic ability, some teachers, administrators, and community members blame the school’s perceived declining prestige to falling test scores supposedly caused by Mexican American students, and they put undue pressure on Asian American students.

Overall, the nationally imposed culture surrounding assessment and the excessive focus on the “gap” are detrimental to schooling and
students’ experiences. They reduce the attention on students’ well-being and foster assumptions that standardized tests are fair and precise assessments of student learning. In addition, posting test performances by panethnic categories and without analyses of within-group heterogeneity and the role of larger factors on test performance perpetuates the power-evasive framework that something must be wrong with those groups who are thought to be responsible for lowering scores. As Claude Steele (1997) has documented in his work on “stereotype threat,” it could even become self-fulfilling so that Asian Americans rise to others’ expectations and Latinas/os may underperform on tests in accordance with dominant assumptions. Finally, the narrow emphasis on an achievement gap that leaves unquestioned standardized test results also positions Asian Americans against Latinas/os and fosters the invisibility of Whites and Blacks, who at SCHS are left out of the data or barely discussed. Given the relatively small percentage of Whites and Blacks at the school, their scores may not impact the overall ranking of the school. Thus their performances and such students are largely dismissed. As detailed next, this focus on standardized tests and decontextualized presentations of students’ performance work in tandem with the prevalence of individual and group-level frameworks on educational success. Together, they reinforce the legacy of biological and cultural deficiency arguments that further hierarchical constructions of Latinas/os and Asian Americans.

**Individual and Group-Level Arguments for Educational Outcomes**

The approach to education might be like an Asian tradition. Since back for thousands of years, education has been the thing for like millions of years. Chinese dinosaurs probably took school seriously.

—Sandra Wu, International Baccalaureate (IB) senior

Student Sandra Wu’s comments rooting Asian educational success in the time of the dinosaurs capture other dominant frameworks. Such arguments posit that some groups possess and others lack the supposed biological or cultural attributes for progress and achievement. These arguments assume that racism and discrimination are passé and that the United States is a meritocracy. So the roles of class inequality and individual, institutional, and structural discrimination on educational experiences and life chances are largely dismissed. Furthermore, both biological and cultural arguments are essentialist and are used to profile students since all members of particular races/ethnicities, classes, and genders are perceived to possess defining traits. Within-group heterogeneity and the ways that race/ethnicity, class, and gender are sociopolitical, economic constructs are overlooked. Such perspectives have shaped popular discourse, and at SCHS, they are apparent in (1) biological determinist arguments that naturalize gender and race/ethnicity and assert that some groups are inherently more mature, more disciplined, or smarter than other groups; (2) cultural determinist beliefs that assume, for example, that Asian Americans and the middle and upper classes, in comparison to Latinas/os and the poor, come from families and traditions that are more likely to value schooling and hard work; and (3) the invisibility of whiteness. By glossing over student differences and ignoring macrosocio-meso factors fostering disparities in schools, broad categorizations of Asian American and Latina/o students and general designations of “high performing” and “low performing” reproduce dominant structures, maintain hegemonic gendered and racialized assumptions, pit groups against each other, and hinder the possibilities of change. Cultural determinist beliefs are also connected to assimilationist arguments and the “model minority” myth discussed in more detail in chapter 5. For now, we turn to the perspectives of the staffulty and the reinforcement of dominant ideologies.

**The Belief That Biology Is Destiny: Naturalizing Sex, Gender, and Race**

Ninth-grade girls do well until they get the two Bs—boobs and boyfriends.

—Tom O’Brien, teacher

You grow up in a world where some people are just stupid and some people are smart. You assume that Asians are smart and that Mexicans are always stupid.

—Monique Martinez, student

The comments made by Tom O’Brien before a faculty meeting and the reflections from junior Monique Martínez during an interview reveal the naturalizing of both gender and race/ethnicity as biological entities. Although some might interpret Tom O’Brien’s remarks as a statement of students’ changing interests over the life course, his specific reference to breasts implies anatomical differences and hormonal fluctuations that supposedly disrupt the academic performance of all ninth-grade girls, who he assumes are distracted by boys. Just as O’Brien claims that girls’ academic performance dips with the onset of puberty, Monique Martínez’s explanations of intelligence also suggest that biology is destiny. In this case,
she has come to believe that Asians are naturally smarter than Mexicans. While such biological determinist arguments have long been disproved and replaced by theories of race/ethnicity and gender as socially constructed, some at SCHS reduce academic performance to biology and use assumed biological traits to profile students.

Rooting Sex and Gender in Biology

Although national statistics reveal an overall gender gap where women across all racial/ethnic groups have higher rates of school achievement and college attendance (Lopez 2003; Gándara and Contreras 2009), gender and educational outcomes were rarely discussed during the interviews. Similarly, school personnel reported that little was said at the school about their salience. Many did not seem to question this silence because as some indicated, they did not notice the significance of gender in their classrooms, or they figured that standardized test scores are presented by race/ethnicity. So they believed that the school simply draws on available data when trying to understand educational outcomes, and with the mandates of No Child Left Behind, test performance by race/ethnicity is emphasized.

Several of the school officials who described noticing gendered patterns in school performance naturalized them with comments such as “we all know that girls tend to perform better in school.” A couple explicitly adopted a biological explanation by stressing differences in maturation. Teacher Jane King’s comments are illustrative:

English has a tendency to be a class that girls do better in because it’s a linguistic-based class and, you know, the boys are not quite as talkative and not quite as social . . . I think honestly they’re not ready for it yet, you know. They are when they’re seniors; maturity-wise, they’re where the girls are when they were freshman. You know, they’re just not ready for it yet.

Believing that it is common knowledge that as two distinct groups all boys and all girls differ in terms of maturation, Jane King thrice uses the phrase “you know” to express her point. She is not alone in accepting this sentiment. Coach Jim Scott echoes her as he reflects on the students who have assisted him:

The girls perform higher than the boys because of the maturation; girls usually mature faster than guys. There’s like a five-year gap between the girls and the guys, maturity-wise . . . The people that help me in my office, the good ones are the girls that are really good on the computer and are able to handle the things I need done. I don’t think I’ve ever had a male office aide that was good on the computer, so it’s always been a female student.

Not only is sex and maturation conflated with gender identities, but such biological determinist perspectives often foster unequal treatment. In this case, young women are given the opportunity to work with Coach Scott. This provides them with capital such as computer skills and social networks that young men may be denied. Similarly, just as young men are restricted by this biological categorization, it may also reinforce gender expectations of women’s labor and the assumption that women are effective assistants and good with data entry.

Longtime teacher Margaret Albert extends this perception that there are natural variations in maturation by sex and gender. As she explains, in comparison to girls, boys have more energy, and this accounts for their higher representation in remedial courses:

When I had the remedial English [class], the majority were guys. We know that there are some differences in maturation . . . [It’s] pretty difficult with their energy level for them to have to keep still for as long as they have to.

According to Margaret Albert, these supposed differences make it hard to force boys to sit in class for long periods of time. So she alters her teaching strategies to accommodate for their perceived differences:

[Guys are] more active. I’d need to have some of them run around the building a few times [to] get rid of that energy. And I need to have more hands on and moving around. It’s cruelty to them to have to sit still that long.

Many people find it difficult to remain seated for hours each day in a traditional classroom. However, rather than critique a lecture-based classroom structure that requires students to quietly sit next to other students as they listen to the teacher and take notes, some such as Margaret Albert instead locate the problem in males’ supposed unique biological composition. Also underlying this teacher’s comments is an assumption that women are naturally more adept at sitting passively. Although Margaret Albert tries to accommodate the presumed high energy of males in her remedial classes by changing her pedagogy, this does not address the larger factors that lead to the unequal placement of young men in remedial classes, such as the transitional English class described in the preface,
that funnel students away from college. It also does little to disrupt the traditional one-way transfer of knowledge in the classroom that expects students to inactively receive information from teachers.

Similar to their teachers, students only occasionally consider gender as a factor influencing schooling. Nonetheless, a couple of students repeated a biological determinist argument that they learned in class. Eleventh-grader Margaret Kang explains, “Recently, we heard in English that girls excel in English and liberal arts and then guys are more logical thinkers.”

Several students labeled girls as “hard workers” and guys as “lazy.” Sometimes, guys were characterized as “chill”—which seems to contradict teacher Margaret Albert’s description of boys having a lot of energy. For junior Summer Reyes, this apparent relaxed demeanor in comparison to girls’ “more emotional” state is genetic:

I think the girls are harder on themselves. I guess because girls are weaker or more emotional, so they get really stressed, so they work themselves really hard. The guys, they’re chill about everything . . .

I think it’s just in their genes. Girls are just more caring about things.

Senior Jean Kim concurs with Summer that “guys are more laid back; just naturally they’re laid back. Even if they’re smart, they’re laid back.” She adds that girls “take [more] initiative and actually try to work harder than boys, but then sometimes guys are smarter. They don’t even need to try; they just are smarter.” The assumption in such comments is that in comparison to men, women are not inherently smart; they are just harder workers.

Remarks such as these reveal how some at SCHS equate sex with gender. Such conflating ignores the ways that gender is not natural. Instead, gender is a sociopolitical economic construction that is influenced by socialization from family members, peers, schools, the media, and others. Gender is also performed in everyday interactions and embedded in cultural expectations and institutional disparities (Risman 1998). Furthermore, such comments assume that one’s biological sex always matches one’s gender identity and that genders are genetically distinct from each other. In spite of research demonstrating that the two-sex (male–female) and two-gender (man–woman) system is constructed and that there are more variations within the categories of males and females than between males and females (Epstein 1988), such conflating of sex with gender persists. This discourse perpetuates the belief that both sex and gender are biological and that variations between sexes and genders are normal. It is alleged that girls and boys differ biologically and that these differences produce fundamentally distinct people. Expecting changes in academic performances is thus futile because the assumption is that boys and girls are just naturally different. Such sentiments may then become self-fulfilling to the extent that students are profiled based on these assumptions and encounter unequal treatment and expectations.

Employing Biological Constructs of Race/Ethnicity and Intelligence

In comparison to discussions surrounding sex and gender, school officials were much less likely to provide such explicit biological arguments when explaining academic differences by race/ethnicity. Instead, they were merged with cultural deficiency arguments or their language was racially coded. For example, coach Marilyn Garcia combined biological and cultural explanations in her assessment of students’ coordination:

Asians, they’re more oriented to academics, to their studies. They’d rather not play softball or hit the ball, or they don’t have the coordination. But then, the Mexican kids are a lot more fun in terms of sports because they’re not studying hard at home. There’s no one really to beat them up to do the school work because the focus seems to be different.

Although few school officials adopted such traditional racist beliefs linking race, biology, and performance—in this case that Asian Americans lack coordination—there were indications that some school officials still accept the belief that intelligence is biological and that select people are innately more inclined to certain subjects. For instance, during an IB meeting with students, a school official instructed “natural-born mathematicians” to enroll in an additional calculus class, while those who are “not the brightest light as math is concerned” should take statistics.1

Teacher Manuel Cadena also reinforces conceptions that intelligence is biological:

If you’re lucky enough, you are on this side of the tracks. You’re given students that are unbelievably bright. You’ve got three people [at SCHS] that scored perfect on the SATs. Here, if you get something below 1200, something’s wrong with you. We’ve got all this raw talent, but then you get these kids from the other side of the train tracks that are not prepared. So you can only do so much.

While unstated, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status are embedded in Manuel Cadena’s train tracks metaphor. In comparison to the primarily poor and working-class Latina/o neighborhood on “the other side of the train tracks,” SCHS is situated in a more socioeconomically privileged
and racially diverse area—factors that, according to Manuel Cadena, result in students with “raw talent” in comparison to other students who he believes “can only do so much.” Such references to talent and brightness in this context reinforce assumptions that intelligence is not only innate but also correlated with class and race/ethnicity. His equation of SAT scores with talent also overlooks years of hard work studying for the test and unequal resources such as differential access to tutors and paid preparation courses.

Whereas during their interviews most school officials tended not to equate race/ethnicity to biology, students frequently used phrases such as “smart” and “stupid” to refer to different racial/ethnic groups, as in Monique Martinez’s opening quote. It was not always clear if such labels and racial/ethnic associations were linked to an underlying belief in biological differences, but the associations are made so frequently that some students start to deduce, as Monique does, that “Asians are smart and that Mexicans are always stupid.” According to at least one group of friends, such comments are as frequent as saying “Hi” at school.

Some of what students hear emanates from their teachers. Sophomores Jenn Vanderhol and Fran Padilla reflect on the power of teacher’s comments:

**Jenn:** He would just talk about how Asians are smarter. How we are not smart ‘cause you’re not Asian.

**Fran:** He was always joking around, but it’s like even if you’re joking around there is always some form of truth to it. It has to come from somewhere.

As Fran suggests, even though her teacher may be joking, these racialized messages from authority figures may be internalized and reproduced. After all, Fran believes that such so-called jokes must bear some “truth.”

Mexican Americans Rebecca Ramos and Gloria Camacho accept similar beliefs, and they too draw upon a teacher’s lesson to prove their points. When asked why one of the two middle schools that many SCHS students attend is perceived as better than the middle school they attended, Rebecca and Gloria offer the following explanation:

**Rebecca:** They’re all Asians over there . . .

**Gloria:** They’re probably just born smart.

**Rebecca:** Yeah, and well, our first period teacher was showing us how many people go to college, and Mexicans were last. First, it was Asians and then it was White people, then it was Black people, then it was Mexicans.

While their teacher’s intent in sharing current demographic information on educational attainment was not clear, if the data were presented without interrogation as the standardized test results are presented to teachers, a phenomenon similar to the one teacher Laura Cooper described earlier may occur for students. That is, like some teachers, students may also interpret such statistics as confirmation of a racial/ethnic hierarchy where Asian American students are positioned as smarter than other students.

These biological arguments from some school officials and students are not isolated. For much of history, biological deficiency perspectives dominated academic and public discourse, and they have bolstered school practices. Through the 1950s, White middle- and upper-class researchers and educators often used biological arguments to justify de jure segregation, Americanization programs, and vocational courses for students of color. For example, proponents of biological determinism believed that Mexican American students were naturally inclined toward sex rather than education, were predisposed physically to perform agricultural labor, and lacked the mental capabilities to excel in academically rigorous courses (see Gonzalez 1990). These theories justified separate and unequal schools that punished those who spoke languages other than English, emphasized U.S. patriotism, and prepared students for low-wage and gender-specific occupations. Meanwhile, Euro-American students were largely schooled to fill higher-paying occupations in accordance with their gender and class positions.

More recently, there have been several high-profile cases illustrating the endurance of biological arguments, including in 2005 when, at an economics conference, then-Harvard University president Lawrence Summers attributed the underrepresentation of women scientists in senior positions to genetics (Goldenberg 2005). In 2009, a Harvard PhD student completed a dissertation arguing that immigrants have lower IQs than White Americans. The content of the dissertation was made public when a well-known conservative think tank aimed to use it to bolster their argument against immigration reform (Wessler 2013).

Even though the idea of superior and inferior sexes, genders, and races/ethnicities has long been disproved scientifically, biological arguments persist. They seep into dominant ideologies, people’s imaginations, and even our language. Furthermore, along with some of the cultural determinist arguments detailed in the following section, they have maintained and reproduced a race-based capitalist and gendered labor system that divides and ranks students.
Cultural Determinism: Fostering Homogenization and Hierarchies

The Asians seem to be motivated and driven. The Latinos don’t seem to value education in the same way. Their parents don’t seem to be as involved the way the Asian parents are.

—Anthony Castro, teacher

Notwithstanding the existence of some biological assumptions, cultural explanations such as those presented by fifth-year teacher Anthony Castro were more commonly provided during the interviews. These arguments emphasize supposed differences in values, parental expectations, and work ethics. As in the biological arguments surrounding race, in most cases, Asian Americans—believed to possess the preferred cultural and familial predispositions necessary to excel—are positioned in opposition to Latinas/os. However, at times, Asian Americans are judged just as harshly as Latinas/os but still in binary ways, with Asian Americans characterized as being overly involved or demanding too much academically of their children and Latinas/os as being too lax when it comes to school. Similarly, some teachers also use a “culture of poverty” explanation when they argue that the poor and working classes are “apathetic” toward education (see Lewis 1966). Thus, just as these cultural determinist arguments homogenize groups and overlook systems of power and inequality, they also foster racial/ethnic and class hierarchies.

The assumption that Latinas/os and Asian Americans are diametrically opposed in their support for and involvement in education is ubiquitous. Comments such as the following by school official Jackie Towne are typical: “The achievement gap is going to be there because the mind-set of the Asian culture and the mind-set of the Hispanic culture are different. They’re just different.” Teacher Jane King, who earlier attributed supposed biological differences in maturation to gendered performances in English language courses, agrees with Jackie Towne that “culture” and “family life” are preeminent factors in influencing educational outcomes:

Whether or not somebody is academically successful? What influences that? Oh, first and foremost, their family life, how they were raised, the culture of the family, what the family believes—100 percent, and that’s why we have a gap at this school between the Asian population, Hispanic . . . You’re going to see the number one difference is what’s going on in the home, not what’s going on in the classroom.

Along with referring generally to the undefined but apparently understood “gap” at SCHS, Jane King is quick to dismiss any role that the school may have in creating and perpetuating inequalities. According to her and many of the staffulty, “the culture of the family” is 100 percent liable for student performance. This discourse of the family is pervasive; it reinforces assumptions of good and bad families, and it ignores the multiple economic and political contexts infringing on household resources and opportunities. The implication is that educational outcomes cannot be changed unless families and cultures are altered.

Framing Latinas/os

Even when the staffulty do not explicitly compare Latinas/os with Asian Americans, these assumptions of cultural difference and a cultural hierarchy are rampant. Teacher Manuel Cadena, whose views span biological, cultural, and power-aware arguments, is one among several school personnel to offer a scathing critique of what he refers to as “the attitude” of Latina/o parents:

Latino parents have no involvement in what their kids are doing . . .

The attitude of the village needs to change. The entire Latino village needs to change the way it raises kids to understand the value of being educated and realize they’re a big population that can be heard.

While study after study reveals that Latina/o students have higher aspirations to go to college than do students from the general population and that 94 percent of Latina/o parents say they expect their own children to go to college (Delgado-Gaitan 1992; Kao 2000; Pew Hispanic Foundation/Kaiser Family Foundation 2004), sweeping generalizations are made about Latinas/os not valuing education. Incidentally, earlier in his interview, as described in the section on biological determinism, Manuel Cadena argued that students on “the other side of the track trains” (read: Latina/o and poor or working class) are “not prepared. So you can only do so much.” In this current example, he criticizes Latina/o parents for not valuing education. Yet members of the same Latina/o community that he castigates across the tracks who attend SCHS are actually “choice students.” These students and their families made the decision to leave their home schools to attend the more highly ranked school in the district with the hopes of increasing their educational opportunities. One such student, sophomore Daniela Gutierrez, explains her parents’ decision: “My brother was coming here, and I guess they thought that [SCHS] was a better school . . . They have higher test scores or something like that.” Thus while some working-class and Latina/o families are actually investing significant time to enroll their children in SCHS and then driving them
several miles each day to and from school, Manuel Cadena dismisses these efforts by assuming that parents do not value education. Instead, he seems to equate valuing education to attending school meetings:

If you look at the parents of these kids in [my non-college prep. course], you'll see a difference in their parental attitude compared to the parents of kids in [my college prep. course]. Parent conference night, for example, I'll see one or two sets of parents from two kids from [my non-college prep. course]. The rest of the fifty-some parents that I see are from my [other class].

This belief that attendance at school meetings is a crucial indication of parent caring is a fallacy accepted by many who possess stereotyped perceptions of Latina/o families and narrow conceptions of parent participation (Lareau 1989; Quijada and Alvarez 2006).

Not only do parents believe that all forms of raising children are critical, including providing food, clothing, and verbal encouragement (Williams and Stallworth 1983; Gándara 1995), but working-class, immigrant, or Latina/o parents may also be more likely to expect that schools and teachers are responsible for student learning since they are officially trained for this undertaking (Lareau 1987). However, given the hegemony of middle-class and upper-middle-class frameworks of parent participation, these broader views may be ignored by the staff. Likewise, by blaming parents' cultures, the responsibilities of schools in creating spaces inclusive of all parents—including working-class, immigrant, and non-English-speaking—are overlooked.

Also overlooked in cultural deficiency frameworks are the ways that class position and previous experiences with institutions of higher education may influence families' cultural and social capital. In particular, low-income and Latina/o families may not have the same forms of school-expected cultural capital (knowledge of how the school system works and what it values) and social capital (access to institutional agents) than middle- and upper-class students who are often White and Asian American (Lareau 1989; Gándara and Contreras 2009, 68). However, rather than examining how schools may assume that all possess the same forms of capital or that schools bear no responsibility for providing information and access that may be taken for granted by more privileged parents, Latina/o families are blamed.

While only mentioned in regard to Latinas/os, a couple of school officials drew on classic cultural deterministic arguments that blame what has been referred to as a "language handicap" for hindering academic success (see Chavez 1991). Fourth-year teacher Mike Williams expounds,

There's a huge language issue because they're taught Spanish first and then they come to an American school where everything is done in English. So they're already behind because they don't have that language acquisition. They don't have the language to function academically, so that already is an enormous setback for most.

Rather than seeing bilingualism as an asset or faulting schools for the elimination of bilingual education, Mike Williams assumes that Spanish-speaking students are deficient—that they lack "language acquisition." This sentiment was common, especially through the 1960s when much of the academic scholarship on bilingualism was premised on the belief that English-language learners experience impairment in speech, intellect, confidence, and originality of thought (Soto 1997, 3). Disproving such biased assumptions, more recent studies indicate that when students are provided the opportunity to acquire two languages through dual-immersion programs, they demonstrate superiority in concept formation, mental flexibility, and verbal problem-solving abilities relative to their monolingual peers (Lindholm 1995, 247).

By only focusing on Latinas/os and the Spanish language, teacher Mike Williams assumes that Latinas/os are the group most held back by language or that they are more likely to come from non-English-speaking households. However, as documented by the California Department of Education, equal numbers of Latina/o and Asian American students (about one hundred each) are designated English-language learners at SCHS. Although no group should be the target of such a fallacious statement that they lack "language acquisition," this sentiment is also unequally applied.

Framing Asian Americans

In contrast to Latina/o parents, who are typically described as not valuing education, Asian American parents are often characterized as just the opposite. Second-year teacher Alison Adams's comments capture this sentiment: "I see honors/AP as your high achievers, and that tends to be your Asian kids. I think it's cultural. I took a class once, and we talked about that, and culturally Asian parents tend to push more. They're very involved in education." Dominant representations of Asian Americans as a so-called model minority who are believed to really "push" education prevail, and in the case of Alison Adams, she learned this in her teacher education program. Teacher Mike Williams bases his assessment on his observations:

Education, from what I've seen in most Asian families, is something that is held in the highest regard. If you want to get anywhere in
your life and become successful and prosper and be a professional, education is that key. What I’ve noticed even with little, little Asian American children is, “School, school, school, work work, work. Study your butt off.” And because knowledge and education is so revered in so many Asian American families, that’s quite naturally what a lot of Asian American students bring to school with them.

While his qualifying language of “most” and “a lot” tempers Mike William’s simplifications, he nonetheless casts a broad stroke in describing Asian Americans. Likewise, he conveys his assumption that “education is that key” to success, “to get[ing] anywhere in life.” Such a sentiment supposes that there is just one path and one conception of success, that everyone has equal access to education, and that education necessarily results in prosperity. In contrast to these assumptions, relative to Whites, Asian Americans do not receive comparable returns on their education, and they often face blocked opportunities to career advancement, especially in managerial positions (Woo 2000; Chen 2006). Some suggest that it is precisely these structural barriers that are a product of racial discrimination that lead some families to do all they can to encourage education for their children in hopes of reducing the impacts of racism (Louie 2004). Like their Latina/o immigrant counterparts, studies suggest that Asian American parents place much hope in their children’s education. However, at SCHS, the financial resources and knowledge of educational institutions of Asian American and Latina/o parents often differ because of parents’ variations in class-based resources and educational backgrounds.

While school officials tend to praise Asian American families for what they believe is a strong emphasis on education, underlying some of these cultural arguments is that Asian Americans might just “push” their children too much. Veteran teacher Margaret Albert reflects,

The bad side of that is that some Asian parents have, and again I’m lumping all Asians and it’s very different being wherever you’re from, but sometimes, it’s so unrealistic that their parents are pushing them that that creates a lot of problems. You know, it’s unrealistic that everyone’s going to go to UC [University of California] Berkeley.

Softening her generalization of Asian Americans by mentioning geographic and ethnic differences, Margaret Albert cautions Asian American parents from being “unrealistic” and “pushing” too hard. However, like many, she does not challenge the structure of society and schools that are based on competition and driven by hierarchies that rank schools and individuals. The push to achieve greater and more rewards is embedded in society and schools. As described earlier, SCHS’s emphasis on its API score is just one of many examples of this culture of competition in schools. Rather than critique this culture, the supposed culture of Asian Americans is targeted.

The image that Asian American parents are not just “unrealistic” but even downright abusive has, according to teacher Beth Hill, become part of the student lore. She shares, “The students always joke, ‘You have no idea what beating I would get if I get a B. That’s like a big joke, but I don’t know if it really is.’” While Asian American students may be playing with stereotypes of their parents when they make these comments to their teachers, Beth Hill hears such comments so often that she is even beginning to believe them.

Just as some critique Asian Americans for “pushing” their children in what they perceive as too much, a few such as Beth Hill belittle families for being insistent with teachers:

I have a student that was absent a lot and his mom has been e-mailing me. Since he got a C for the semester and a B—[overall], and I didn’t advise him to go on to AP because I feel like the absences are really going to [hurt him], she e-mailed me, “Please.”

Parents have the right to request that their children be placed in advanced courses. However, Beth Hill believes that this request was too demanding and emblematic of some of her exchanges with Asian American parents. To punctuate her point, she continues with a second example:

One [family member] I had asked to change a grade. [The student] took my sophomore class as a junior for honors because he was in IB and he needed a better grade than a D. He still got a D in my class his junior year. That aunt [said], “Please, can you just change it?” I’m like, “No.” They come, and they push.

While it is unclear how often teachers encounter this second example, where they are asked to change a grade, some teachers may equate these two interactions with Asian Americans parents only. However, middle-class and upper-middle-class children and parents in high curriculum tracks such as the International Baccalaureate program or those with high socioeconomic status may be more likely to make such requests because of their own privileged positions and sense of entitlement in school and society (Lareau 1989). As education scholar Lisa Delpit (1995) has documented, they may possess a variation of the “culture of power” in knowing what to expect and what to ask of the school to best serve their interests.
Panethnic Lumping: Cultural, Class, and Interracial/Ethnic Homogenization

Typically ignoring within-group variations, many school officials describe the supposed cultures between Asian Americans and Latinas/os as static, homogenous, and diametrically opposed. When asked about within-group differences, many seem unaware or reluctant to discuss them. This was especially the case for White administrators and faculty, who often accepted dominant beliefs or were raised in areas where, as the numeric majority, they did not think about the significance of race/ethnicity. For example, thirty-year teacher Harriet Andrews remembers being raised in an area where “people didn’t concentrate” on racial/ethnic backgrounds. Instead, during her childhood, there was the idea of “the so-called melting pot,” where it was believed that all groups would interact and boundaries would eventually blur so that people’s backgrounds would become insignificant. It was thought that they would lose their ancestral ties and assimilate into the dominant U.S. culture (Waters 1990). As a result of this perspective, Harriet Andrews believes that Asian American students’ ethnicities, along with her own, which she defines as American, are “irrelevant”:

I have an awful lot of Asian students. The school percentage is something like 53 percent or maybe more, and in the honors classes it’s probably 80 or 90 percent, and I’ve taught so long that I forgot what anyone is, and I certainly don’t know the difference between a Korean and a Japanese and a Chinese in general. I might because someone told me or they have a Japanese last name. It occurred to me that all of that, especially in being older, it becomes irrelevant. If I were a new teacher, I’d be more aware of it.

It is unclear why she speculates that she might be more aware of students’ ethnicities if she were just starting to teach since even some newer teachers are also unaware. Newcomer Alison Adams, who earlier shared how she learned in a class that “culturally Asian parents tend to push [education] more,” confesses here that she actually knows little about students’ backgrounds:

I wish I knew the different socioeconomic [backgrounds] because I don’t know the differences. That’s one thing that I don’t . . . I guess it’s good and bad. I don’t know the difference between the different Asian ethnicities. So I don’t pinpoint that.

Ironically, while the school focuses so much on Asian American and Latina/o educational outcomes in the form of standardized tests and so many profess that there are cultural differences between groups, teachers such as Alison Adams are uninformed of the histories and backgrounds of those who compose these categories. This confirms teacher Laura Cooper’s earlier critique that outside of students’ test results, little information is provided about the various students at the school. Initially, Alison Adams is concerned that she does not know these differences, but then she reflects on how not knowing may be good. She seems to imply that if she knew, she might treat students unfairly.

Not only is there little awareness of varied histories and ethnicities, but staff often tend not to distinguish between socioeconomic status. In fact, with comments such as “It’s a touchy subject” and “People don’t want to go there,” several outright avoid any discussions about class disparities. Since so many accept a cultural determinist view rather than a more structural analysis on group position, the assumption is that one’s socioeconomic position is somehow a reflection of a person’s worth or merit. To some, to be poor is perceived to be a negative indictment on one’s values, work ethic, or abilities rather than a critique of an unequal class system or an awareness of differing migration patterns. In the eyes of one SCHS administrator, “To say you’re poor is more of a slur [than to say you are Mexican].” She believes that the prejudices and stigmas against the poor and Hispanics are so strong that people not only avoid identifying as such, but there is a culture of silence surrounding class and race.

These claims about averting awareness of differences are a more contemporary spin on the melting pot approach that was popular during teacher Harriet Andrews’s childhood and through the early 1960s. The melting pot approach emerged in the 1930s and was a liberal challenge to biological determinist beliefs that assumed a biological hierarchy of racial/ethnic groups (Omi and Winant 1994, 14). In contrast, the view articulated by new teacher Alison Adams became pervasive in the 1970s in opposition to the civil rights struggles and an analysis of systemic power and inequality. The backlash against civil rights gains resulted in what has been described as neoconservatism. Some who accept a neoconservative perspective may say that they do not see class or race, or they may equate being class or race conscious with being exclusionary. While melting pot and neoconservative ideologies developed during distinct time periods and represent different political perspectives, they are both variations of a cultural-determinist and power-evasive view because they minimize class inequality, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination (see Omi and Winant 1994). Cultural arguments, as opposed to historical, political, economic, and social ones, are then used to explain group position. However, in a society and school stratified by class, race/ethnicity, gender and
migration and when these backgrounds are salient for people’s experiences, not noticing them or believing that they are “irrelevant” can reinforce stereotypes, inhibit understanding, and camouflage the role of larger factors in perpetuating inequality. They are also assimilationists because all are expected to become the same, such as by melting away their differences. In these examples, the assumption is that all Asian Americans are the same and that unequal resources as a result of class disparities are irrelevant in influencing schooling.

In spite of a general tendency among school officials to homogenize racial/ethnic groups, some made within-group distinctions. However, this was more common when describing Latinas/os, and such acknowledgments of heterogeneity often came from Latina/o teachers. For example, while many teachers were silent on the impact of class differences on educational outcomes, several emphasized that poor and working-class Latina/o families in particular were the ones who did not value education. Fifth-year teacher Anthony Castro clarifies:

There is a lot of “apathy” [from low-income Latinas/os]. Both students and their families don’t place importance in education. The Latino families [at SCHS] are economically disadvantaged. Socioeconomic status is so correlated with family instability. Their parents don’t have as much education, and they don’t value it in their children. If there weren’t different class statuses then there wouldn’t be a difference, a gap. The Latinos in the upper-level classes are the Latinos that come from the Asian neighborhood. They have the high test scores and GPAs [grade point averages].

Raised in a Mexican American family, Anthony Castro may be more inclined to see the diversity among Latinas/os. However, as someone who is college educated and the third generation of his family in the United States, he may wish to distinguish himself from working-class Latinas/os because of the extensive stereotypes that lump all Latinas/os together. Upon first glance, Anthony Castro’s arguments about class variation appear helpful for acknowledging some of the differences among Latinas/os and highlighting how many Latinas/os at the school are working class. Nevertheless, his arguments also perpetuate detrimental assumptions. First of all, they assume that something is allegedly wrong with low-income Latina/os who Anthony Castro stereotypes as not valuing education. In contrast, he says little about how class inequalities influence access to resources such as computers, tutoring programs, and other forms of support that enhance educational opportunities. Second, by claiming that the eradication of class differences will eliminate racial/ethnic disparities, Anthony Castro overlooks the significance of racist beliefs and practices. Finally, a common assumption made by this teacher and others is that all Asian Americans are economically advantaged. Thus while some recognize class differences among Latinas/os, Asian Americans are still cast as monolithic and held up as the group to model. Popular misperceptions that all Asian Americans are middle and upper class lead some to overlook how nearly 11 percent of Asian American families in the area of SCHS, including one in five Korean families, are living below the poverty line (U.S. Census 2000).

Gendered and Racialized Assumptions

Just as some acknowledge class variation among Latinas/os, a small number of school officials link gender and race/ethnicity to argue that there are more gender differences between Latinas and Latinos than between Asian American women and men. As teacher Anthony Castro proclaims, for the Hispanic group, the guys are less motivated to do well. For Asians, “guys and girls are equally motivated.” In making such assessments, the emphasis is again on allegedly different values between Latinas/os and Asian Americans.

In fact, a few staff members, such as teacher Margaret Albert, drew on hegemonic constructions of race and teen pregnancy to characterize Latinas as more sexually active and desirous of children in comparison to other groups of students on campus:

I’ve felt there was a marked difference between the Hispanic female, and I remember reading a very interesting article on how it was a status symbol practically, you know, you’re proud that you’re pregnant at an early age… If you’re in one part of the subculture, it’s kind of cute for the girl to walk around pregnant. And she’s young and then he’s young and then there’s the limit to how much education you can get.

Despite research indicating that Latina adolescents are less likely to be sexually active than European American and African American girls (Blum et al. 2000, as referenced in Denner and Guzmán 2006, 4) and that having a child as a teenager is linked to class resources, the assumption is that Latinas/os as a group favor young mothers. Teacher Margaret Albert expounds on her essentializing of Latina hypersexuality and young parenthood in comparison with her beliefs of Asian Americans:

Among the Asian population, generally dating and really getting involved in boyfriend-girlfriend relationships is something that is
delayed a great deal. And therefore they have more time to do other things.

Such categorizations are also pervasive in the media, and they position Latinas and Asian American women into racialized and gendered binaries. During various historical periods, Latinas and Asian Americans have been cast as sexually promiscuous and flaunting their sexuality or as asexual and virgins until marriage. In contrast, Latino men are often stereotyped as “Latin lovers” or hypermasculine, whereas Asian American men may be feminized (Ramírez-Berg 1997; Espiritu 1997). These representations are confining. They divide groups into whore/virgin and masculine/feminine dichotomies; they do not allow for the individual agency of Asian Americans and Latinas/os in determining their own sexualities, and they assume that education is necessarily sidelined by relationships and pregnancy. The few studies centering the perspectives of Latina teens actually suggest that motherhood increases educational aspirations for some teens (Russell and Lee 1994, as referenced by Trejos-Castillo and Frederick 2011). With so much focus on the supposed values of racial/ethnic groups, young Latinas are derogatorily cast as “at risk” and seen as the source of the believed problem of teen pregnancy (Garcia 2012). Meanwhile, sex education remains absent in most schools, limiting students’ opportunities to learn more about their bodies, relationships, and sexual health (Fields 2008).

Several school officials noted that they believe Latinos in particular have more “behavioral” problems than other students, and Latinos were typically named as the root of the problem. Teacher John Alvarez, who at first faulted the school for eliminating vocational classes that might appeal to some students, reverted to a cultural explanation by clarifying that “within the Hispanic culture, [boys] like to get involved with their hands. They like to work with cars.” Even Alvarez, who believes that CHS needs to provide more course options for students, reverts to an underlying assumption that Latinos, in comparison to other students, have a predilection for working with their hands. Arguments such as these permeated rationales used through the 1950s to confine Mexicans to manual labor in the agricultural fields, brickyards, and mines (Gonzalez 1990).

In spite of the variations in people’s emphasis on supposed cultural differences, such explanations prevail in the dominant representations of Asian Americans as an assumed “model minority” in comparison to Latinas/os. These beliefs divide Latinas/os from Asian Americans, and as history teaches us, these same frameworks are used to justify differences in academic achievement and to shape school practices. With groups of color defined as the “problem,” attention is also diverted from Whites and White privilege.

“The White Elephant”: Whiteness Is Largely Unmarked

Early during my research, a member of the staff was referred to the achievement gap between Asian Americans and Latinas/os as the “white elephant” because few people actually discuss it. As previously described, staff mention the “gap” constantly but only look superficially at the quantitative data. They do not delve into the complexities behind the numbers. When I heard this “white elephant” phrase, I understood it as a mistaken reference to the popular idiom of “an elephant in the room” used in reference to a taboo topic that people ignore. The addition of the word “white” is apropos given the overall silence regarding Whites, White privilege, and the normative cultural practices sustaining the racial/ethnic hierarchies at the school. As part of the power-evasive discourse at CHS, whiteness is one of the elephants in the school. Few White staff reflected on their own identities or the manifestations of White privilege. These silences are as significant as the biological and cultural arguments for maintaining disparities and for illustrating the dominance of power evasive thinking.

“I Never Thought about [My Racial/Ethnic Identity]”: White Invisibility

In spite of all the staff’s continual references to “Asians” and “Hispanics,” few talk about or even mention Whites at the school. Actually, interviews with the White staff reveal that although they are generally comfortable talking about Asian American and Latina/o students and parents, some are much less accustomed to thinking about their own racial/ethnic identities. Several even confessed that they never thought about their identities. This lack of acknowledgement of Whites’ own identities and positions in contrast to the extensive focus on Asian American and Latina/o students is glaring and reflects the normalization and privileging of whiteness that permeates the United States.

Older White teachers and administrators who were raised in predominately White communities outside of California were least likely to have thought about their identities. Comments by established teacher Elaine Cobb are illustrative:

I never thought about this ever, ever, ever. I thought of myself as an American, and over the years it seems to me it’s not good enough to
be American anymore. You have to identify with something, and we weren’t raised to identify with anything really but being an “I pledge allegiance to the flag” kind of person. So it is difficult for me when people make a big issue over “I am this; I am that” because I never thought of those terms until recently. Every form you fill out wants you to identify with something.

Until lately, Elaine Cobb’s racial/ethnic identity has gone unquestioned. As a light-skinned and blond White woman, her race has been the unnamed norm affirming sociologist Ruth Frankenberg’s point that “White stands for the position of racial ‘neutrality,’ or the racially unmarked category” (1993, 55). Within the United States, where many Whites have been taught to think about race/ethnicity only in relationship to people of color and not to themselves, Cobb identifies simply as “American” and emphasizes her “allegiance to the flag.” Now, presumably because of the growth in people of color, she is resentful at what she perceives as a change in expectations surrounding identification and assimilation into “Americanness.”

In an extreme case, longtime teacher George Larkin got very nervous when he was asked how his racial/ethnic identity is relevant to his teaching. He blurted, “I’m just a person helping everyone.” Larkin’s defensive reply suggests that he believes it is not good to see peoples’ differing racial/ethnic identities, histories, and experiences. He insinuates that even naming his own identity might imply that he is a traditional racist who treats students unfairly.

Coming of age in White communities in the 1950s and early 1960s and then becoming teachers at SCHS at a time when most students were White, these older members of the staff have been in positions of privilege where their experiences, perspectives, and cultures have been the unmarked norm. Assimilationist imperatives that all should shed their identities and practices to become “American” and the popular discourse purporting that “race does not matter” also seem to influence their ideas. Within this context, they have adopted a power-evasive framework to their own positionalities. From their positions of not having to name or think about their racial/ethnic identities, they have a difficult time understanding why all racial/ethnic groups in the United States cannot or do not just ignore their backgrounds. These stafffully appear unaware of the historical and contemporary dynamics circumscribing the identities and experiences of many people of color in the United States, where their “Americanness” and identities are often contested. Unlike the experiences of many Whites where their racial/ethnic identities may be taken as the standard, can be considered “symbolic,” or can be regarded as something enjoyed during holidays or represented in special foods (Gans 1979; Waters 1990), for many people of color—including students of color at SCHS—race/ethnicity continues to be imposed, required, and involuntary. Also, there is a generational gap based on immigration between the White staff fully and many of the students that may impede understanding. Compared to the White staff fully whose families have been in the United States for multiple generations, many of the students at SCHS migrated at a young age or are the children or grandchildren of immigrants. These differing experiences and perspectives have important implications for the type of climate that is constructed in the classroom and on campus.

Highlighting the prevalence of white invisibility, a couple of newer staff fully members expressed similar forms of resentment and bewilderment surrounding racial/ethnic identities, White privilege, and the significance of racism. Nancy Gardiner was the most vocal. She grew up in a small town in the Midwest, where she remembers, “We probably had one Mexican American student and one family from India.” Even though Gardiner spent the next twenty years in more racially/ethnically diverse communities in Southern California, she was shocked when she was recently asked about her background:

One of the staff turned to me and said, “Well, what race are you?”
I’ve never been asked that question before. I go, “What? Well, I’m White, you know.” The correct answer to that was “I’m German and English.” I never had anybody ask that. I had to stop and think,
“That sounds really different to more and more people.” German and English, you know, in a way, it’s like, “Don’t be afraid of me.”

Similar to Elaine Cobb’s bitterness that increasingly “you have to identify with something,” Nancy Gardiner implies that as a result of changing demographics, she is a minority in California. She even wonders if people will fear her because of her perception that being German and English is so unusual.

This sentiment and her feeling of being “really different” were intensified when she first saw all the SCHS students at a school event:

I walked into the gym, one of the first times I met the students here, and it is the sea of nothing but black hair. You know, I’m more of a minority as each year has gone by in my life. So that’s been interesting, and I try to experience it in a healthy way.

Rather than state the racial/ethnic demographics at the school, Gardiner focuses on hair color to demarcate students’ differences relative to her own as a blond White woman. Nancy Gardiner’s use of hair color as opposed to
naming racial/ethnic backgrounds illustrates what Frankenberg describes as using "polite" language or a "euphemism" to avoid "naming power" (1993, 149). In this example, the assumption is that hair color is what distinguishes socially and politically constructed races/ethnicities. This failure to name power differentials between staffulty and students as well as the position of Whites over communities of color is especially apparent when Gardiner proclaims that she is "more of a minority as each year has gone by." This proclamation ignores the fact that as a group Whites constitute more than half of the staffulty at SCHS and that they predominate within the United States and continue to wield most of the power.

Ignoring and Asserting White Privilege

In a society seeped in racism and where race and ethnicity influence opportunities, a few staffulty who ignore their identities also overlook the multiple forms of White privilege—what Beverley Daniel Tatum describes as "the systematically conferred advantages they receive simply because they are White" (1997, 95). Ranging from the ability to shop without being treated as suspect by clerks to being seen as an individual rather than as a representative of her race, in her now classic piece, Peggy McIntosh (1995) lists forty-six daily benefits of White privilege. Sociologists Oliver and Shapiro (1995) document the state policies fostering a cumulative legacy of White privilege and white supremacy that has resulted in vast wealth differentials between Whites and African Americans. These include unequal access to loans, a history of restrictive housing covenants, contemporary residential segregation, and differential rates of home appreciation based on the racial composition of communities. A lack of awareness of such everyday, institutional, and structural advantages granted to Whites relative to people of color reproduces the racial order. It also maintains the idea that individuals are solely responsible for their positions in society (McIntosh 1995).

This limited consciousness of privilege was most apparent in Joe Berk's retelling of his schooling and career trajectory. Raised in Southern California in the 1960s and 1970s, Joe attended a Catholic high school with a majority of White and Latina/o students. For him, school was "easy," and he "got along well" with his teachers, who were virtually all White. As has been the pattern in the racial skewing of course placement, he was placed in the top classes away from his Latino friends, who were put into courses that were several levels below his. This practice of being pushed up the educational pipeline continued throughout his life: after he became a teacher, he was selected to be a counselor, a director, and eventually an administrator. Recounting his experiences, Joe pipped, "Everything I did, I always got pushed into some leadership role." This experience of what Williams (1995) describes as the "glass elevator effect" contrasts with the "glass ceiling" often encountered by women and people of color who face multiple barriers to academic and career advancement. Nevertheless, Joe did not initially understand his experiences as an example of White and male privilege. Instead, he stumbles to explain why he was pushed up the career ladder:

I don't know why. I, I just, I don't know why. Ummm, it's like even when I was finishing up at high school umm and I was asked by the coaches to come out and help coach in the spring of my senior year. Why they asked me, I don't know. Then when I was, when I first started teaching umm, I was pulled into a role as a counselor... I was just being pulled into those roles. Ummm, one of the things I remember that was written on my observation when I was doing my student teaching was that they felt that I would eventually be suitable for an administrative position.

Joe Berk's multiple false starts, repetition, and lengthy pauses suggest that he is uncomfortable or even nervous answering the question. Such "rhetorical incoherence" increases when people discuss sensitive topics (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 68). This difficulty contrasts with the ease at which Joe characterized Asian Americans and Latinas/os at the beginning of this chapter.

As Joe explains his current position, he continues in a similar manner of rhetorical incoherence and without an analysis of the advantages his race/ethnicity and gender have had on his promotions:

I've always been kind of trusted with these leadership roles. Umm, I was thrust into uhh the role at [a private high school] as a counselor. And, before I left there, they, they were thrusting me into a disciplinary position as a leader. Then when I started teaching at the public school, after my second year there, I got pushed into department chairmanship. I got pushed, kind of, uhh into taking the athletic director's role.

Flustered to understand why he was so trusted and promoted, Joe eventually attributes his advancement to "showing an interest" and people being "happy to give" him high status roles. However, at the end of our two interviews spanning multiple weeks, Joe shared an epiphany: after the first interview, he started considering how he might have been pushed up in curriculum tracks and in job promotions because he is White.
While Joe Berk's narrative illustrates how people's perspectives can change, it also highlights how the invisibility of whiteness is similar to biological and cultural arguments in that it shifts attention away from structural and institutional causes of inequality and the salience of race/ethnicity, gender, and class. For staff member Nancy Gardiner, her ignorance of White privilege—including, as described in the previous section, her unawareness of her own identity—leads her to invert the reality of power differentials and to blame immigrants for "ruining" the United States:

**NANCY GARDINER:** Sometimes I resent it. It’s like, “Wait a minute. You came in and you think this is all about you. Excuse me.” You just sometimes feel run over. I mean, some of my more defensive emotions might be, “Well, you came here to America for the good that America has to offer, but then in so many ways, a lot of people seem to ruin it.”

**GILDA OCHEA:** What do you mean? Are there any examples you can think of?

**NANCY GARDINER:** I feel that a lot of people take advantage of what’s given to them and do not respond in an appreciative way. In some ways, things have been made too easy for people who have needs or people who come illegally. I might be wrong, but a lot of my perception of poverty and crime for example are from a lot of people who are here illegally and take advantage of the system in America like free medical, free public education, communicating in your primary language.

By failing to note power and privilege, Nancy Gardiner overlooks the many hardships immigrants encounter living and working in a new country. She also inaccurately reverses who is really advantaged within the United States and who benefits from our current system. Rather than critique the role of U.S. economic and military policies that impel people to migrate and that are also impacting the livelihoods of working people within the United States, she faults undocumented immigrants. This framework allows her to ignore how immigrant labor forms the base of the U.S. economy so that the low wages paid to immigrants advantage capitalists and consumers. These low wages and immigrant labor subsidize the food, clothing, electronics, and services that many people in the United States consume, and the economic policies and military actions of the power elite—primarily upper class White men—serve elite interests.

Psychologically, Nancy Gardiner's anti-immigrant perspective also provides her with a scapegoat for her difficulties finding a job:

In my own [experience] seeking employment, I was becoming very concerned and frustrated that so many of the schools were looking for someone who could speak Spanish. That was upsetting to me. And a lot of the job positions were bilingual. It changed from desirable or preferred to desired, to required.

Instead of considering the possibility that others are more qualified than she is and that bilingual staff are assets in schools, she exerts a sense of entitlement that she deserves to be hired:

It became very discouraging and upsetting. It's like, "My God, here I am an intelligent adult. I just paid for a master's degree. I have the qualifications, the credentials to be hired... just being more mature, having been a parent and my work in schools, a lot of other things in my background that were very desirable to be hired, even in schools where I knew people." But I felt I was not getting hired because I could not speak Spanish.

When she was not immediately hired and she could not benefit from her social connections, Nancy Gardiner claimed discrimination and reconstructed the history of the area to suit her interests:

I was being discriminated against. And that brought various thoughts and feelings like, "Wait a minute, this is America and our primary language, our national language—whether by default or whatever has been English. Why can't I get hired and all these people who didn't even have an education could get hired just like that?" And here I went and invested in a master's degree, and I felt like I was being discriminated against. So that made me angry at the whole system.

Conceiving of the region as English speaking, Nancy Gardiner adopts mainstream ideas that selectively forget that the area where Los Angeles was founded in 1781 started as a Mexican pueblo. Similarly, even when Southern California and the rest of the Southwest were forcefully incorporated by the United States in 1848, cultural rights were to be protected under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. As Vigil notes, "Mexican cultural customs and patterns were to be given equal consideration with Anglo culture; this meant recognition and accommodation of the Spanish language and Catholic religion" (1980, 127). By overlooking this history and contemporary demographics, she accepts an image of Southern California and the United States as White and English speaking. Furthermore, Gardiner speaks in generalities about "all these people" who were being hired over her. She does not name their racial/ethnic backgrounds, but the implications are that they are less qualified, do not have an education, and are not from the United States. Her focus on the Spanish language
appears to be a code word for Latinas/os and her belief that unqualified Latinas/os are taking these jobs. Nancy Gardiner assumes that she has more of a right—an entitlement—to be hired, possibly because “this is America,” and she is White. In spite of the privilege Whites receive in a racially stratified society and the legacy of discrimination against people of color, this example of claiming discrimination or “reverse racism” is a noted strategy employed by some Whites who believe people of color are responsible for taking college slots, jobs, and promotions from Whites. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explains, such “racial stories” of not getting jobs because of people of color help “make sense of the world but in ways that reinforce the status quo, serving particular interests without appearing to do so” (2006, 75). Despite such racial stories, the number of reverse discrimination cases actually filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is small and the majority of the cases are rejected for lack of any foundation (83).

Nancy Gardiner’s description of applying to a tutoring center reflects her framework of ignoring and asserting White privilege:

I found it very interesting that when I went into the interview, everybody was Asian. People at the reception desk were speaking Chinese to the parents coming in. Again, I thought, “Oh my gosh.” It’s like I grew up and moved to another country. I thought, “Oh boy, it’s not going to work here either.”

Although this is a private tutoring business run by members of the Chinese community, Nancy was enraged when she saw who participated in the center and that Chinese was being spoken to parents. This space did not fit her white image of the United States, even though there has been a long Chinese presence in this country, especially in California. As she did throughout her interview, Gardiner defends White privilege by proclaiming an exclusionary definition of America and Americanness belonging to and populated by Whites and English speakers.

When Nancy Gardiner’s assumptions that she would not be hired at the center were disproved, she celebrates what she perceives as her niche—inverting the reality that the English language is hegemonic:

But in the interview with the president of the company, she was very complimentary; she was very impressed. She wanted to hire me . . . .

One of the things she said was that they were interested in me being a teacher because I was a native English speaker. I am going, “Wow!” There is a market for me somewhere . . . . I finally decided there are so many languages around me that my strength is on the native English speaker.

While a cultural hierarchy within the United States positions the English language over other languages, Gardiner seems to believe that the power of the English language and her role in education is threatened. She resists this concern by embracing a belief that she has a value that others have somehow not yet realized—she is a “native English speaker.”

Gardiner is unique in the amount of time she devoted during her interview to revealing her White privilege and concurrent sense of entitlement. Most staffulty said nothing about white advantage individually or institutionally. At SCHS, where Asian Americans and Latinas/os are consistently talked about, this silence surrounding whiteness and White privilege are obvious. As Frankenberg writes, “Whites are the nondefined definers of other people” (1993, 197). Such silences surrounding whiteness and White privilege are damaging. They lead to the overlooking of the macro-meso-micro factors perpetuating white supremacist practices such as assimilationist expectations. Likewise, they simultaneously advantage those who fit dominant constructions of whiteness—such as being light skinned, speaking English, being born in the United States—and disadvantage those outside of this socially constructed norm.

Silences Surrounding the School Culture

Along with not recognizing their own positionalities, most White staffulty said little about the school culture and the multiple factors influencing it. Absent was a critique of the power structure and the racial/ethnic gap between the staffulty and students. At SCHS, three-quarters of the administrators and half of the teachers are White. In contrast, 90 percent of the students are of color (California Department of Education 2008). As illustrated throughout this chapter, this racial/ethnic gap between the staffulty and students may be one of the factors fueling the school culture with deficiency and assimilationist perspectives. These perspectives are known to inhibit understanding of students and to impede more inclusionary approaches in schools (Sleeter 1993). As Valenzuela also found when analyzing the gaps between teachers and students in her Texas high school study, “Teachers see the differences in culture and language between themselves and their students from a culturally chauvinistic perspective that permits them to dismiss the possibility of a more culturally relevant approach in dealing with this population” (1999, 66). While changing the racial/ethnic demographics of school officials is not the answer to altering perspectives and the campus climate, studies suggest that increasing the percentage of teachers of color may have a positive effect on race/ethnic relations in schools by better addressing inequalities (Goldsmith 2004;
Ochoa 2007). As will become apparent in the forthcoming chapters, the silences surrounding the school culture at SCHS compounded with an acceptance of power-evasive perspectives allow for the continuance of Eurocentric course curriculum and school activities.

Overall, power-evasive frameworks such as these biological and cultural arguments and the absence of an interrogation of whiteness are dangerous for what they expose, justify, and camouflage. They reveal deep-seated biases that are rooted in larger ideologies that dichotomize, homogenize, and perpetuate hierarchies. Biological and cultural deficiencies justify inequality and shape everyday perceptions and interactions, including how staff highly perceive students. They can become self-fulfilling, especially when the focus in education is on standardized tests and students’ worth is simply defined by quantitative measurements. Similarly, the absence of a discussion of standardized tests and whiteness prevent an analysis of their impacts on student learning and the campus dynamics. As detailed in the upcoming chapters, students experience the power of these constructs to the point that most Asian American participants reference the limiting expectation that they be “model minorities” while Latina/o students often discuss being seen as “troublemakers.” As long as such confining categorizations persist and remain uncontested, dominant discourses will inhibit the discussions necessary for dismantling larger injustices. The causes and justifications of disparities and divisions will remain intact.

To more thoroughly understand the factors influencing students’ educational experiences, chapters 2 through 5 focus on the school structures, practices, and everyday dynamics that work in conjunction with the dominant discourses presented in this chapter to influence students’ opportunities and peer relations. By interrogating dominant discourses and educational practices, we are better positioned to reconstruct paradigms and rebuild institutions in the movement to change exclusionary perceptions and create more equitable realities.

CHAPTER TWO

Welcome to High School

Tracking from Middle School to International Baccalaureate Programs

It should not be so separated because it makes people feel different.
—Rebecca Ramos, sophomore in college preparatory (CP) classes

By the time students begin Southern California High School (SCHS), many are aware of the racialized and classed reputations that mark the middle schools feeding into the high school and the students who will soon be their schoolmates. The images of the two neighborhood middle schools—La Montaña and Maple Grove—are stark. As detailed in this chapter, these reputations and unequally valued schools interact with the segregation structured in SCHS’s tracking system. This system sorts, divides, and treats students disparately, fueling their separation and the feeling of being different and unequal, which Rebecca Ramos critiques in the previous quote.

While there are important variations, in general, Asian Americans and middle-class and upper-middle-class students are concentrated in La Montaña Middle School and in the high school’s International Baccalaureate (IB), honors (H), and advanced placement courses. In contrast, Latinas/os and working-class students predominate in Maple Grove Middle School and in nonhonors courses that are designated college preparatory (CP). With students in La Montaña and in SCHS’s top classes experiencing higher expectations and greater educational opportunities, a binary, racialized, classed, and hierarchical construction of students is perpetuated. This construction is propelled by and reinforces racialized and classed discourses. Consequently, rather than greeted with inclusion and optimism at the high school gates, students are funneled into a system of inequality and competition where their peer groups are disparately and separately formed.