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“Ask Not for Whom the line is Drawn”: How Middle-Class,
African-American Parents in an Urban California School District
Socially Construct School Boundaries

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Education

by

Tolulope Abimbola Bamishigbin

2017

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2017

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Ask Not for Whom the line is Drawn”: How Middle-Class African-American
Parents in One Community Located in an Urban California School District
Socially Construct School Boundaries

by

Tolulope Abimbola Bamishigbin
Doctor of Philosophy in Education
University of California, Los Angeles, 2017
Professor Megan L. Franke, Chair

Within the past few years, the topic of school boundaries (district boundaries and school attendance boundaries) has become more and more prevalent in both public and scholarly discourses around education inequality. While a number of education scholars have examined the role school boundaries play in education inequality, many of these scholars have focused primarily on geospatial and/or quantitative analyses of school districts or school district data. Guided by a theoretical framework that combines Critical Race Theory, social constructionism (meaning-making), and minority culture of mobility, this case study uses a qualitative approach to understand how middle-class, African American parents socially construct school boundaries. Hence, this study focuses on parents’ perceptions of school boundaries, how these perceptions shape their decision to cross school boundaries, and how their decision to cross school boundaries can either disrupt or reproduce school boundaries. I conducted 23 in-depth interviews with 24 parents and key informants from one socioeconomically diverse, predominantly African

American community in an urban school district located in California. Major findings revealed that while most parent-participants believed that race and racial bias play a significant role in how school boundaries are drawn and enforced, they personally were not deterred by school boundaries. However, in their quest for what they perceived to be better schools, parents' perceptions of and decisions to cross school boundaries contributed to the reproduction of school boundaries, leading to the further isolation of already marginalized students in disadvantaged schools. Findings also exposed both intra- and inter-racial divisions regarding school choice, suggesting that middle-class and/or upwardly mobile, African American parents use boundary-crossing as a tool to assert their class identity and distinguish themselves from less advantaged African American families. Policy implications are explored.

The dissertation of Tolulope Abimbola Bamishigbin is approved.

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Megan Franke, Committee Chair

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2017

DEDICATION

To Saada

If tomorrow is judgment day
And I'm standing on the front line
And the Lord asked me what I did with my life,
I will say I spent it with you

—“*My love is your love*” by Whitney Houston

To Sade & Sewa

I am standing upon the seashore. A ship, at my side,
spreads her white sails to the moving breeze and starts
for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength.
I stand and watch her until, at length, she hangs like a speck
of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.

Then, someone at my side says, "There, she is gone"

Gone where?

Gone from my sight. That is all. She is just as large in mast,
hull and spar as she was when she left my side.
And, she is just as able to bear her load of living freight to her destined port.

Her diminished size is in me -- not in her.
And, just at the moment when someone says, "There, she is gone,"
there are other eyes watching her coming, and other voices
ready to take up the glad shout, "Here she comes!"

-Henry Jackson Van Dyke

***And to all the beautiful, black youth on the front lines everyday
fighting to have our humanity recognized***

Thank you!
Black lives *do* matter.

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- 2015 Critical Questions in Education Conference, San Diego, CA (February 16-18) Paper Presentation: *Conceptualizing School Boundaries to Examine the Role They Play in Limiting African Americans' Access to Quality Education*

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In early 2011, during my first year as a doctoral student, the case of Kelley Williams-Bolar¹, caught my attention. Williams-Bolar, a single, African American mother in Akron, Ohio was arrested and subsequently jailed for illegally sending her daughters to school in a neighboring school district instead of her children's assigned school district. The Copley-Fairlawn school district is an affluent, high performing school district located just a couple of miles away from the poor, low performing Akron Public School District. Williams-Bolar says that after her home was broken into twice, she decided to enroll her children in Copley-Fairlawn schools for their safety. Local prosecutors claimed that by sending her children to Copley-Fairlawn schools, Williams-Bolar's actions amounted to a theft of educational services.

The case drew national attention, sparking debate about disparities in school quality across district lines, where African American and Latino students in poorly funded districts receive lower quality education compared to their white, more affluent counterparts in better funded school districts. Prior to hearing anything about the case, my research interest was culturally relevant pedagogy. As a former high school mathematics instructor in a predominantly black and Latino school, I was primarily interested in discovering more effective pedagogical and curricular approaches for teaching students of color. However, when Williams-Bolar's case came to the forefront, I found the case not only fascinating, but resonant with my own experience as a student in the public school system.

For my entire K-12 schooling, I attended schools outside my assigned school boundaries. My newly immigrant, working-class parents did everything they could to make sure my younger

¹ Kavanaugh, J. (2011, January 26). "Mom Jailed for Enrolling Kids in Wrong School District." CNN. Retrieved on February 1, 2012 from <http://news.blogs.cnn.com/2011/01/26/mom-jailed-for-enrolling-kids-in-wrong-school-district/?iref=allsearch>; Applebome, P. (2011, April 27).

siblings and I attended the best schools in our district—even if it meant bending the rules². This is why shortly after hearing Williams-Bolar’s story, I decided to switch my research focus from culturally relevant pedagogy to the phenomenon newly referred to as “education theft.” When I shared my new research interest with my advisor, she also found it fascinating yet, lacking in depth. She worried “if all of a sudden, parents stopped being prosecuted for this, then what?” Instantly, I understood that she was challenging me to dig deeper to unpack the underlying issues at play in this case and others like it. After going back to the drawing board, it became clear that though ostensibly being punished for using extra-legal means to access educational resources, Williams-Bolar and parents like her were being punished for crossing the line—both literally and figuratively.

Across the country, many school districts (particularly those that are affluent and high performing) invest a great deal of resources to ensure that only students residing within their boundaries attend its schools. Similar to news stories about parents called upon to face charges of education theft (i.e., boundary crossing) are stories about middle-class to affluent school districts engaging in surveillance of families whom they believe to be unlawfully attending their schools. In 2014, a 7-year old Latina girl attending school in the affluent Orinda Union School District in California—an affluent community near the Bay Area, located just east of Berkeley—was ordered to leave her school after the district hired a private investigator to determine whether she lived in the district.³ The girl and her mother, a nanny for an affluent family who lives in the district, live full time in the district although their permanent address is with the girl’s grandmother outside the district. While some districts encourage community members to

² My youngest sibling even attended high school outside our district.

³ <http://www.eastbaytimes.com/2014/11/27/orinda-district-hires-private-investigator-kicks-live-in-nannys-daughter-out-of-school/>

anonymously report families they believe to be in violation of the district's residency requirements⁴, other districts have offered monetary rewards for any information leading to the removal of a student attending its schools from outside its boundaries.⁵

In a more troubling trend, residents from several affluent suburbs in or around cities such as Dallas, Atlanta, Memphis, and Birmingham, Alabama, have recently proposed plans to secede from their larger, more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse municipalities to create their own districts, citing the need for their own schools. In 2014, for example, Louisiana residents in the southern- and easternmost regions of the City of Baton Rouge began a petition to create their own city under the banner "Local Schools for Local Children."⁶ According to Bloomberg, a "Dallas-based Standard & Poor's managing director who studies school finance, warned that... a reduced tax base and declining enrollment could hurt the remaining district."

In Manhattan, the New York City Department of Education's rezoning plan, which was proposed to relieve overcrowding in an affluent school located on the Upper Westside, drew a great deal of controversy in 2016 over affluent parents' refusal to send their children to the low-income, predominantly black and Latino elementary school located in the adjacent school boundary.⁷ The controversy, along with similar conflicts over school rezoning plans that would lead to more integrated school settings for children in the city, exposed racial and class tensions and affluent residents' resistance to measures that would lead to more racially and socioeconomically mixed schools.

⁴ <http://www.dispatch.com/news/20170515/some-school-districts-tail-parents-to-check-where-family-actually-lives>

⁵ http://www.hudsonreporter.com/view/full_story/10488598/article-Schools-increase-bounty-on-illegal-students-District-investigates-seven-leads-from-phone-tips-?instance=more_page

⁶ Margaret Newkirk, "Baton Rouge's Rich Want New Town to Keep Poor Pupils Out: Taxes"

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-02-06/baton-rouge-s-rich-want-new-town-to-keep-poor-pupils-out-taxes>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/nyregion/rezoning-plan-for-3-upper-west-side-schools-will-proceed-city-says.html>

Three thousand miles away, parents from the affluent suburb of Palo Alto, California, gathered to show support for their low-income, mostly Hispanic neighbors residing in the Buena Vista Mobile Home Park.⁸ In 2015, the mobile home park, faced closure when its owners threatened to sell the property, located in the high-performing, predominantly white and Asian Palo Alto Unified School District. While the mobile home park parents worried about the fate of their children's education were they to be evicted and forced to move outside the school district, the affluent parents worried about how the loss of these working-class, Latino families would negatively affect the class and ethnic diversity of their schools. In 2017, both poor and wealthy residents got their wish when the Housing Authority of Santa Clara County, Santa Clara County, and city of Palo Alto formed a partnership to preserve the mobile park⁹, enabling the low income families to remain in the district.

Problem Statement

The aforementioned cases illustrate the contentious battles playing out across the country over school boundaries—where they are drawn, how they are enforced, and the role they play in families' residential decisions. Although residential patterns, school finance schemes, and school organizational structures in the U.S. all contribute to the uneven distribution of educative resources in this country, school boundaries exacerbate this problem by limiting where some children can go to school.

Despite the expansion of schooling options available to families over the past several decades, the vast majority of students in the U.S. attend their assigned public school (73% in 2007) (NCES, 2010b). According to NCES data on school choice, African American students are

⁸ Herhold, Scott (2015, March 11) "How affluent Palo Alto PTA members are trying to save a working-class enclave" Retrieved on March 24, 2015 from http://www.mercurynews.com/scott-herhold/ci_27690602/how-affluent-palo-alto-pta-members-are-trying

⁹ <http://www.mercurynews.com/2017/05/18/a-great-great-day-palo-altos-buena-vista-mobile-home-park-is-saved/>

more likely than any other ethnicity to attend a “chosen” public school (NCES, 2016), i.e., charter schools, magnet schools, and those attended by students on inter- and intra-district transfer (NCES, 2010b). Although several studies within the education literature have examined various school choice topics such as parent preferences, types of parents more likely to engage in school choice, and the types of resources needed for the successful navigation of the school choice process, fewer studies have focused on constraints to school choice. Among those that have examined constraints to school choice, such studies have been limited to constraints such as time, distance, and lack of resources. Through school assignment policies, which rely on residence to determine which school a child can attend, school boundaries represent both a geographic and institutionally-based constraint on school choice.

Research Questions

While several studies have examined school boundaries and the role they play in maintaining education inequality, many of these studies utilize geospatial and/or quantitative analyses of school districts or school district data. Few, if any, examine groups’ or individuals’ subjective understandings of school boundaries and how those understandings may contribute to education inequality. In an effort to fill this gap in the literature, and center the experiences of African Americans in the school choice process, this study examines how middle-class, African American parents socially construct school boundaries. Thus, my broad research question asks “How do middle-class African American parents socially construct school boundaries?”

Specifically, I examine the following research questions:

- (1) How do middle-class African American parents make meaning of school boundaries?
- (2) How do these meanings shape these parents’ decision to cross school boundaries?

(3) How does the act of boundary-crossing among middle-class, African American parents either disrupt or reproduce school boundaries?

To answer these questions, I designed a qualitative case study and conducted 23 in-depth interviews with 24 study participants during two academic school years (2014-2015 and 2015-2016). Participants included 13 middle-class or upwardly mobile, African American parents and 11 key informants, including the designated school's principal and staff, district personnel, and feeder high school principal.

Findings

Guided by a theoretical framework combining Critical Race Theory, social constructionism (meaning-making), and minority culture of mobility, I found that most, but not all, parent-participants believed that school boundaries were designed to contain African American families in their neighborhoods and limit their access to more affluent, predominantly white schools. However, despite the numerous obstacles they faced in attempting to cross school boundaries, these parents remained undeterred in their quest for what they perceived to be better-quality schools for their children. In fact, parents interpreted traits such as sacrifice, persistence, and determination in finding good schools for one's children as a sign of responsible parenting and good character and used boundary-crossing as tool to distinguish themselves from less advantaged African American parents. Findings also showed that boundary-crossing contributed to drops in school enrollment, changes in school composition, and changes in school culture and that by crossing school boundaries, middle-class and/or upwardly mobile, African American parents contributed to the reproduction of school boundaries.

CHAPTER 2 Literature Review

“Geography is destiny.”

—Dr. Abraham Verghese

Introduction

In the ongoing quest for educational equality in the United States, scholars, activists, and policymakers have approached education reform from multiple angles including school finance, access, curriculum, testing and accountability, and teacher training and evaluation. Among these, ensuring equal access to quality schooling has been particularly challenging. Although much of the school choice literature focuses on topics like the dispositions and resources needed to cross school boundaries as well as the process of choosing schools, outside of factors such as times, distance, or lack of resources, few have examined the constraints on parents’ school choices.

In this chapter, I discuss the existing literature on the types of knowledge, skills, and dispositions parents draw on when choosing schools. I also discuss the literature on how these skills, knowledge, and dispositions vary across families. I then examine on the extant school boundary literature because school boundaries may pose as a barrier to school choice. I first by look at empirical and theoretical research that examining the geography of educational opportunity and the institutional policies and practices that determine the spatial organization of schools and geographic distribution of educative resources. Next, I review the literature examining the relationship between the spatial dimensions of school districts and their political characteristics. I then review the literature examining school boundaries and boundary-crossing. And finally, I provide a brief summary of the literature reviewed and discuss how the present study can contribute to this area of education research.

Literature Review

The School Choice Process

While their preferences and specific needs may vary, all parents—regardless of their race or socioeconomic class—want a quality education for their children (e.g. Cooper, 2005; Diamond, 2000; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). Unfortunately, however, all parents do not have access to quality schools (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Bell, 2009). In an effort to make quality education more accessible to all families, various state and local governments have established school choice plans that allow parents to opt out of sending their children to their assigned neighborhood schools (Ryan & Heise, 2002). *School choice* is defined as student enrollment in a public school other than the one assigned or enrollment in a religious or nonsectarian private school (NCES, 2010b). Although school choice options available to families vary by district and region, options include magnet schools and schools with magnet programs, charter schools, inter-district choice plans, intra-district choice plans, and private schools (NCES, 2010b).

Given the abundance of options available, the resources necessary to finding the perfect school, and the outcomes associated with what school a child attends, the process of school choice can be costly (Ben-Porath, 2009; Hastings, Weelden & Weinstein, 2007). In addition to deciding whether to even engage in the process, parents must first determine what options are available to them, gather information on potential schools, fill out applications, submit important documents, take entrance exams (where necessary), maintain contact with school officials at the desired school or district, and ultimately decide on a school if the student is accepted to more than one (e.g. Bell, 2009; Cooper, 2005; Nield, 2005). Although some scholars rely on theoretical models designed to predict parents' school choices, others warn that such models are

too oversimplistic and fail to take into account the various factors that influence parents' choices—namely, race, gender, culture, and class (Ben-Porath, 2009; Bulman, 2004; Cooper, 2005). To further complicate matters, these factors can also influence how parents engage with and are perceived by potential schools. Lareau (1987) points out that certain forms of interactions with schools are more valued than others. Thus, some parents are better positioned to navigate the school choice process than others. This inherent bias within the system has created a predicament where the problem that school choice had sought to address – unequal access to quality schools—persists because the process privileges families with certain skills, knowledge, and dispositions (Andre-Becheley, 2005; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Lareau, 1989; Nield, 2005).

School Choice Patterns Across Race and Class

White Parents. With respect to parents' dispositions toward schools, a theme that consistently emerged in the school choice literature was the significance that race played when white parents approached the school choice process. While scholars noted that white parents rarely made it explicit that the racial composition of a school factored into their decision to choose (or not to choose) a school, other data indicated that it did. These scholars found that middle- to upper-class white parents had an aversion to schools or neighborhoods that had high minority populations and avoided them regardless of the schools' other characteristics (Frankenberg & Kotok, 2013; Holme, 2002; Wanzer, 2008). For instance, Holme's (2002) study on white upper-middle class parents' school preferences revealed that once they had children, affluent couples who previously lived in diverse neighborhoods or neighborhoods in districts with diverse schools used their economic privilege to move out of these neighborhoods and purchase homes in more racially and economically homogenous neighborhoods. On the other

hand, middle-class white parents who were less privileged continued to reside in their school districts, but sent their children to private schools or sought opportunities to put their children in public schools that did not have high minority populations (Kimmelberg & Billingham, 2012; Lareau & Saporito, 1999). Hence, when white middle- and upper-class parents exercised school choice, either through the real estate market or through choice programs, the racial composition of potential schools informed their decision-making.

In addition to a race-conscious disposition towards schools, both middle- and upper-class families used the same techniques to gather information about schools. In fact, several scholars noted that regardless of socioeconomic status, parents relied on their social networks to learn about schools (Andre-Becheley, 2005; Bell, 2009; DeJarnatt, 2008; Goyette, 2008; Villavicencio, 2013). However, while the use of social networks to gather information was consistent across groups, the kind of networks and the degree to which parents rely on these networks varies by race and class (Goldring & Phillips, 2008). According to the literature, compared to African-American families who tend to consult family members for information about schools, white families rely more on friends, colleagues, and neighbors for this information (Goyette, 2008; Holme, 2002; Nield, 2005). And, because social networks are largely influenced by class, parents' socioeconomic background influenced the type and number of schools these contacts provided. Research suggests that middle- to upper-class parents are more likely to have friends who are educated professionals like themselves (Bell 2009; Nield, 2005). In the context of school choice, these types of networks give affluent, white families an advantage over their counterparts because they tend to have access to contacts that have information that is more reliable and relevant to their school search (Ben-Porath, 2009; Goyette, 2008). For instance, scholars have noted that white, affluent parents use the relationships they develop through their

participation in schools and their children's extracurricular activities to exchange information about the reputation of teachers, school practices, curriculum, and classes (Lareau & Hovart, 1999; Nield, 2005; Sil, 2007). Scholars also noted that because these networks possessed more reliable information, affluent families consulted fewer sources and considered fewer schools than their non-affluent counterparts (Bell, 2009; Goyette, 2008).

It is important to note, however, that even though middle- and upper-class whites share many similarities with respect to using their social networks to choose schools, Holme's study (2002) indicated that upper-class white parents relied almost entirely on information they gathered from their social networks rather than objective measures of school quality, such as test scores. Holme determined that upper-class parents' perceptions of school quality based on a school's reputation among other upper-class parents. On the other hand, middle-class white parents who do not have the privilege of "buying schools" through homes, had to gather information through a combination of social networks and other sources of information. One of these sources included school fairs and school visits. In the broader literature on parental involvement in schools, Sil (2007) notes that unlike their low-income and working-class counterparts, middle-class parents' more disposable incomes and flexible work schedules makes it easier for them to visit schools. Aside from conferring more advantages on families whose economic capital enables them to use multiple sources of information, school visits and other occasions where white, middle-class parents make contact with school gives them the opportunity to use their cultural capital. Cooper (2005) notes that while parents compete to be admitted to the schools they feel are the best fit for their children, schools also compete for students whom officials believe will be an asset to their student body. In a few examples, scholars found that during the school choice process, school administrators attempted to "recruit"

middle-class, white students they believed would help the school achieve acceptable test results on statewide assessments while intentionally steering away parents whose children were perceived to have poor test scores or be behavioral problems (e.g. Andre-Becheley, 2005; DeJarnatt, 2008; Jennings, 2010; Sil, 2007). Another practice by school officials that also gave white, middle-class families an advantage was school officials' tendency to engage in selective or unequal distribution of information and other strategies designed to attract certain kinds of students and eliminate others (e.g. Andre-Becheley, 2005; Jennings, 2010).

While the abovementioned is by no means intended to generalize the school choice preferences or practices among middle- to upper-class whites, the differences and similarities between and within this group can illuminate certain aspects of how school choice varies across families of different racial or socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, it suggests that in the hyper-competitive market of school choice, possessing more resources or traits valued by potential schools increases one's likelihood of getting what they want.

African American Parents. When working-class parents or parents of color appear in the school choice literature, the theme that consistently emerges is the notion that their school choice is shaped by their social location (Bell, 2009; Ben-Porath, 2009; Bulman, 2004; Cooper, 2005). This is not only because school choice depends on a family's resources (Bell, 2009; Ben-Porath, 2009; Wanzer, 2008), but also because one's identity shapes their preferences for and orientations toward schools (Cooper, 2005; Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

According to the literature, compared to other ethnic groups, school choice plans appeal to African-American parents the most (Cooper, 2005; Shumow, Vandell & Kang, 1996). At the same time, the literature shows that poor and less educated parents are less likely to participate in school choice programs than parents who are educated and have higher incomes (Lareau &

Saporito, 1999; Umut, 2011). While, at times, the school choice literature demonstrates examples of low-income to working-class African-American parents engaging in school choice (Andre-Becheley, 2005; Nield, 2005), middle-class African-American parents appear to take advantage of school choice programs more often (e.g. Diamond & Gomez, 2004). This may be due in part to the fact that information gathering is costly and as Ben-Porath (2009) notes, “can become prohibitive to families who lack the needed social capital, the resources, the time, the connection and the language or cultural resources to effectively participate in... ‘choice work’” (p. 536).

For poor and working-class African-Americans who participate in school choice, the poor quality of schools in their neighborhoods greatly influences their decision to seek alternative schooling options (Andre-Becheley, 2005; Nield, 2005). Middle-class blacks, on the other hand, choose because they want their children to attend schools that are diverse and those that have programs that will prepare their children for college (Diamond & Gomez). It is important to note that in the studies reviewed on parents’ preferences, white and affluent parents have rarely, if ever, mentioned that they preferred schools that prepared their children for college. As one report on parents’ school preferences suggests, more privileged parents may not feel a need to articulate this preference because they may take for granted that their children will be prepared for college and have a career (Zeehandelaar & Winkler, 2013). Considering one’s social location, as suggested by the scholars mentioned earlier, the history of African-Americans in this country and the continuing discrimination they face in many areas of their daily lives may contribute to why they make this preference explicit.

With respect to knowledge, the literature indicated that middle-class African Americans were more knowledgeable about information regarding potential schools’ programs (i.e.,

objective measures of school performance such as content and curriculum, teacher characteristics, pedagogy, etc.) while low-income and working class African-Americans were either unaware or skeptical of objective measures of schools (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Nield, 2005). Also, as mentioned earlier, for all groups, social networks played a significant role in parents' knowledge about schools (Nield, 2005; Andre-Becheley, 2005; Diamond & Gomez, 2004). Similar to white middle- and upper-class, middle-class African-American parents had stronger social networks including friends and co-workers who had more relevant and reliable information. Low-income and working-class African Americans, on the other hand, had less reliable social networks and relied primarily on relatives who neither had first-hand knowledge about schools nor were familiar with the school choice process (Andre-Becheley, 2007; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Nield, 2005; Sil, 2007). Other scholars noted that middle-class African American parents possessed resources (such as personal transportation) that also gave them an advantage over their low-income to working-class counterparts. This, along with their more flexible work schedules, allowed them to take time off work during the day to visit potential schools (Andre-Becheley, 2005; Goyette, 2008).

It is important to note, however, that other scholars have found that some low-income parents found ways to overcome the limits of their social networks. Under the category of social networks, Goldring and Phillips (2008) make the distinction between interpersonal contacts (i.e., friends and family) and what they refer to as "formal networks." Formal networks include "publicly available information such as brochures and pamphlets, public meetings, published results of test scores by school, school and district websites and so on" (p. 214). However, many school choice scholars (Andre-Becheley, 2005; Delale-O'Connor, 2011; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Hastings, Weelden & Weinstein, 2007) argue that few parents know how to access or use

these materials effectively. Moreover, they argue, these sources of information tend to be vague, difficult to understand, or do not contain enough information to enable parents to make an informed decision (Andre-Becheley, 2005; Delale-O'Connor, 2011; Hastings et al., 2007; Nield, 2005). As a result, low-income to working-class parents—adamant about getting their children into schools outside the ones they are assigned to but with little to no informed interpersonal contacts—used formal contacts such as guidance counselors, office staff, administrators, district personnel as sources of information (e.g. Andre-Becheley, 2005; Nield, 2005). Because these parents could not rely on interpersonal networks, they used formal networks to assist them in filling in information gaps.

Another aspect of successful school choice is managing the process. Based on the current literature, both groups of parents, poor and middle-class, appeared to be aggressive about getting their children into good schools. However, this trait is operationalized differently depending on the parents' socioeconomic background. Nield's (2005) study suggests that better educated parents had more alternatives and tended to consider more than one option in the event they could not get their children into their first school of choice. One college-educated mother in Nield's study kept in contact with the guidance counselors at two of the schools where her son applied (p. 290). This parent, and other parents like her (working-class, but educated) were anxious during the waiting period and closely managed this stage of the process (p. 291). According to Nield, the less educated parents, on the other hand, "pinned their hopes for providing a good education for their children on the outcome of this process" (291). However, Nield highlights the fact that in the place of these middle-class parents' resources and greater ability to navigate the process, some of the working-class parents—desperate to keep their children out of the failing neighborhood schools—were willing to move or use a friend's or

relative's address to enroll their children into better schools (e.g. Andre-Becheley, 2005; Nield, 2005).

The foregoing illustrates that in the face of many challenges inherent in navigating the school choice process, some low-income to working-class parents remained undeterred and used persistence as a form of capital. In the following sections, I turn to the literature on school boundaries.

Geography of Opportunity

In order to understand school boundaries and the constraints they may place parents' ability to choose schools, one must first understand the relationship between race, space, and the politics of school governance. School boundaries refer to school catchment areas and district boundary lines. According to Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley (2013), "attendance zones dictate the student population within a school building; more broadly, district boundary lines help define enrollment at the district level" (p. 48). School boundaries are a long-term fixture in the both the geographical and political landscape of education.

In her article "Finding Space and Managing Distance: Public School Choice in an Urban California District," Andre-Bechely (2007), who has conducted extensive research on school choice and the significant obstacles parents face in the process of choosing schools, quotes

Martin and colleagues who theorize space as

a complicated set of interlocking physical and social relations, patterns, and processes. Space is an inavoidably social product created from a mix of legal, political, economic and social practices and structures. While it has a material reality as environment, it is also experienced and conceptualized through the organization of social life (p. 1372).

This conceptualization of space as both a product and determinant of social relations, creates a useful lens through which to examine social inequality and stratification.

Tate (2008) pointed out that in most discussions on the education of underserved children, “the risks of uneven geography of opportunity are largely omitted” (p. 397). As educational researchers studying educational inequality began to incorporate geography and geographical concepts into their research, scholarship connecting educational opportunity and achievement to the spatial distribution of schooling began to emerge. For example, using multiple data sources, Logan, Minca, and Adar (2012), provided the first national-level study at all school grades that examined disparities in school performance between the different types of schools attended by students from different ethnic groups. Among other findings, they found that in as early as elementary school, black, Hispanic, and Native American students tend to attend schools that are on average, in the 35th to 40th percentile of performance in reading and math compared to white and Asian children who attend schools near the 60th percentile. The schools attended by students of color tended to be high-poverty and located in central-cities, whereas schools attended by white and Asian students tended to be lower poverty and located in suburbs or nonmetropolitan areas (Logan, Minca & Adar, 2012). With respect to high school graduation rates, a common measure of student outcomes and future earning potential, Storer, Mienko, Chang, Kang, Miyawaki and Schultz (2012) found that, although previous studies have found that both race and class—together and independently—have an impact on educational attainment, “the extent to which either one of these factors is associated with educational attainment can depend on the location of the school district” (p. 38). Hence, they argue, “place can provide important context for the explanation of how a student’s educational attainment is constructed and the many competing factors that influence that trajectory” (p. 38).

While outcomes are important in measuring progress, or lack thereof, more and more scholars are pointing to how gaps in opportunity play a significant role in student achievement

(Carter & Welner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2013). In this vein, Tate, Jones, Thorne-Wallington, and Hoglebe (2012), who advocate for increased learning opportunities in the STEM fields, have identified several conceptual areas that they believe “warrant attention by scholars and practitioners interested in improving access and opportunity to STEM learning in urban cities of the United States” (p. 400). In short, they argue that in order to implement successful interventions addressing the lack of access urban students have to learning opportunities in the sciences, scholars, policymakers, and other stakeholders must consider the unique geospatial dimensions of urban schooling.

The Spatial Impact of Education Policy

In his paper tracing the ideological underpinnings of both parties’ arguments in the *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) case, in which the Supreme Court drew the distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* segregation and ultimately nullified a school integration plan that would have incorporated over 50 school districts in the Detroit area, Delaney (1994) argued that “segregation, is an inherently spatial process” and “a spatial violation that requires a spatial solution” (p. 476). While the work of scholars like Gary Orfield (2009) have focused primarily on using school demographics to demonstrate the persistence of racial segregation in schools today, scholars like Amy Stuart Wells (2008) have focused their attention on programs and policies aimed at reducing or eliminating school segregation. Because of the close relationship between housing and schooling opportunities, many scholars have pointed out the importance of recognizing the impact housing policy has on access to schooling (Debray-Pelot & Frankenberg, 2010; Siegel-Hawley, 2014).

In his article, “Building Inequality: The Spatial Organization of Schooling in Nashville, Tennessee, after *Brown*,” Erickson (2012) discusses how school and municipal planning

practices in Nashville, Tennessee contributed to segregated schools and neighborhoods before and after *Brown*. He details the federal urban renewal and housing initiatives, federal education guidelines, and local practices, which, he argues, simultaneously favored suburban space and neglected urban space. With respect to school site selection, for instance, he shows that the federal government's encouragement of the dispersion of white, middle class families into the suburbs were further reinforced by school site selection guidelines implemented by local government leaders. These site selection guidelines, founded upon the belief that a quality education should take place in the suburbs, avoided expressly discriminatory language and instead cited common urban irritants, such as noise, pollution, and large buildings, which, under the guise of protecting the health and safety of school children (p. 250), allowed the federal government to justify their selective investment in which areas to build schools.

Erickson (2012) argues that, undergirded by this spatial ideology, private organizations in collaboration with local education leaders were able to obscure and normalize the practice of creating and allowing for the unequal distribution of educational resources between black and white students. As a result, Erickson shows that the school location decisions in Nashville (and in other part of the U.S.) were not the natural result of residential housing patterns, but rather the result of policies that overvalued the interests of whites and undervalued the interests of minorities. Given this historical background linking private interests with public policy, Erickson points out that the *de jure/de facto* dichotomy often relied on by the courts to determine its rulings on school segregation cases—i.e., explicit segregationist policies common in the South versus school assignment patterns in the North that were supposedly the result of free market forces—fails to acknowledge the government's role in facilitating the perpetuation of school

segregation, the uneven distribution of educational resources, and the achievement gap we see today.

Wilson's (2010) analysis of the judiciary's role in undermining school integration is equally incisive. She argues that the Court in *Milliken* "treated school district boundary lines as sacrosanct" (p. 641). She notes that the Court "bristled at the suggestion that school district boundary lines should be disturbed in order to remedy de jure segregation; the Court noted:

Boundary lines may be bridged where there has been a constitutional violation calling for interdistrict relief, but the notion that school district [boundary] lines may be casually ignored or treated as a mere administrative convenience is contrary to the history of public education in our country. No single tradition in public education is more deeply rooted than local control over the operation of schools; local autonomy has long been thought essential both to the maintenance of community concern and support for public schools and to the quality of the education process (p. 641-642).

These analyses, highlighting the spatial ideologies underlying the selective investment in suburban schools, the false dichotomy of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, and the sanctity of school boundaries, are critical in that they aid our understanding of why current education policies have done little to alleviate school segregation.

Wells et al. (2009) report on inter-district desegregation programs in the U.S., observes that "educational policies designed to address segregation and inequality have generally been limited to *within*-district solutions" when, in fact, the vast majority of racial/ethnic segregation in schools occurs *between* districts (p.1). They argue that making school choice available to all students, instead of the most disadvantaged students, does not work toward leveling the playing field between white and non-white students, whereas race-conscious school choice options (e.g. inter-district desegregation plans) lead to academic improvement of students of color and improves their chances for upward social mobility. Similarly, Holme and Wells (2008) compare interdistrict desegregation plans to other school choice options and find that inter-district

programs have a more positive impact. They argue that school choice under the federal policy of NCLB gives students only limited options (i.e., only schools within their district) and fails to provide funding for resources necessary for the successful participation in these programs, such as transportation. Together, these studies demonstrate that racially discriminatory practices and policies employed in the past can only be corrected by race-conscious remedies today. It further demonstrates that despite the federal government's role in facilitating educational inequality in the past, its policies aimed at addressing school inequality today only go so far in actually addressing the problem.

The government's reluctance to adequately address educational inequality might be due in part to politics. In researching the effectiveness of current school choice policies (at each level of government), several scholars have pointed to the lack of public support for race-conscious school choice policies for why these policies have had little success (Ledwith & Clark, 2007; Lipman, 2005; Prins, 2007; Saporito & Sohoni, 2006; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007; Zhang, 2011). Examining one of the oldest inter-district desegregation programs in the country, Finnigan and Stewart (2009) argue that little attention is paid to the political dynamics of inter-district choice. Hence, among other things, they sought to assess how political dynamics affected the popularity of school desegregation programs such as the urban-suburban program in Rochester, NY. They found that in addition to a lack of government funding, there was a lack of public support for these programs, which contributed to not only a reduction in the number of students enrolled in this program, but also the decreased likelihood of the program's expansion to other school districts in the county. As will be discussed in greater detail below, much of the opposition to these programs had a great deal to do with some affluent white parents' desire to retain their

wealth in their communities as well as the desire to prevent the blurring of racial and socioeconomic boundaries that are often maintained through the use of geographical boundaries.

This section illustrates the complex relationship between private interests and public policy and how the tension between eliminating school segregation and maintaining a supportive political base makes it difficult for policymakers to implement and sustain these policies. As a result, these anti-integration attitudes become deeply embedded in the geographical landscape of schooling and impacts the organization of schools, which I discuss in the next section.

The Geographical Arrangement & Political Structure of School Districts

Several scholars have shown the relationship between the geographical location of schools and educational inequality (Carlson, Lavery & Witte, 2011; Lubienski, 2005; Reback, 2008). Spatial arrangements in which residents are divided along racial and socioeconomic lines are key features of local governance and have long been the basis for smaller political entities such as municipalities and school districts (Frug, 1998; Hagman, 1977; Saiger, 2010).

Residential patterns that lead to racial isolation and the concentration of wealth and poverty, coupled with these political entities' power to tax, has contributed greatly to the uneven distribution of resources among students. In examining the origins of inequitable funding between affluent white school districts and predominantly poor and minority school districts in Texas, Drennon (2006) provides a historical and geographical analysis of 30 years of litigation between families of students from poor school districts and the state of Texas. She also analyzes the history of the creation and maintenance of school districts in San Antonio and challenges the underlying assumption by those defending the unequal distribution of educational resources that school districts are separate, independent, fixed, absolute spaces devoid of history or politics. Instead, she argues that school districts are "envelopes of a particular space-time that was

characterized by highly discriminatory ethnic and class relations and neighborhood development that produced a fractured and fragmented landscape of property values” (p. 590). In other words, “[t]hese spaces were produced from specific social relations that spatialized and polarized city residents economically and racially. In turn, those spaces now work to reinforce the same social relations that produced them” (p. 591). Ultimately Drennon argues that adequately addressing educational inequality in the U.S. requires a full acknowledgment and critical reconceptualization of the spatial organization of property and how it contributes to social inequality.

Drennon’s analysis suggests that school boundaries are raced and classed structures designed to maintain the racial and socioeconomic boundaries between affluent, white students and poor, minority students. This interpretation of school boundaries is supported by Martinez-Vazquez, Rider and Walker’s (1997) study, demonstrating a relationship between race and the number of school districts in a given area. Using state and metropolitan area panel data and incorporating racial discrimination into a model of district formation, Martinez-Vazquez et al. found that increasing racial heterogeneity in a state increases the number of school districts. This phenomenon, known as political fragmentation, results when the number of political entities, such as school districts, proliferates (Holme & Finnigan, 2013). When the size of a political jurisdiction becomes smaller, it impacts several factors associated with operating this entity including cost effectiveness, delivery of services, and diversity of human interaction (Bischoff, 2008). Bischoff’s (2008) study further supports the argument that school boundaries are racialized structures. In her study on school district fragmentation in metropolitan regions across the country, she found that the political fragmentation of school districts increases *between-district* segregation. This means that as more and more school districts are created, students of

certain racial backgrounds become more geographically isolated. And since many school districts around the country fund their schools using local property taxes collected on properties located within district boundaries, students in property poor districts receive less educational resources. This confirms Martinez-Vazquez et al.'s speculation that individuals' preference to associate with those from the same racial background plays a significant role in determining the structure, conduct, and performance of the system of school districts. The following demonstrates in better detail how this sorting behavior determines the structure, conduct, and performance of school district systems.

Looking at three jurisdictional types of suburban school districts (i.e., multimunicipal, single municipal, countywide) in seven large metro areas in the U.S., Frankenberg and Kotok (2013) examined how these different school district jurisdictional types respond to diversity. They observed that although each district felt pressured "to be competitive in the suburban marketplace to retain 'desirable' students (and taxpayers)" (p.119), the extent to which this pressure was expressed in either positive or negative school policies and practices varied by the school district's jurisdictional type and location within the metro area. Specifically, they found that among the three types of districts, multimunicipal school districts were more desperate than the others to retain their tax base, which resulted in the enactment of school assignment policies and the establishment of boundaries that were "constrained by fears of exit by affluent families" (p.123). Thus, although this school district adopted policies aimed at making racially separate schools more equal, they made little effort to make the schools more integrated. On the other hand, in single municipal school districts—which are "more tightly coupled with the housing market" (p. 122), enroll a smaller portion of suburban students, and hence, allow for easier exit among the most desired residents—the authors found that these districts had few policy options

available to them and thus relied on other sectors of the community (e.g., housing) to help them stabilize enrollment. Last, due to the size and location of countywide school districts, factors which makes exiting the district more costly for families, these districts faced less pressure to conform to the demands to residents and, as a result, were able to implement integration strategies more successfully. Put simply, this research shows that a school district's jurisdictional type can influence how much racial segregation it is willing to tolerate.

In addition to the impact jurisdictional type has on school district response, Battersby and Fischel (2006) found a relationship between school district size and location and their level of competitiveness. Of the 70 urban areas analyzed, they found that there was more school district competition in large urbanized areas (i.e., Boston, MA, New York, NY, Pittsburgh, PA, and Chicago, IL, Philadelphia, PA in the top five) compared to less densely populated areas, and more competition in the northeast compared to southern and western regions of the country.

Overall, the studies reviewed in this section support Siegel-Hawley's (2014) contention that "[d]istrict boundary lines separating multiple, unequal school systems within a single metro area play a central role in structuring racial and economic isolation" (p. 391).

School Boundaries and School Boundary-Crossing

Thus far, this review of the literature has demonstrated the important link between geography and educational inequality and the role school boundaries play in limiting African American students' access to quality education. Despite the contention by several scholars that education policy overall has failed to adequately address racial segregation in schools, there is some research that indicates that some individual students of color have benefited from policies and programs, which have, in some form or another, increased their access to better quality schools (Bifulco, Cobb & Bell, 2009; Holme & Wells, 2008; Ledwith, 2010; Wells et al., 2009).

However, in order for a significant number of families to gain access to better schools, strategies to achieve this often involve boundary-crossing. Hence, it should be of no surprise that far more students participate in programs that allow them to cross boundaries than they participate in any other school choice option (Holme & Wells, 2008; Carlson, Lavery & Witte, 2011). In addition to studies that have examined school boundaries in the broader geographical context of schooling, several studies have examined various issues more narrowly related to school boundaries and boundary-crossing. This section will review the literature on these issues.

In her paper titled “Interdistrict public school mobility: Common Misperceptions and a Call for Local Revival,” Helen Ganski (2015) sought to test the perception of four school districts in Alameda County, California as “closed” school districts. Using inter-district transfer data, she looked at student mobility between school boundaries and found that these district boundaries were far more flexible than previously acknowledged. She concluded that the perception of district boundaries as either “open” or “closed” oversimplifies the complexities of education policies that enable student mobility between school boundaries and the way school districts operate. The primary contribution of this study is the more nuanced manner in which boundaries are being conceptualized. In contrast to how they have been conceptualized in much of the education literature, here, “boundaries” appear to be less of an abstraction—i.e., imaginary lines enclosing separate and unevenly resourced school districts—and more like actual structures with their own attributes or qualities. Depicting school boundaries as either “open” or “closed,” for example, allows us to place these structures at the center of our inquiry rather than use them as proxies for the larger concept of school districts. In this way, school boundaries (though largely invisible and non-physical) can be better understood as material barriers to educational equality as opposed to abstract concepts that have no meaning on their own.

However, despite Ganski's contribution to the literature on school boundaries, in particular, and educational inequality, in general, this study has its limitations. First, Ganski fails to make clear exactly *whose* perception of boundaries is being examined. As the literature above demonstrates, school boundaries are both classed and racialized; they serve not only to exclude certain racial and socioeconomic groups, but to control the flow of these individuals into better resourced school districts. Although Ganski briefly mentions the racial implications of school boundaries, she fails to acknowledge the racial differences in how boundaries are perceived (by potential boundary-crossers) and protected (by various gatekeepers). The literature so far suggests that compared to white affluent families, African American families may have a more difficult time crossing boundaries. Hence, perceptions of school boundaries are likely to vary between individuals from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as the level of boundary safeguarding by gatekeepers.

Second, Ganski concludes that school boundaries are *more flexible* than perceived, but fails to provide a base measurement (to the extent that such a concept is measurable) or comparison against which we can test the relative strength or weakness (permeability) of school boundaries. A study examining the permeability of school boundaries might be useful to researchers and policymakers seeking to better understand the level of difficulty different parents have in attempting to access better schooling. Numerous scholars on school choice have pointed out the faulty premise upon which most school choice policies rely. They argue that these policies are founded on the assumption that parents are rational actors and that they all have the same needs and the same number or quality of resources to draw from in navigating the school choice landscape. However, a significant amount of research has demonstrated otherwise (Andre-Bechely, 2004). Similarly, numerous issues factor into whether a student is able to

successfully cross school boundaries. The ability to determine the permeability of different school boundaries in different geographical areas and context can greatly contribute to better identifying discriminatory school practices and policies that disadvantage African Americans and other students of color disproportionately and limit their access to quality schooling.

Another area of school boundary literature that might help us better understand racial differences in boundary-crossing is flow: which districts are students coming from and which districts are students going to? Both Holme and Richards (2009) and Carlson, Lavery and Witte (2011) have examined this. First, Holme and Richards examined inter-district transfer patterns in the Denver metro region and found that white students were more likely to take advantage of interdistrict choice programs and that, more often, they transferred from racially diverse school districts to more affluent school districts with more white students. Although Carlson et al.'s findings on the influence race and socioeconomic status have on in- and out-flows of school districts in Colorado and Minnesota were inconclusive, they found that factors such as (1) student achievement (students from districts with lower student achievement were more likely to leave these districts, while students from high performing districts were less likely to leave theirs), (2) enrollment (students in districts with low enrollments were more likely to exit their school districts than students in districts with high enrollments), and (3) distance (students were more likely to exit their school districts when the receiving district was closer to their home district) primarily determined flows. One notable observation from this study was that students from already high performing school districts were more likely to transfer to higher performing school districts than students from lower performing school districts. This lends credibility to Holme and Richards' (2009) finding that more privileged students are more likely to take advantage of school choice.

Similar to examining in- and out-flows of school districts, Dauter and Fuller (2011) and Rabovsky (2011) both examined the characteristics of families and schools more likely to transfer or have students who transfer. In their study investigating the student and school attributes that influenced the rates of students exiting their schools prior to the end of the grade cycle in Los Angeles Unified School District, Dauter and Fuller found that blacks were 40% more likely to exit their schools. They also found that compared to those “more rooted in their catchment areas,” students already attending schools outside their catchment areas were also more likely to exit those schools to enroll in other schools outside their assigned schools (Dauter and Fuller, 2011, p. 29). More findings included the following: (1) students in overcrowded schools were a third more likely to exit their schools than other students; (2) schools with higher teacher turnover had higher rates of student exit; and (3) students who lived in communities where the school closest to their current school was farther had a lower likelihood of exit.

In a similar vein, Rabovsky (2011), seeking to better understand what factors contribute to parents’ decision to transfer their children from their neighborhood schools to other schools in Tulsa, Oklahoma, found that contrary to the literature, which often conflates parents’ motivations for transferring *from* a particular school and transferring *to* a particular school, parents’ motivations for transferring *to* a school and *from* a school differ. Using a mixed-methods design, Rabovsky found that students were more likely to leave/exit a particular school due to reasons such as safety or personal behavioral problems with faculty and/or other students, and more likely to transfer to a particular school based on that school’s academic performance and racial composition. Rabovsky also sought to determine the impact school choice policies had on school administrators and found that, again, contrary to the literature, school administrators were “neither apprehensive about losing transfer students...nor aggressive about acquiring transfers

from outside schools” (p. 90). He explains that based on interviews with high school principals who shared that transfers were often students who were troublemakers and had difficulties at their previous school and the fact that they are legally prohibited from selectively choosing transfer students, many school administrators are reluctant to pursue transfers because doing so could cause them to “attract undesirable and potentially disruptive students” (p. 90).

Jennings (2010) found similar, but slightly different results in her study of schools of choice in New York City. Lamenting the dearth of research on how schools manage choice compared to the abundance of research on how families manage choice, Jennings examined the disparate school principals’ approaches to the management of school choice in light of district policies prohibiting them from selecting students based on their school performance. In the New York public school system, for grades 9-12, rather than attend schools based on their residence, students are allowed to choose their high schools based on a ranking system and the schools, in turn, choose them. Jennings found that in an effort to recruit and retain a student body that will allow them to meet their accountability goals, some school principals circumvented district rules and used their networks to obtain information about prospective students’ academic performance. After obtaining this information, they used subtle tactics to steer these prospective students away from their programs and/or selectively target more desirable students. The fact that these schools are located in a highly diverse city such as New York and the association between low test scores and poor students of color suggests that poor students of color applying to small schools with high standards in this area were strategically excluded from these schools.

The foregoing highlights the assortment of factors that determine student transfer rates and flows as well as schools’ responses to potential transfers. In her study, Ganski (2015) observed that there are underlying ethno-racial dynamics in the interdistrict transfer process and

that district administrators have a great deal of discretion in the transfer process. Both Lubienski's (2005) and Reback's (2008) findings support this observation. In a case study on district responses to African American students' in the district demand for choice in the Detroit metro area, Lubienski found that district patterns of accepting and rejecting students from other school districts disadvantaged poor African American students by leaving them with fewer options. He noted that a district's decision to accept transfers from other districts was influenced by (1) their physical proximity to poorer school districts and (2) the other district's status in the local education market. Thus, lower status schools in the county, which had more proximity to poor school districts, were more likely to accept students from poorer districts, while higher status schools (even those in need of increased enrollment) closed their boundaries to students from poor school districts and selectively targeted students from less disadvantaged districts. Reback similarly found that in Minnesota, despite the state's open enrollment policy that prohibits the district from selectively admitting applicants, highly desired districts are more likely to reject transfer requests when their own mean standardized test scores and socioeconomic characteristics are substantially higher than the other districts' mean standardized test scores and socioeconomic characteristics. He also found that districts often cite capacity concerns when, in fact, concerns over "negative peer effects" or "negative capitalization" due to accepting certain student transfers actually influence their decision-making. These studies illustrate school district administrators' ability to either facilitate or constrain students' ability to cross school boundaries. This is important because it demonstrates the role school districts play in determining the number and type of students who enter their districts using school boundaries.

Despite the relative weight of the research on school and school district responses to intra- and inter-district transfers, this phenomenon can be better explained within its broader

context. As noted earlier in this chapter, the public's response to boundary-crossing plays a significant role in whether policies allowing students from other schools and school districts to transfer are adopted and ultimately successful. Several scholars have shown that resistance is a common response to school districts' efforts to reduce racial segregation in schools. In their case study on a northern Colorado school district's rezoning process upon the building of a new school, Bartels and Donato (2009) concluded that even in districts where minority and poverty rates are relatively low, and where school integration plans would cause families little hardship in terms of distance to travel to school, white and affluent parents are likely to challenge school district decisions that could potentially affect the racial composition of schools in their district. Bartels and Donato observed that after the school board decision approving a rezoning plan that would allow students from the predominantly less affluent Hispanic neighborhoods to attend the newly built middle school and reassign some of the students from the more affluent white areas to the old school, white, affluent parents contested the plan and insisted that they did not want to send their children to the older, lower performing school. After analyzing various documents related to the rezoning decision, Bartels and Donato noted that white parents' concerns about race and class were articulated in racially coded terms, while Latino parents identified race and class as the underlying reasons for white parents' objections to the rezoning plan. Ultimately, Bartels and Donato found that while the board's rezoning plan had a positive effect on the racial composition of the new school, it had a negative effect on the old school. The evidence suggested that many of the white students assigned to the old school left the school and transferred to schools in other school districts or nearby private schools. Ultimately white flight from the old school resulted in the increase in that school's poverty rate, further disadvantaging the students of color enrolled there.

Numerous other studies also indicate that white flight is a very potent method in resisting district policies aimed at promoting school integration (Ledwith & Clark, 2007; Lipman, 2005; Prins, 2007; Saporito & Sohoni, 2006; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007; Zhang, 2011). In his study examining the effects of ongoing desegregation plans in Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, KY, Zhang (2011) found that desegregation plans accelerated white flight from public schools. Like other scholars, he observed that many white affluent families find refuge in private schools or other, less diverse, public school districts nearby (Ledwith & Clark, 2007; Prins, 2007; Saporito & Sohoni 2006; Saporito & Sohoni 2007). These findings support Saporito and Sohoni's (2006, 2007) studies which show that there is more racial and economic segregation in schools than in their attendance catchment areas. If all students in residential areas attended the schools in their catchment areas, they argue, schools would be less racially and socioeconomically segregated.

Aside from their apparent aversion to integrated school settings, Reback's (2005) study on the effect school choice has on property values shows that affluent, white parents' concerns about boundary-crossing policies are not without merit. He found that outgoing transfer rates are associated with an increase in house prices, while incoming transfer rates are associated with a decrease in housing prices. Although the findings showed that the impact of exiting transfers exceeds the impact of incoming transfers, this combined with the previously cited literature suggests that when white, middle-class parents have the option to send their children to the neighborhood school in addition to the option of sending them to a better public school, their homes increase in value. On the other hand, when students from other school districts are allowed to cross school boundaries and enroll in schools in their districts, home values diminish. This market response to boundary-crossing suggests that middle-class, white parents' reaction to

integration is not only affective but also economic. Roda and Wells's (2013) study showed that even among middle-class, white parents who claim to be "bothered by segregation," gaining as much advantage as possible for their children in schools supersedes their desire for school diversity and thereby results in school choice behaviors that maintain racial segregation in schools.

The flight behavior and various other reactions of white, affluent parents when confronted with the possibility of school integration is characteristic of what legal scholar Ford (1997) calls "exit." In his paper titled "Geography and Sovereignty: Jurisdictional Formation and Racial Segregation," Ford whose scholarship focuses on the use of territorial boundaries as instruments of social regulation¹⁰, writes,

Middle-class whites, fearful of declining property values and crime in the streets, display a spectrum of responses, from tentativeness to outright revolt. The newly consolidated or reapportioned integrated local governments are at first hindered by underlying racial tension, then paralyzed by overt racial conflict; they quickly become unable to govern effectively. Race infects even the most benign policy discussions. Anyone with means attempts to replace governmental services with more reliable private alternatives, faith in government declines, and citizens begin to starve the government of resources by voting for imprudent tax cuts—an effective "secession of the successful" (p. 1396).

He continues,

Exit refers to the politically motivated decision to leave a jurisdiction that fails to satisfy one's demands or needs, as opposed to an attempt to change the jurisdiction by persuasion, influence, or force. Exit combines geographic realism with wholesome provincialism: It is a process by which physical mobility serves as a medium of political expression and a means of political autonomy...Both private and public institutions provide opportunities for exit, and today (as direct participation and effective "say" in large, bureaucratic institutions becomes more and more illusive) exit is increasingly the first move rather than the last resort for the dissatisfied (p. 1410).

¹⁰ From the Stanford University School of Law website. Retrieved on September 12, 2014 from <http://www.law.stanford.edu/profile/richard-thompson-ford>

The tendency of parents with the most resources to exit schools and school districts in the face of possible school integration reveals the irony of school choice: school choice plans allowing poor students of color to cross boundaries to gain access to quality schools and more integrated school settings simultaneously enable middle-class, white parents to leave these now increasingly diverse schools. Exiting contributes in the racial isolation and concentration of poverty among students of color in schools. This cyclical pattern of segregation-integration-resistance-segregation, illustrates that school boundaries, in particular, and the meaning of space, in general, are not fixed; their meaning and importance shifts at the will of the privileged.

Summary

This literature review examined school choice and the broad context in which occurs. It also examined school boundaries and the complex social and political dynamics that shape their creation and maintenance. In looking at both bodies of literature: school choice and school boundaries, we can see how the two are related, but also the gaps in the literature of both. This study aims to fill this gap by bridging both bodies of literature and examining the impact school boundaries may have on parents' school choices. Reconceptualizing boundaries as institutional structures with their own attributes enables us to examine the impact they have on parents' choices.

CHAPTER 3

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand how middle-class African American parents in this study socially construct school boundaries, research questions, study design, data collection and analysis were all guided by a theoretical framework that combines (1) Critical Race Theory, (2) minority culture of mobility, and (3) social constructionism (i.e., meaning-making) perspectives.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) arose in the 1970's out of minority legal scholars' frustration with the slow pace of racial reform in the U.S. (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Critical race theorists argue that "racism is a permanent fixture of American life" (p. 11). Thus, they argue, due to the salience of race in every aspect of U.S. social relations and social structure, race and racism should be brought to the fore of any analysis of U.S. social structure and relations. In addition to centering race in these analyses, critical race theorists emphasize the importance of integrating "experiential knowledge drawn from a shared history as 'other'" (p. 11). As a result, stories and narratives are deemed crucial in adding the "necessary contextual contours to the seeming 'objectivity' of postpositivist perspectives" (p. 11). In addition to challenging "dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness and meritocracy," according to Tate (1997), "CRT challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical examination of the law and experiential knowledge of people of color in analyzing the law and society" (Tate, 1997, p. 235).

By the mid-1990's CRT had expanded to scholarly disciplines beyond the law and had been adopted in fields like education. Education scholars Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate are credited as the first scholars to bring CRT to education (Taylor, Gillborn, Ladson-Billings, 2009). These scholars see CRT as a powerful analytical tool for examining a wide

number of issues in the field of education, including curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and school segregation.

This dissertation is particularly interested in the broad or macro structures that shape the current geographic education landscape. Education scholar and critical race theorist David Gillborn's (2005) analysis in "Education Policy as an Act of White Supremacy: Whiteness, Critical Race Theory, and Education Reform" is particularly useful in this context. In this paper, Gillborn cites Ansley (1997) who defines white supremacy as "a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings" (2005, p. 491).

Against this backdrop of the pervasiveness of white supremacy, Gillborn argues that when examining education policy, one's inquiry must "go beyond the expressed intent of policy-makers and practitioners to examine how policy works in the real world" (Gillborn, 2005, p. 492). Questions must include, but not be limited to (1) priorities—"who or what is driving education policy?" (2) beneficiaries—"who wins and who loses as a result of education policy?" and (3) outcomes—"what are the effects of policy?" Ultimately, he concludes that racism is a fundamental characteristic of the education system and in this way, "education policy is an act of white supremacy" (p. 498). Education policy, he adds, "assumes and defends white supremacy through the priorities it sets, the beneficiaries it privileges, and the outcomes that it produces" (p. 498).

Minority Cultures of Mobility

In their paper on how non-white minority groups achieve social and economic mobility in the United States, Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) introduce a concept they refer to as the *minority culture of mobility*. This concept outlines the cultural elements shared by middle-class minority groups. The authors argue that the elements of this cultural toolkit—which provides strategies for economic mobility—arises out of a “context of discrimination and group disadvantage, and respond[s] to distinctive problems that usually accompany minority middle-class status” (p. 946). These “distinctive problems”, Neckerman et al. assert, arise out of two types of experiences these groups encounter: (1) conflict arising out of their contacts with the white majority and (2) interclass conflict arising out of their contacts with those within their minority community (p. 946). Neckerman et al. explain that

The minority culture of mobility draws in available symbols, idioms and practices to respond to distinctive problems of being middle class and a minority. It includes knowledge and behavioral strategies that help to negotiate the competing demands of the white mainstream and the minority community. But, it also includes symbolic elements, particularly those relevant to problems of ambiguous identity and affiliation—will one identify (or be identified) in terms of class, ethnic group, or both? —that often accompany minority middle-class status. (p. 949)

The authors go on to outline some of the problems these groups face. They contend that due to their middle-class status, middle-class minorities tend to come into contact with whites more often than their lower income or working-class co-ethnics in areas such as the labor market, residential neighborhoods, the retail goods and services market, and higher education. Such contacts often “demand conformity to white middle-class speech patterns and interactional styles” (p. 950). Additionally, within these settings, these groups tend to encounter more prejudice and discrimination than their poorer counterparts. When in white-dominated settings, these groups may suffer social disadvantages such as isolation, loneliness, tokenism, exclusion from information networks, and economic loss. Speaking specifically of the issues middle-class

African Americans face, for example, they discuss what scholar Ellis Cose calls the “permanent vulnerability of one’s status,” referring to the tendency of “whites tend to assume that all black strangers are lower-class and respond accordingly, with fear, insult, or threat.” As a result, many “middle-class African Americans work hard to signal their class status to whites” (p. 953).

In predominantly minority settings, on the other hand, middle-class minorities tend to experience issues related to inter-class relations. Citing Massey and Denton’s research on residential segregation, Neckerman et al. explain that middle-class minorities tend to live near their poorer co-ethnics. Further, due of the smaller size of many minority communities, middle-class minorities are more likely to engage in local civic and religious organizations that are more socioeconomically heterogeneous, obscuring class differentiation. Last, since middle-class minorities often have more socioeconomically heterogeneous kin, they “must manage their relations with poorer co-ethnics who might make claims for assistance, resent their good fortune, or feel intimidated by their success” (p. 951). However, the authors point out that for middle-class blacks living in mixed-class neighborhoods, contacts with their poorer co-ethnics both reflect and reinforce the solidarity forged by a shared history of racial subordination and resistance” (p. 955).

In proposing their framework, the authors draw on Swidler’s (1986) *strategies of action* perspective, which posits that

Strategies of action are cultural products; the symbolic experiences, mythic lore, and ritual practices of a group or society that create moods and motivations, ways of organizing experience and evaluating reality, modes of regulating conduct, and ways of forming social bonds, which provide resources for constructing strategies of action. When we notice cultural differences, we recognize that people do not all go about their business the same way; how they approach life is shaped by their culture. (p. 284)

Hence, in acknowledging that culture can contain diverse, even contradictory elements,¹¹ the authors are careful not to label *minority culture of mobility* a culture, arguing that it is a set of “cultural elements within the larger framework of a given minority culture” and not itself a culture (p. 949).

Social Constructionism (Meaning-making)

In their highly influential text, the *Social Construction of Reality* (1966), sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann posit that the foundation of knowledge is rooted in the way people make meaning of everyday life. These meanings, they argue, are negotiated through social interactions with others and language, a shared symbolic system, is the means by which this occurs. Such shared meanings influence human action which, over time, result in the construction of institutions and social structures. Thus, according to Gergen (1985) “the terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated exchanges among people” (p. 5).

Cunliffe (2008) contends that researchers studying the construction of knowledge may examine (1) the *products* of construction, for example, institutions, practices, identities, cultures, narratives, discourses, etc.) and/or (2) the *process* of construction, i.e., “how particular discursive and/or conversational practices produce meaning” (p. 127). She adds that critical theorists and poststructuralists approach social constructionism from the stance that “both the product and the process of social construction are infused with power relations, which privilege some groups and individuals over others” (p. 128). While critical theorists and poststructuralists focus on social

¹¹ “[A]ll real cultures contain diverse, often conflicting symbols, rituals, stories, and guides to action...A culture is not a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction. Rather, it is more like a ‘toolkit’ or repertoire (Hannerz, 1969: 186-188) from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of action” (Swidler, 1986, p. 277).

construction at the macro-level, relational social constructionists “focus on the micro-level—how people within a particular setting [create] meanings intersubjectively through their embodied dialogical activities” (p. 128).

Summary

This study pays particular attention to the way middle-class, African American parents make sense of school boundaries. However, neither school boundaries nor the phenomenon of boundary-crossing exist in a vacuum. African American parents’ perceptions of school boundaries and their eventual decision to cross them or not occurs within the context of asymmetrical power relations that privileges whites and those with more resources over other people of color and those with less resources. The scarcity of high quality schools within this context results in competition for access to these resources. By foregrounding these uneven power relations as well as the historical context of racial exclusion and unequal educational funding in the U.S., CRT serves as a powerful tool in helping us understand the social context in which the parents in this study operate. The minority culture of mobility similarly highlights the social factors which either constrain or enable middle-class African American parents in enacting their choices.

According to Barnes (2001), “Practices are enacted by people...It is always necessary to ask what disposes people to enact the practices they do, how and when they do; and their aims, their lived experience and their inherited knowledge will surely figure amongst the factors of interest...” (p. 29). Using social constructionism alongside CRT and its emphasis on centering the experiential knowledge of African Americans plus the added sociocultural context provided by the minority culture of mobility can bring into focus how shared meanings among a group of middle-class African American parents situated within a particular social and cultural context

informs the motivations and strategies adopted by these parents. This perspective further allows us analyze how various social processes shape how these parents make meaning of school boundaries, how these meanings shape social action, and how collective action contributes to the production/reproduction of school boundaries.

Together, these perspectives provide a solid framework needed to guide this study. This framework will help explain how individual decisions, or micro-processes, shape structures and how these structures in turn shape individual decisions, resulting in the ongoing production of social structures—in this case, school boundaries.

CHAPTER 4

Methods

Since social construction involves human interaction and this study seeks to understand how social actors socially construct school boundaries, an effective study design must allow the researcher to explore how respondents make sense of their lived experiences within their social context. The broad research question for this study was: “How do middle-class, African American parents socially construct school boundaries?” This research question was further broken into the following three questions:

- (1) How do middle-class African American parents make meaning of school boundaries?
- (2) How do these meanings shape these parents’ decision to cross (or not cross) school boundaries?
- (3) How does the act of boundary-crossing among middle-class, African American parents either disrupt or reproduce school boundaries?

I determined that qualitative case study design was best-suited for this study. In this chapter, I will discuss the research methodology, setting, sample, data collection methods, data analysis, limitations of the research design, and my role as the researcher (positionality).

Qualitative Case Study Methodology

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative methodology refers to a research approach that “assumes that reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (p. 8). Accordingly, qualitative research involves “an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (Merriam, 2009 p. 13 citing Van Maanen). Characteristics of qualitative research include but are not limited to a focus on meaning and

understanding, an inductive process, purposeful sampling, rich description, and the researcher as the primary instrument (pp. 13-17).

Yin, defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that (1) investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when (2) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which (3) multiple sources of evidence are used” (Bachiochi & Weiner, 2002, p. 174, citing Yin, 1984, p. 23). Hence, a case study is defined as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam, 2009, p. 40), the parameters of which can be defined geographically, by a group, event, or phenomenon. The outer edges of the of a case represent the unit of analysis. Merriam argues that “by concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon” (2009, p. 43).

Qualitative case study design was chosen for this study because it is the best approach for answering the abovementioned research questions. In order to understand how middle-class, African American parents socially construct school boundaries, I had to first situate the phenomenon of school boundaries within the local context in which these parents experience school boundaries. I then had to outline the parameters of case. Because *school boundaries* is both a political and geographical concept, I chose parents from one community, located within a single school district (i.e., political entity) that governs the administration of educational services within that geographical area.

As will be demonstrated in the following sections, the setting and participants were strategically selected. According to Flyvbjerg (2006),

When the objective is to achieve the greatest possible amount of information on a given problem or phenomenon, a representative case or a random sample may not be the most appropriate strategy. This is because the typical or average case is often not the richest in information. Atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they

activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied. In addition, from both an understanding-oriented and an action-oriented perspective, it is often more important to clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences than to describe the symptoms of the problem and how frequently they occur. (p. 229)

In this case, a sample of African American parents within a local community located in an urban school district was my unit of analysis. In their paper, Bachiochi and Weiner argue that contrary to common misperception, case studies may be generalizable. Citing Yin (1984, p. 21) they write that ““case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes.” They add that cases studies “The focus of cases studies, like most other qualitative research, is to expand and generalize theories rather than enumerate frequencies” (Bachiochi & Weiner, 2002, p. 174).

Research Setting

West Bay and West Bay Unified School District

The community at the center of this study, which I refer to as Unity¹², is located within the City of West Bay, an urban, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse city in California. According to the most recent census data¹³, California’s total population is composed of 38.7% whites, 5.6% blacks, 38.4% Latinos, and 13.5% Asians. Like many cities in California, however, Latino/-as outnumber whites as well as other ethnic groups in West Bay. According to a recent study which found that West Bay has grown slightly less segregated¹⁴, the city remains racially and socioeconomically segregated. The West Bay Unified School District (henceforth, referred to either as “the district” or “West Bay Unified”) is the city’s local education agency (LEA). The U.S. Department of Education defines an LEA, or school district, as “an agency responsible for

¹² The names of all sites and persons named or referenced in this study are pseudonyms.

¹³ Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

¹⁴ Due to the immigration of Asians and Latino/-as, leading to fewer homogenous neighborhoods.

While looking at maps of the West Bay Unified and the larger county, participants were asked who lived in various regions of the district. The west was often described as white and affluent. The south was characterized as predominantly white and affluent with some areas that were middle-class more racially mixed. The north was described as middle- to upper-middle class and predominantly white and Hispanic, though “becoming more Latino.” The eastside was described as poor, overcrowded, and Latino. And last, southeast/southwest, was described as primarily black and Latino.

To the far west, housing prices range from \$750,000 to well over a million dollars. Depending upon how far west one travels, the median household income for this area can go as high as three times the median household income for the county. Similarly, the population of whites can go from as low as 50% to as high as 85% further west. One parent participating in this study, Mr. Thompson, remarked that when it came to the schools in this area, “You can best believe that they’re getting world class, high quality education...because of what [those] parents are paying for [the] homes over there.” According to California Department of Education (CDE) statistics of the schools in this area, the schools in this area are indeed some of the highest performing in the county.

Up north, the population is also predominantly white, the homes are also expensive, and the median household income far exceeds the median household income for the county. However, there are areas that are more ethnically mixed with more middle-class families. The schools there are also considered high-performing. Down south, the racial and socioeconomic profile is similar to that of the north. While there are areas down south that are more white and more affluent than others, there are some areas that are more middle class and ethnically mixed. According to

district transfer data for the 2014-2015 school year¹⁷, among the transfer requests received by the district for students seeking to leave the district, the majority of those requests were for school located south of West Bay's boundaries.

The area far east, is predominantly Latino, who make up as much as 97% of the population in some areas. Household median incomes in these areas are considerably less than the median household income for the county and schools in this area have a reputation of being poor, overcrowded, and low-performing. In the central portion of the district, where Unity is located, the schools are either predominantly black, mixed with black and Latino\ students, or predominantly Latino. Many of these schools are high minority, with high numbers of students receiving free and reduced priced lunch (FRPL), and low-performing.

School Funding in West Bay

In California, public schools (both traditional and charter) are financed through a combination of state funds, federal government funds, local property taxes and other local sources, which are distributed to school districts and charter schools. Prior to this, schools were funded primarily through local property taxes until the California Supreme Court ruled that this funding scheme was unconstitutional, requiring the state to equalize funding across districts. In 1978, Proposition 13 limited the amount of property taxes that can be used to fund public schools. Later, Proposition 98 (1988), mandated that a minimum of 40% of the state's general fund be allocated to education annually.

In 2013, the state adopted a new funding formula called the Local Control Funding Formula. According to the CDE, "The LCFF creates funding targets based on student characteristics and provides greater flexibility to use these funds to improve student outcomes. For school districts

¹⁷ Provided to me by the district

and charter schools, the LCFF funding targets consist of grade span-specific base grants plus supplemental and concentration grants that are calculated based on student demographic factors.”¹⁸ In other words, districts now have greater control over how funds are spent and receive additional funding for disadvantaged youth, including English learners, low-income students.

According to a report compiled by The Education Trust, a national non-profit advocacy organization, they found that among 40 school districts studied, several fell short of requirements mandating that they “communicate their strategies for improving student outcomes and performance” (Chen, 2016). Other observers have noted a loophole in the law enables districts to spend the supplemental funds intended for disadvantaged students however they want without violating the law, effectively undermining its intent (Fensterwald, 2016). Advocates for underserved children have complained about such practices.

West Bay Unified’s Reputation

Over the past several years, the district has faced declining enrollments due to declining birth rates, families leaving the county and state, and families leaving the district for neighboring public school districts or other school options. Many of the families leaving the district are reportedly white. As it stands, white students make up only 10% of the students in the district even though whites make up almost 30% of the city population. According to the district’s permits and transfers coordinator, Ms. Salinas, several parents either call or come into the district offices daily inquiring about or requesting transfers out of the district. She said,

We get about 20 parents a day walking into our office. I would say maybe 75 phone calls a day, and then we also have voicemails. It would average out to 25 voicemails a day...

¹⁸ California Department of Education. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/lcfffaq.asp>

Although parents' primary reasons for requesting transfers out of the district are due to either parent employment (a parent works in another school district and sending a child to school in a district there will be more convenient for the family) or childcare (the families' childcare provider is located in another district), Ms. Salinas said that one complaint she hears often from parents is the number of ELL students in the district.

Though Latinos make up more than any other ethnic group in both the city and county, they are grossly overrepresented among students in Westbay Unified. Many of the students in the district are designated English Language Learners (ELLs). According to CDE data from the 2014-2015 school year, 25% of the students served by the were ELL. Several sources have speculated that many whites and African Americans have left the city and the county due to the influx of Latino/-as. In addition to the disproportionate numbers of Latino/-a students, overall, the district has a reputation of being a "bureaucratic mess." As a result, the district has tried to offer more programs in an effort to woo families back to the district.

School Choice in West Bay Unified

West Bay Unified offers a wide array of school options for students in the district. These school options include magnet programs, charter schools, intra-district transfers, inter-district transfers, open enrollment, and up until recently, transfers under the school choice provision of No Child Left Behind. There are also a number of elite private schools located in the district as well as religious private schools.

Among West Bay parents, the district's magnet programs are perhaps the most popular alternative to traditional neighborhood schools, particularly those offering foreign language. Some of the magnet programs in the district are ranked among the best in the country. The added benefit of magnets is their need to maintain a certain racial balance, offering both white students

and students of color opportunities to go to school in an integrated setting. Unfortunately, spaces in these programs are extremely limited. This, in addition to the paperwork, and the district's complicated system for assigning students a spot in one of these programs has left many parents in the district disenchanted with the school's magnet programs. Still, each year, many parents in the district vie for a spot in one of West Bay's magnets.

There are slightly more charter schools in the district than there are magnet programs. Charter schools are also public schools. While some receive their funding directly from the state, others receive theirs from the district. In addition, charter schools can be start-ups or conversions from neighborhood public schools. In West Bay, the vast majority of students served by these schools are Latino. However, data show that among black and white students, these schools serve a larger percentage of them than traditional public schools. Data also show that these schools serve about a fifth of all students in the district. Like magnet schools, there are no residency requirements for acceptance (except that students must live in the district authorizing the charter), freeing students from their assigned school boundaries. In the event that there are more students who wish to apply than there are available seats, the charter school must admit students via lottery. One data sources indicated that although students in the district's charters score better on standardized tests than students in the district's traditional public schools, students in magnet programs outperform students in charters.

Other school options include intra- and inter-district permits. As a general rule, students attending public schools are to attend the school assigned to them by the district based on their residence. However, intra-district permits allow students who live within one school's attendance boundaries to attend another school in the district under specific circumstances. They include sibling permits, where students whose sibling attends one school may receive permit to also

attend the school; child care permit, where a child care provider lives in the attendance boundary of the school requested; parent employment, where a parent works in the attendance boundary of another school; safety and protection, for the protection of a student's welfare; continuing enrollment, to allow a student to continue at a school he or she currently attends; and specialized program, if the desired school has a program that is not available in the district. If a parent can show proof of the foregoing and the request is denied by the homeschool or receiving school, the parent has the option to appeal the decision to the district. The other type of permit that may be issued falls under an exception permit, which are granted only at the discretion of both schools or under extenuating circumstances. Once a student is accepted at the receiving school, he or she cannot be subjected to any requirements different from the rest of the students. A major drawback of this option is that it does not come with transportation privileges.

Inter-district permits offer students the same opportunity to leave their assigned school, except in this case, students are allowed to leave the district for another district, or enter the district from another district. The same exceptions outlined above for intra-district transfers apply to inter-district transfers. According to 2014-2015 data on interdistrict boundary-crossing trends in and out of the district (provided to me by the district), The two most common types of permits approved for outgoing students were for parent employment (67%) and exception (16%). For incoming students, the most common types of permits approved were parent employment (40%) and specialized program (17%). Outgoing permits by the district had an approval rate of 80% and incoming permits had an approval rate of 99%. The grades most requested for both outgoing and incoming students were (in order) kindergarten, 9th grade, and 6th grade.

A few years back when the district announced its plan to no longer allow students from the district to transfer to other school districts, there was a huge uproar among district parents.

Though the district later rescinded the plan, families complain that the district has been more strict about approving transfers. Some parents have drawn petitions and formed online platforms via social media where they vent their frustrations and share tips on how to secure an interdistrict transfer out of the district. One high-performing school district, with low enrollments, located further south, has been known to be actively solicit West Bay parents seeking to transfer their children out of the district.

Open enrollment is the other major school option in the district. In West Bay, there are two types of open enrollment programs. The first is where schools with available seats accept applications from students within the district. If there are more applications than seats, students will be chosen via random drawing. The other enrollment program is called the Romero Open Enrollment Act, or Romero Transfers. In 2010, the California legislature enacted what is known as the “Romero Bill.” The law was designed to give students attending failing schools the opportunity to transfer to a better performing school within or outside the district. A list of 1,000 schools in the state is compiled and parents of students attending these schools must be notified of their right to leave their home school and opt for a better performing school. Like other transfer programs offered by the district, this school option does not include transportation.

According to a 2016 report by the California Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO), among the 6.2 million students attending public schools in California during the 2014-2015 school year, 8.7% of all students attended charters, 3.4% attended magnets, and 2.2% used the interdistrict permit process, although they note that an additional number of interdistrict transfers may be Romero Transfers. Each of the school options listed above either eliminate school boundaries or allow parents and students to have greater freedom with respect to accessing schools outside their assigned school boundary. Some of these options involve crossing district boundaries, while

others involve crossing school attendance boundaries. Although the district provides these options, in many instances the district does not provide the supports to help families take advantage of these options.

Unity and Unity Elementary

Unity Elementary is centrally located within the West Bay school district. Though considered a historically African American community, the Unity community was predominantly white prior to African American families moving in in the late 1960's and 1970's. Although African-Americans make up under ten percent of the city population, large concentrations of African-Americans reside in this area and neighboring communities. In fact, Unity is only affluent, predominantly African American community out of several affluent, predominantly African American communities in the area. This area is often referred to as the "black hub" of the city. In recent years, however, the community's racial demographic has been changing.

After being priced out of the suburbs and other parts of the city, white residents have found refuge in Unity, and its spacious homes with panoramic views. Many of the local residents encounter the newcomers when they are out jogging or walking their dogs. While reading the local paper and speaking to different member of the community, I learned that while some welcome the change and the potential improvements that it may bring, others are wary. In describing the community, Unity Elementary's parent-community liaison Ms. Quincy said,

The majority is African-American but you do have Latinos that live in the area. That number is growing increasingly. You also have Caucasian folks that have moved back in the area. Every property that's been on the market, probably in the last year, then you've seen Caucasian people move in.

One of Unity's teachers confided that although the new white residents have yet to send their children to the school, she's afraid of what might happen to her position as a teacher at the school once they start.

Unity's median household income is above the county median and only 5% of its residents live below the poverty line. Although often considered affluent, the socioeconomic profile of the community is actually mixed. While the more affluent parts of the community boast of large homes overlooking the city, residents in the less economically advantaged parts of the community occupy rental apartments along a major artery running through the community as well as those tucked into blocks of modest homes with neat lawns and nicely trimmed sidewalks. Though there are several fast food chains in the area and a few large retail chains and grocery stores, I also observed smaller, independently owned shops in strip malls alongside restaurants, banking institutions, and nearly anything else one might find in an urban center.

Immediately adjacent west of Unity is a middle to upper middle-class city located just outside of West Bay's city limits. Although predominantly white (almost 50%), the city is also diverse with over 20% of the population characterized as Latino/-a, almost 15% Asian, and a little under 10% black. It has a median household income well above the county median and the schools are high-performing, diverse, and highly sought after, with many residents from various parts of West Bay moving there for the schools. There are shops, cafes, a nice downtown area, and live theatre venues. Although many Unity residents speak highly of this city's school district and some make efforts to send their children to the schools there, others have their sights set on schools further west.

On the other side of Unity, the communities are described as lower income to working class, with poor performing schools and gang activity. Although there are some pockets of middle class households, overall as few as 16% to as high as 36% of residents in these communities live below the poverty line. These communities are also ethnically mixed with a predominantly black and Latino population and some whites. The area has a very poor reputation among residents as

well as outsiders. Among the schools in the area, several are listed among 1,000 schools on Romero list of failing schools.

While interviewing one of the district coordinators assigned to the area, I asked, “What is the general perception of [this] particular area.” He recalled an incident with a student who lived in the area, but whose guardian (an aunt) had opted out of the local middle school, *Heritage Middle*, transferring the student to a middle school further west. The district coordinator said, “I don’t know if she [the guardian] would be a microcosm of the perception of the area, but it’s a parent that I had a very strong disagreement with.” He went on to explain that the young man had gotten into some trouble at the middle school out west and his aunt was appealing the school administration’s decision to send him back to Heritage, Unity’s feeder middle school. The aunt explained that she did not want him to go to school at Heritage because of who she called “those people.” The district coordinator went on to explain that even though he knows the school to be a good school and only had positive experiences whenever he visited the school, many parents in the area had negative perceptions of the school because “they’ve heard that there are large numbers of foster kids or kids in groups homes that go there.”

Other key informants in this study, like Unity’s parent-community liaison and one of the teachers, also mentioned the prevalence of group homes, foster homes, and section-8 housing in the area. Unity’s 5th grade gifted-magnet teacher claimed that at one point, Heritage’s principal shared with her that 80% of the students from this middle school came from foster homes. The district coordinator added that among the parents in the area “there’s a fear...that, oh, all kids in group homes have committed crimes, or that they’re kids we don’t want our children to associate with.” As a result, many of the parents in the area opt out of the school, sending their children to schools outside the community or to private schools, charters, or other public schools.

Unity Elementary, which Located directly in between the predominantly white, middle- to upper-middle class community to its left, and the lower income community to its right, is referred to by some of the locals as “a gem” because it is both predominantly black and considered high-performing. Before the state switched to a different statewide-assessment, Unity had consistently scored in the 800’s (out of 1000). It also has Nationally Board Certified teachers, and was awarded a Title I Academic Achievement award.

Unity is two schools in one: it has a gift-magnet program that accepts students from all over and a community school attended by students residing within and outside its attendance boundaries. Despite sometimes being described as two schools in one, according to Unity parent Mrs. Thompson, whose youngest daughter is in the gifted magnet program and whose older daughter attends the community school on intradistrict permit,

There’s no separation with community versus magnet like there is at some other schools...All the kids know each other and there’s not a sense of ...I’m better than...someone else.

Her husband Mr. Thompson added that:

They all work together. Even in the programs that they do and different holidays, the classrooms come together...[Y]ou wouldn’t know the difference. Someone would have to tell you.

Comments like these illustrate the schools’ ethos of fostering community.

Multiple school personnel reported that Unity was highly sought after, saying that many families, especially those from outside its boundaries want to send their children to this school. When I asked Mr. Montgomery, one of the office clerks who handles multiple office responsibilities, including enrollment, why so many parents wanted their children to come to this school, he said that

Well, definitely the magnet program is one of the interests of the parents. Many parents have heard good reports about the staff. And teachers. In both schools, community as

well as magnet. High test scores, fairly good reports as far as staff and students, just good clean environment, minimum drama.

The lead clerk and the parent community liaison said that many of the parents who live outside the school boundary are so desperate to have their children attend Unity that some even falsify their address (using a work address or an address for a friend or relative).

However, like many of the schools in the district, Unity has been operating at below the school's capacity. The school district has attributed the problem of declining enrollments district-wide to decreasing birth rates, families moving out of the county and/or state, and families leaving the district for neighboring public school districts or other school options. Unity's parent-community liaison, Ms. Quincy mentioned the community's aging population for why there were fewer students attending the school than in previous years. She said,

[T]he majority of the folks that are on my street have been my mom's age. She's 80-years-old. It's your retired community, but with the homes that are going up for sale, whether it was for people not being able to afford it anymore or like I said, them being older, them putting the homes up on the market. Then [you see] young families coming back into the neighborhood. For quite a while, it's been. We've gone to school here, grown up and then our parents are still in the home so you're not getting young kids that will come here. That's the reason why there are a lot of kids that are here on permit and otherwise, but we do have families that are moving in now, too.

When I asked Unity's principal, Mrs. Walker, to estimate how many students within Unity's school's boundaries attended the school, she said, "Maybe 70%" while the other 30% she estimated opted for schools located "west, west, west." Though she is a California native, she is not originally from the area and had just joined the school in 2014 and had only been on the job for about a year when I interviewed her. The lead office clerk Mrs. Scarlett, on the other hand, had been at the school for seven years and had worked in the district for thirty. She was a lot more familiar with the community and also oversees the enrollment process. She estimated that

only 10% of the students enrolled lived within the school's boundaries, while the other 90% came from neighboring communities.

Aside from the aging population and the lack of school-aged children in the community, however, there was also a tendency for many of the locals with school-aged children to rejected the school and opt for schools out west. Many people mentioned this to me during my regular visits to the school while I was becoming familiar with the school and local community. When asked why they believed why so many parents opted for schools outside the community, several individuals, primarily those whose children attending Unity said they believed it was because these parents "thought they were better." Ms. Quincy said that there were some African American parents in the area that were simply not "comfortable in a school with a majority African American population." However, other individuals raised the issue of class. For instance, while speaking briefly on the phone to one parent who had answered my recruitment flyer, I was told "You have to understand. You have some of the most affluent blacks in all of America sharing a zip code with poor black people."

Site Selection

When I crafted my research questions about middle-class African American parents' perceptions of school boundaries, I initially wanted to focus on an exclusively middle-class community. However, after researching several different predominantly middle-class, African American communities, I decided on this community because of its central location in the district, and its position right in the middle of two somewhat polar opposite communities. I also chose this site because this school is considered one of, if not, the highest-performing predominantly African American school which raised questions about why locals would reject it. Although boundary crossing in many of the middle-class, African American communities in the

area appeared to be quite prevalent, the added dimensions of the school's characteristics as well as the school's location made this site most desirable. Furthermore, the school's existence within a larger school district with interesting dynamics such as ethnic diversity, school and residential segregation, several school options, and a highly questionable reputation among residents were all taken into consideration. Given all the complexity and amount of movement occurring within this school and community, I felt that this research site was the more suitable for helping me obtain the data I wanted to capture in this study.

Study Sample

My study sample was divided into two categories: parents and key informants. Parent-participants fell into two categories: (1) inside parents—parents who lived within the Unity attendance boundary and (2) outside parents—parents who lived outside the Unity attendance boundary. Within these categories arose three more specific groups: (1) parents who lived within the attendance boundary and chose the home school, (2) parents who lived within the attendance boundary and chose other schools (i.e., public, private, or charter), and (3) parents who lived outside the boundary and chose Unity. Hence parents' relationship with the school defined the parameters of the case. Thus, the criteria for parents participating in the study was that they must have sent their children to the school or lived within the schools' boundaries.

Key informants included individuals who either advised parents on school choices, such as 5th grade teachers, whose students would be matriculating to middle school the following year; those who directly and indirectly engaged parents in the boundary-crossing process, such as office clerks who handled enrollment and processed intradistrict permits and district permits coordinators who processed and informed parents in the interdistrict permit process, school administrators who made the final decision about whether parents' permit requests would be

accepted or denied (i.e., principals), and those who participated in the appeals process (i.e., district coordinators); and other school or district personnel who advised parents about their children's school options and/or attendance.

Participant Recruitment

I obtained access to the school through a professor who put me in touch with Unity Elementary's principal, Mrs. Walker. I first contacted her in February, 2015 (i.e., the latter half of the 2014-2015 school year). Since my study focused on parents, Mrs. Walker put me in touch with the school's parent-community liaison, Ms. Quincy. Ms. Quincy's office was located in school's parent center. She came to school every day, and stayed beyond her designated work hours. She has worked at the school for 11 years and held multiple positions at the school. She was also born and raised in the community, attended Unity herself as a child along with her older siblings, and when she had children, she sent both her daughters there. She also oversees the booster club. She is very familiar with the school, the surrounding community, and many of the parents at the school. During what I call the first phase of my recruitment efforts she was the point person recommending which families I should talk to and informing parents who visited the parent center of my study. In addition to recommending parents, she allowed me to set up a sign-up sheet in the parent center so that parents who were interested in participating in the study could provide their phone numbers and email addresses.

During this phase I easily recruited parents whose children attended the school but lived outside the school boundaries. I made most of these contacts through the parent center. (As it turned out, the parents most active in the PTA were mostly, if not all, outside parents.) At this time, I was able to recruit one parent who lived within the school boundaries and whose child also attended the school. Because this parent operated one of the afterschool programs on

campus, she was well known to the school staff and administration who put me in contact with her. Finding other parents at the school who lived in the boundary and whose children attended the school proved difficult (which might be explained by multiple reports that not many parents who lived in the boundary sent their children to the school). Nonetheless, I engaged in other recruitment efforts at the school to recruit parents whose children both attended the school and resided within the school's boundaries.

These efforts included attending PTA meetings, open houses, daytime or evening school functions such as talent shows, winter concerts, and Black History Month shows where the principal either inform parents of my study before or after the show or presentation or I directly approached parents myself. I also attended functions like "Math Night", the school's annual weekend campus beautification project, off-campus school fundraisers, and more. None of these tactics yielded prospective participants.

In attempting to recruit inside parents, i.e., those who lived within the school boundary but whose children attended school elsewhere, Ms. Quincy either put me in touch with administrators from other public schools where children from Unity were known to attend. Based on recommendations by Ms. Quincy, I also directly contacted directors of admission at private schools that children from Unity were known to attend. I contacted local civic organizations, fraternity and sorority chapters, girl scout troops, and organizations that pair minority parents with independent schools. These efforts yielded no prospective parents. By then, the 2014-2015 school term had ended, and the following school term had begun. This time, I went back to the drawing board and tried recruitment fliers to recruit these now elusive inside parents.

During the 2015-2016 school term, I printed fliers and palm cards and got permission to hand them at Unity, again before and after school functions. I was also allowed to leave them at

the school's front desk where parents could see them. I also distributed the fliers at nearby local library branches, nearby malls and shopping centers, local recreation centers that sponsored football and cheerleading, a local church and youth centers, a pediatric dentist office, two local dance companies, the homeowner's association across the street from Unity, and the annual women's health exposition. I also emailed popular organizations and event planners with social media platforms to post my carefully crafted recruitment statements. By the end of my second recruitment attempt, I had recruited a total of six inside parents who had either received one of my fliers through one of the aforementioned organizations, or had seen my flier on a social media website "Next Door", which only allows members to join for their local neighborhood. One of the parents in that online community had seen my flier at one of the local libraries and got my permission to post it on the website. In the end, I had recruited a purposive sample of seven parents who resided outside the Unity school boundary but whose children attended Unity and six parent who resided inside the school boundaries and who children either attended Unity (2) or other schools (4).

I was contacted by several other parents who saw my flier on Next Door and were interested in participating in my study. However, these parents either did not meet the study criteria (i.e., Unity was neither their child's home school nor did their children attend Unity) or they were not able to sit for an interview during school hours. A few more parents from Next Door contacted me after study enrollment was closed.

With respect to key informants at the school, I was put directly in touch with them through Ms. Quincy. Other key informants such as the district permits and transfer coordinator and the district coordinators who handle intradistrict permit appeals were contacted directly by me. The feeder high school principal was contacted by one of the district coordinators on my

behalf. After interviewing the feeder high school principal, he attempted to put me in touch with the principal of the feeder middle school but she repeatedly ignored my request.

Study Participants

Parent-Participants. My recruitment efforts yielded a total sample of 24 participants; 13 parent-participants (12 families in total) and 11 key informants. Among the parent-participants, six resided within the Unity school boundary (“inside” families) and six resided outside the Unity school boundary (“outside” families). Two of the inside families sent their children to Unity, their assigned school, while four of these inside families opted out of Unity, instead choosing schools outside their attendance boundary (this included four different schools in total). All six of the outside families, opted out of their assigned school (five different schools in total) and chose Unity. All of the outside parent-participants, except one, resided to the east of Unity (the farthest was a little less than 5 miles, with a travel time of 13 minutes without traffic)¹⁹, while the remaining parent resided southwest of Unity (a little under 7 miles, with a travel time of 13 minutes without traffic).

After each interview, parents were asked to complete a questionnaire asking whether they lived in the school boundary, annual household income, and parent’s level of education (see Appendix E). Two of the parents in this study reported a household income of less than \$20,000; one reported a household income of \$20,000 - \$39,000; two reported a household income of \$65,000 - \$70,000; and seven reported a household income of \$100,000 or greater. All reported more than a high school education (some college = 3; college degree = 4; more than college = 4, including one MFA, one MSW, and one MSN; two of the parents with advanced degrees mentioned having earned either their master’s or undergraduate degree from highly selective

¹⁹ based on google maps

California universities). One of the outside parents lived in the Unity school boundary for several years until recently moving to a home outside the school boundary. Three of the inside parents have lived in the community for several years while the other three had fairly recently bought homes in the area. The parent participants included ten women and three men. A list of parent-participant profiles can be seen in Table 1 located in Appendix A.

Despite the income heterogeneity in this sample, I categorize each of these parent-participants as middle-class. The criteria for what constitutes middle class are contested (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). According to Pattillo-McCoy (1999), a scholar on the black middle class, “Economists often define class in strict income terms...whereas sociological conceptions of class include occupation and education along with income” (p. 1). She adds that “studies of black middle class in particular have used white-collar employment as the marker of middle class position” (p. 1). While most (10 of the 13) parent participants reported household annual incomes well above the city and county annual household income medians, three reported incomes below the median. However, all three of these parents reported having either a college degree (1) or having attended some college (2).

One of the parents who reported an annual household income under \$20,000, reported having a college degree (although it is not clear whether the degree came from a 2-year or 4-year institution) and described her employment as working “in the education field” for several years, in multiple school districts, including affluent school districts. She also lives within the Unity school attendance boundary, which is considered a middle-class to affluent neighborhood. Taking into account her income, neighborhood, education, occupation, and the social capital she might have obtained working in school districts, this parent can be considered at least lower- or working-middle class. In her study examining school choice among middle-class, African

American parents in Alabama, Boyd (2011) cites Smrekar (2009) who “describes ‘social capital’ as an additional characteristic prominent in middle class. Social capital includes the knowledge, connections and capability of using networks to navigate institutions of power. ‘Who you know and where you live matters...these networks provide the primary channel for collecting information about school options for children’” (Smrekar, p. 214)” (p. 46).

Another one of the parents in the sample who reported an annual household income between \$20,000 - \$39,000 grew up in the neighborhood, attended some college at a 4-year institution, works part-time at Unity as a campus aide, and now lives in a home located slightly west of the community. I found this parent to also be very knowledgeable about the better performing schools in the district and how to navigate the school choice process. Similar to the parent described above, I believe this parent’s income, along with his education, the neighborhood where he grew up, where he lives now, and his knowledge of the system might classify him as also lower or working-middle class.

The last parent, a married mother of five, reported an annual household income below \$20,000 and some college (though it was not clear whether she obtained this education at a 2-year or 4-year institution). This woman is a homemaker, who, each time I visited Unity to collect data, was always there doing some volunteer work of some sort. She lived outside Unity’s school boundaries (east of Unity) and had two young boys attending the school, one in the gifted program and the other in the community school. In addition to sending her younger boys to a school outside their assigned school boundaries, she also sent her two oldest boys to a high school outside their assigned high school. When her boys first started out going to school, she had them in private school until the family could no longer afford it. She also reported working for the district in the past as an aide in the early childcare system. She also expressed know-how

in terms of navigating the district. Due to her work history, personal school preferences for her children, and her work volunteering at the school on a daily basis, I would consider this parent also working middle class.

In outlining other characteristics that might meet the criteria for middle-class, Boyd once again (2011), this time citing Bowser (2007), describes “‘delay of gratification, control of consumerism, and a willingness to work hard and long toward a promised goal’ as fundamental to middle-class values” (p. 46). Here, we see where scholars have also used individual attributes or dispositions as a criterion for middle class status. Later, in the findings chapter of my dissertation, I discuss how some parents this study use criteria like these for determining middle-class membership.

Key informants. The key informants included four men seven women. From Unity the included Unity Elementary’s principal, who was on track to complete her first year as principal at the time of our interview; the PSA counselor, who was also in for her first year when I interviewed her; the parent community liaison; the lead office clerk; another office clerk who was also in his first year in the position; the 5th grade gifted magnet teacher who was also raised in the community and whom parents routinely sought her advice about where their kids should go to school after attending Unity; another 5th grade teacher community school. From the district, they included one district permits and transfers coordinator who handles interdistrict transfer permit requests and two district coordinators whose official duties were to support schools in all areas except instruction and to facilitate the intradistrict transfer permit process when parents appeal a permit decision by a school administrator. The last participant was the feeder high school, *Legacy High*, principal. A list of key informants is available in Table 2 located in Appendix B.

Data Collection: Methods and Data sources

Interviews

The primary method for data collection in this study was interviews. I conducted 12 face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the 13 parent-participants in my sample (the Thompsons, husband and wife, were interviewed together). The first six of these interviews took place during the 2014-2015 school term while the second six took place during the 2015-2016 school term. All interviews, except one, took place at Unity in an office or quiet room made available to me by the principal or parent community liaison. The remaining interview took place at the participants home. The shortest interview lasted 23 minutes and the longest lasted an hour and 30 minutes. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

At the beginning of each parent interview, parents were shown four maps: a map of the county with all its school districts and three maps of the district (one for each school level) with all of its catchment areas, and asked to make observations. Parents were also asked to identify the racial and socioeconomic demographics of various parts of the district and asked to share any observations they made about school boundaries. "School boundaries" in this study, was used to refer to both district lines and attendance boundaries. District boundaries refer to lines separating school districts, while school attendance boundaries referred the lines around school catchment areas for individual schools.

The interview protocol contained questions related to parents' perceptions about schools, school boundaries, school choices, and experiences crossing school boundaries. I took notes during each interview and listened to each later in the day. At the end of each interview parents were asked to complete a short questionnaire that asked questions such as name, annual household income, whether they live in or outside the Unity attendance boundary, and where

their children attended school. Each parent was given a \$20 gift card to Target for their participation

All interviews with school personnel, except one, took place during the 2014-2015 school year. The last one took place during the 2015-2016 school year. Among the district personnel, one interview took place during the summer, and the other two took place during the 2015-2016 school year. The feeder principal was also interviewed during the 2015-2016 school year. All of these interviews either took place in the respondent's private office, or in a quiet space where the interview could not be overheard. While most of these interviews took around 20-30 minutes, one was as short as 11 minutes while another ran as long as an hour fifteen minutes. These interview questions focused on these participants' experiences dealing with parents and their school choices and/or the transfer permit process. These interviews were also face-to-face, semi-structured, and recorded. I took notes during most of these interviews and listened to them later that day or the next.

Data analysis

According to Merriam (2006), data analysis is an iterative process that takes place several times over the course of the study. Hence, as data collection takes place, the researcher analyzes the data, using it to inform the study as she goes along. Throughout the data collection process, I made notes about the data. Notes were kept in a small notebook that I carried around with me at all times, as well as two journals I kept at home for more detailed observations, like recurring themes. After data were collected, they were labeled and organized. Once interviews were fully transcribed, I reviewed them and made notes in the margins. I also took separate notes in one of my journals. After reading through all of my interviews at least once, I went back and began

coding my data manually. When themes that I may have missed in previous interviews came up later, I made sure to go back and note them.

Coding refers to “assigning [a] shorthand designation to various aspects of [one’s] data so that [the researcher] can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (Merriam, 2006, p. 173).

After converting this raw data into more manageable data, I was able to look for similarities across codes and place them into categories. During this process, categories were constructed, sorted, and named. After noticing consistent themes emerging, I applied my theoretical framework to these categories to help me “make sense” of this data. I wound up with several broad categories, which were later grouped into three large themes. During this process, I made sure that I reviewing and analyzing the data systematically

Construct validity was increased by triangulating the data, i.e., by drawing on multiple sources of data such as interviews with parents, school personnel, and district personnel as well as district documents (Yin, 2014). To increase reliability, I made sure to maintain a neat a case study database should other individuals want to inspect my raw data in addition to reviewing my study findings.

Role of the Researcher

As a parent and a woman who presents and primarily identifies as African American, I shared some commonalities with my research participants, which worked to my advantage out in the field. My racial background made it easier for me to gain the trust of my research subjects. I felt that more times than not they were candid in their responses about the subject matter, which oftentimes included race. As I conducted my interviews with them, I could tell that they felt not only safe, but a certain level of familiarity.

However, there are definitely drawbacks to having a certain level of familiarity with research subject. For example, several times during interviews, I had to make some of my participants stop and unpack their responses because they had automatically assumed that I knew what they were talking about. And even though sometimes I did, I felt that having as much clarity as possible was important to this study, as I did not want to impose my own assumptions about what participants were saying on the data. In some instances, however, I truly did not know what parents were talking about and truly needed clarification. This may be due to the fact that although I collected my data in this community, I am not a native. There are many unique aspects about this research study site's physical, social, cultural, and political landscape that I am not privy to and to which I don't have the requisite historical context.

Additionally, being in a graduate program might make me physically, socially, and culturally isolated in a lot of ways. Throughout this study, I constantly had to navigate this insider-outsider position. As a black person who has experienced racism, I definitely knew where they were coming from and why they felt that way that they did. However, some things were simply lost on me, like parents' feelings about other ethnic groups. Ultimately, my positionality definitely shapes how I engage and make sense of the data

CHAPTER 5 Findings Summary

This qualitative case study sought to understand how African American parents socially construct school boundaries. The main research question, “How do middle-class African American parents socially construct school boundaries?” was divided into three questions: (1) How do middle-class, African American parents make meaning of school boundaries? (2) How do these meanings shape these parents’ decision to cross (or not cross) school boundaries? and (3) How does the act of boundary-crossing among middle-class, African American parents either disrupt or reproduce school boundaries? Though many studies examining school boundaries rely primarily on geospatial analyses of school districts as well as other quantitative methods used to examine boundary-crossing trends within and between school districts, this study uses a qualitative approach to understand parents’ subjective beliefs about and experiences with school boundaries, and how these beliefs might can disrupt, but also result in the reproduction of school boundaries.

Research questions, study design, data collection, and data analysis were all guided by a theoretical framework that combined Critical Race Theory, social constructionism, and minority culture of mobility perspectives. During data analysis, three major themes emerged. The first was “*Drawing the line*”, which focuses primarily on middle-class, African American parents’ perceptions of why school boundaries exist and how they function. The second was, “*Crossing the line*”, examining what factors motivate middle-class African American families to cross school boundaries and the kinds of obstacles they face in attempting to cross them. The last, “*Redrawing the line*”, examines how parents’ decisions to cross school boundaries affected the neighborhood school and contributed to larger social changes.

Findings reveal that these middle-class, African American parents perceive significant disparities in the quality of schools available in their neighborhoods compared to those available in whiter, middle- to upper-middle class neighborhoods. They also believe that school boundaries play a significant role in shaping multiple indicators of school quality. However, while most parents believed that school boundaries negatively impacted African American schools and limited African Americans' access to high quality schools, a small minority of parents dismissed any notion that there is anything inherently racist or biased about school boundaries.

Nonetheless, whether parents perceived school boundaries to be racist structures or not, they engaged in boundary-crossing in search of what they believed to be better schools, investing a great deal of time and resources in the process. Although parents recognized that their greater access to more resources made it possible for them to cross school boundaries, they also gave a great amount of weight to personal attributes such as determination, sacrifice, and persistence in successfully crossing school boundaries.

Additional findings indicate that some of the consequences of middle-class, African American parents' decisions to cross school boundaries included drops in school enrollment, school demographic changes, and a potential shift in the school's culture. The broader implications of these actions allowed parents to disrupt the constraints imposed on families through school boundaries, particularly those of color and with fewer resources, creating opportunities for themselves and other families to gain access to better quality schools. These decisions to cross school boundaries however, are not free of negative consequences. In fact, by crossing school boundaries, these parents wound up reproducing these structures by causing already marginalized groups to become further isolated.

Responses from key informants also contribute to this study. Though on the surface school and district staff's responses regarding boundary-crossing seem to either refute or support parents' perceptions of school boundaries, findings indicate that these responses, in fact, complicate parents' understandings of the boundary-crossing process, and align with broader interpretations of boundaries as both racist and oppressive.

While the foregoing focus primarily on the *products* of how parents socially construct school boundaries, this study also highlights the *processes* through which parents' beliefs and ideas are developed and transmitted. In arriving at their conclusions about school boundaries, both parent-participants and key informants appear to draw on broad narratives of racism, oppression, and marginalization of African Americans. These narratives constitute common sense knowledge among parents which not only shape their perceptions of schools and school boundaries, but influence their decision whether to cross school boundaries. Some of the modes through which many of these ideas are developed and transmitted include word of mouth, the media, "objective" information such as school ratings provided by online websites like Zillow or Great Schools and test scores provided by the district, and the advice of knowledgeable actors such as teachers, school administrators, and district administrators. Even more compelling, however, is information parents gleaned through observation and personal experience from their own schooling experiences as well as their experiences with older children or siblings.

Although all parent-participants in this study are referred to as *Unity parents*, parents' responses revealed a few patterns in their perceptions of school boundaries and their school choices. For example, the parents referred to as *inside* parents (four parents) were those who lived within the Unity Elementary school attendance boundary but chose to send their children to other schools within the district. As a group, these parents were more educated and generally

displayed more reluctance than their counterparts to attribute race and/or racial bias to the way school boundaries were drawn and enforced.

Outside parents (six parents), on the other hand, were those who lived outside the Unity Elementary school attendance boundary, yet opted to send their children to Unity over their children's assigned schools. These parents were more likely than inside parents to perceive school boundaries as racist and intentionally designed to exclude them from what they perceived to be better quality schools in more affluent area.

The last group of parents, are referred to as the *contents*. These two parents were the only two among the sample who did not cross school boundaries. Both lived within Unity Elementary's attendance boundary and sent their children to the school. There were no observable patterns among their responses. While one provided responses that were more in line with the perception of school boundaries as neutral and unbiased, the other was adamant that race played a role in the way boundaries were drawn and enforced, though she expressed some beliefs in favor of the social exclusion of lower income families from good schools.

Ultimately, for many of the parents in this study, a more preferable boundary policy would be one in which school boundaries to be eliminated entirely, as many felt that as taxpayers and parents, choosing a school for their children should be within their province and not the province of the state. Though some parents, believed that eliminating school boundaries entirely would lead to increased access to better schools or improvements in underperforming neighborhood schools, others argued that school boundaries would not be such a problem if education resources were distributed more equitably. A more detailed description of the study findings are provided in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 6

Drawing the line: “It is Drawn to Avoid Me”

“Ask not for whom the line is drawn; it is drawn to avoid thee.”

—Supreme Court Justice O’Connor, *Shaw v. Reno* (1993)

In this chapter, I address my first research question, *How do middle-class, African American parents in Unity make sense of school boundaries?* In order to best understand these parents’ perceptions of school boundaries, one must first understand how these parents compare the schools in their local communities to those located in other parts of the district.

As discussed in Chapter 4, there was a general consensus among parents and key informants regarding the geographic distribution of educative resources in the West Bay Unified School District. Schools located west in the district were the most highly coveted and well-sought after. The surrounding communities of these schools were described as predominantly white and affluent. The schools and school districts located both north and south were considered ethnically diverse but predominantly white and middle to upper middle class; the schools there were also considered good. Unity is centrally located within the district and described as predominantly black, with some Latinos, and a growing population of whites and Asians. While Unity Elementary was considered unique in that it is both high-performing and predominantly African American, neighboring schools (in attendance boundaries surrounding Unity) were perceived to be poor, predominantly black and Latino, and poor performing. Farther east schools were perceived as predominantly poor, Latino and extremely overcrowded.

In this chapter, I will discuss parents’ perceptions of racial disparities in school quality, parents’ perceptions of the purpose of school boundaries, perceptions of who decides where and how school boundaries are drawn, perceptions of how school boundaries impact school quality,

how determinative parents thought school boundaries were on where a child went to school, and parents' ideas about a more fair boundary policy.

Parents' Perceptions of Racial Disparities in School Quality

Mr. Armstrong is an outside parent who works as a campus aide at Unity Elementary and has two 5th graders enrolled in the school. He grew up in the community and lived within the school's attendance boundary until recently when his aunt passed away and left him her home located just a few miles southwest of Unity. In explaining why there are racial disparities in school quality in general, he says, "schools in the African American neighborhoods get the short end of the stick." Similarly, Mr. Samuel, an inside parent, married father of two, and professor at a selective, medium-to-large sized, private university in West Bay, shared,

I think it's no surprise that the black communities have had worse access to good schools... There was white flight, and there was less money, and schools that were strong were just drained of resources, and those resources went elsewhere. Housing stock became available to African Americans that may have been good or may have not been as good, but the schools suffered, and there's just been a variety of cycles that've occurred.

For nearly all of the parents participating in this study, school funding was seen as the biggest cause of disparities in school quality. Elaborating on his earlier point about schools in black communities always getting the short end of the stick, Mr. Armstrong says,

[T]he opportunities aren't there like they are in other neighborhoods. For whatever reason, they don't get funded right. The teachers that they do get are either on the downside where they used to be great teachers and now they're close to retirement or they're just not very good or not very... interested in the African American student.

Echoing these concerns over unequal allocation of school funding, many parents believed that unequal funding contributed to other disparities in school quality such as books, equipment, teacher quality, well-maintained facilities, broader curricular offerings (including as music and physical education), and access to extracurricular activities.

With respect to teacher quality, many parents believed that schools in black communities lacked teachers motivated enough to teach at their highest level. Mrs. Polk, an outside parent who lives east of Unity with a 4th grader enrolled in the gifted-magnet at Unity says,

[It's] a disservice. There's not enough being put into those schools...even with the teachers. I really feel there's a lot of retired teachers [that] ...probably need to take a step down in these schools... [A] lot of times the older a person gets, they don't have...what it takes to teach the younger kids now. It's time for a lot of them to retire...they have a lot of them...still sitting in jobs that they need to retire from.

While these parents spoke about racial disparities between schools in black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods in general, some parents seized on the opportunity to discuss their specific school.

Mrs. Thompson is an outside parent with a 2nd grader in the gifted-magnet at Unity and a kindergartener in Unity's community school. Both she and her husband are strong advocates of Unity, and perhaps some of the school's biggest cheerleaders among the parents at the school. Rarely will someone hear them say anything remotely negative about the school. However, when the conversation turned to school funding Mrs. Thompson said, "It's not spread equally. That's what I see. The monies are not spread equally, because...when I drive around town, I'm like— why [doesn't] our school look like that?" Although Mrs. Thompson regards Unity Elementary to be a great school in almost every other way, she has noticed disparities between the physical upkeep of other schools within the district and Unity.

At this juncture, it is important to note the different factors that shape parents' perceptions about racial disparities in school quality. In the previous paragraphs, we see that Mr. Armstrong and Mr. Samuels' general perceptions of racial disparities in school quality are framed by common sense knowledge of and/or broader narratives about racial inequality in the U.S., particularly as it pertains to African Americans. Although he does not say so explicitly, Mr.

Armstrong's remark about disparities in the availability of quality teachers seems to be rooted in personal experience, though one cannot say for sure. The same goes for Mrs. Polk's comments about disparities in the availability of quality teachers.

On the other hand, we see Mrs. Thompson explicitly discuss her personal observations of schools and how it indicates a lack of equitable funding. As we can see through the following quote, Mrs. Thompson draws a link between her observations of schools and her beliefs about the power of imagery. Explaining why outward appearance is so vital to school quality, she says,

How are [the children] going to have pride in their school if the facility looks like it does? You know, where are they going to get that from? Because I'm not saying image is everything, but it does play a huge role in the way that you're perceived. I mean, just for our young men, our African American men, you know, if your pants are sagging or whatever, you're perceived a certain way. If you have a hoodie on and you have jeans—even if it's cold—you're perceived a different way. And it's the same thing. I look at [Trayvon Martin].

Here, she notes how subjective qualities, such as a school's outward appearance, can have a profound impact on outsiders' opinions of the school, as well as students' own perceptions of their schools. In this way, Mrs. Thompson demonstrates the power of perception and how perceptions like “those schools *look* bad” can often become fact: “those schools *are* bad.” Further, by analogizing the tendency of most people to base their opinions on subjective qualities such as outward appearance, and comparing it with how many people often judge African Americans, young African American men in particular—she uses the example of Trayvon Martin, the black teenager killed in Sanford Florida while wearing a hoodie and jeans, to make her point—she implies that the way mainstream society perceives African Americans can have dire consequences.

For other parents like Mrs. Phillips, a content parent with a 2nd grader currently enrolled in Unity's gifted-magnet program and an older child who graduated Unity nearly a decade

earlier, other sources of knowledge can be very powerful in shaping parents' perceptions of school quality. While discussing where she gets her ideas about school quality, she said, "[O]ne factual place that I did receive information...[was] the API score...[it] tells a lot about a school." Mrs. Phillips use of the term "factual", coupled with her assumption that school performance on standardized tests "tells a lot about a school," suggests that she regards this source of information as more objective compared to other sources of information. Here and later on in the findings we will see how some parents give a great deal of weight to scores on standardized tests, online rankings, and other numerical indicators of school quality.

Ultimately, we can see that in addition to their perceptions of racial disparities in school quality, African American parents draw upon various sources of knowledge or information to arrive at their beliefs. In this section, sources of information included common sense notions about racism and inequality, personal observations, and "objective" information such as student performance on standardized tests.

Purpose of School Boundaries

While discussing whether race factored into the way school boundaries were drawn, most parents were confident that race played a significant role in the way school boundaries were drawn, though a small minority refuted the notion that race had anything to do with the way school boundaries are drawn. Content parent Ms. Lee lives so close to the school that it took her less than ten minutes on foot to meet me at Unity for our interview. She has two 5th graders enrolled at Unity: one in the gifted-magnet and the other in the community school. She says that Unity is so highly valued in her family that attending the school—as she, her siblings, and several of her relatives have done—is a part of her family's legacy. Relatives of hers who live far away send their children to come live with her mother so that their children can attend Unity.

Earlier during our interview, she sided with most of the other parents in the study, arguing that boundaries served the purpose of containment. She said that the purpose of school boundaries was “[s]o the people that live in that area go to that school. So they won’t take people from another area and put ‘em in a better school or a richer school.” Later, while discussing whether she believed African American families were negatively disadvantaged by school boundaries she claimed, “I don’t think so, but other people might think so.” When I asked why she believed that other people might think that African Americans are disadvantaged by the way school boundaries are drawn, she said, “Cause a lotta people are stuck on this black thing, and it’s not always all about that.”

Throughout the remainder of her interview, however, Ms. Lee began to take a more conservative stance on many of the questions, mainly refuting the notion that race plays a role into the way school boundaries are drawn, enforced, or experienced. In many instances, inside parent Ms. Terry took a similar tack, refuting that race factors into many of the phenomena we discussed. While discussing whether she believed race plays a role in the way school boundaries are drawn, Ms. Terry said no, “because schools can’t just pick up and leave. I mean, this school has been here...[b]efore any of us were here... And so [schools are] already built. So when drawing the line, [you are] just—again— coming back to the population more so than anything else.”

Most parents in this study saw it differently. Even after articulating several non-racial explanations for why school boundaries exist—to maintain a certain balance of students, to prevent overcrowding, to ensure that each school has decent enrollment, so children won’t have to travel far distances for school, and so forth—most parents remained adamant that school boundaries are drawn primarily to ensure the geographical segregation of students of color from

their white, middle class to affluent counterparts. Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, who were both interviewed together, were very blunt about their opinion of why we have school boundaries.

While discussing the topic, they said,

Mr. Thompson: I don't think there *is* a need for boundaries except for—

Mrs. Thompson: —Segregation.

Many of the other parents participating in this study shared a similar sentiment. Their responses regarding the purpose of school boundaries included variations of the following:

- “to keep us enclosed”
- “to restrict us”
- “to keep people locked in a certain area”
- “to keep us from being competitive”

Note that aside from conveying feelings of exclusion and marginalization, most of these phrases utilize the pronoun “us”, signifying African Americans and alluding to the collective struggle of blacks in the U.S. Also, note spatial references in terms such as “enclosed” and “our area.” While it is not clear whether these terms hark back to the era of de jure segregation in the U.S. or present-day geographic segregation, such phrases certainly allude to racial segregation. Here, we can see that some parents’ perceptions of the purpose and/or function of school boundaries are shaped by narratives and/or common-sense knowledge among African Americans around social exclusion and control.

While discussing whether she believed school boundaries were intentionally designed to exclude African American children and families, inside parent Ms. Davis says confidently at first (but hedges her bets at the end), “No. I mean, I do like to be naïve. ‘Cause that hopefully makes me less cynical. But no. I’m sure at least by some level of design, it’s intentional. But it’s all speculative.” Mrs. Coleman is another inside parent. She and her husband have lived in the Unity community and school attendance boundary for the past 13 years. Her daughter is enrolled in a

high-performing, predominantly white and affluent charter school conversion several miles away from Unity but only a few minutes away from the high school where Mrs. Coleman's husband works as an AP History teacher. Without hedging her bets, she says,

I don't think it's coincidental... It's kinda to keep you in. I mean, you have to have a reason to leave this school or this region [referring to black schools and neighborhoods]. Not just 'cause you want to... I mean, on the face, maybe it's: "stay local, ... go to your neighborhood school, have neighborhood connections." But also it's to – I don't wanna say keep you in your place, but to stay where you live... I think that the more affluent want to be able to keep their schools – they don't want everyone trying to run to their district and sully their schools.

Although parents believed that class also played a role in how school boundaries are drawn, those who believed that race plays a role in how school boundaries are drawn felt that race was the more prevalent. The latter part of Mrs. Coleman's remarks, "they don't want people to come to their district and sully their schools," reinforce African American parents' feelings of isolation and marginalization. In the next chapter, we will see that as confirmed boundary crossers, the parents in this study are well aware such policies do not apply to everyone. As upwardly mobile to middle class families, they recognize that there are quite a few possibilities for parents like them to get around school boundary policies they contend are intended to keep them out.

In the end, although some parents shared different points of view regarding race, class, and school boundaries, all but one agreed that whether intentional or not, school boundaries substantially benefitted those from affluent white communities while working to the detriment of African Americans communities.

Who decides where and how school boundaries are drawn?

In addition to the various sources of information referenced above, which influenced parents' perceptions of school boundaries, I found that parents' perceptions of the groups and individuals they believe exert power over when, how, and where school boundaries are drawn,

are also key in helping us understand how African American parents perceive school boundaries. Without knowing the process for how or when school boundaries are drawn, most parent participants said that regardless of how or what considerations go into how school boundaries are drawn, they didn't believe that that process was a fair one. Many of them based this opinion on the fact that school boundaries had a disproportionately negative impact on schools in African American communities. School boundaries benefitted schools in predominantly white and affluent communities by allowing them to keep their resources to themselves, and they benefitted predominantly Latino communities by building more schools to relieve overcrowding.

While many questioned the fairness of how school boundaries are drawn, several wondered why we even have school boundaries in the first place. Ms. Davis has lived in Unity for a long time and currently still lives in the Unity school attendance boundary. She even attended Unity elementary from second to fifth grade before her mother sent her to Catholic school for both middle and high schools. Many of her friends and older siblings attended Unity and went on to attend *Heritage*, the feeder middle school, and *Legacy*, the feeder high school. She expressed having zero confidence in public schools in general but showed particular disdain for West Bay Unified schools. She said,

[A]s a parent of a child who has no intention of sending my children to our home elementary, middle, or high school and would like to send my children to schools of my choice, from a biased, personal point of view, I don't think it's fair. 'Cause I wanna send my kids where I want them to go. But from a practical, logistical, funding, bureaucratic perspective, I mean, you can't let everybody have their way.

Other parents shared similar perspectives. In their opinion, they felt that as parents and tax-paying residents, they should have sovereignty over their children and where they go to school, not the district. Another parent said, "I should be able to have the say. It's my taxpayer money, I should be able to say my kid goes here. I'm paying taxes for this." (3002) And another: "To me,

I pay taxes in the City of West Bay, my child should be free to go to whatever public school in the City of West Bay that I want them to go to. I should be free to choose as long as I'm paying taxes." For many in this study, being restricted by school boundaries and not being able to choose where their children go to school was less about disenfranchising taxpayers in general and more about subordinating the needs of African American residents in the district to the needs of the district's white and affluent residents.

While discussing which entities and individuals were responsible for drawing school boundaries, all four of the inside parents said they were not sure. Six of the participants said either the district or school board (and in some instances, both). Four (including those from the groups described above) said "politicians." And one said, individual voters.²⁰ While it was apparent that most parents perceived both the district and school board as white entities controlled by white, affluent individuals, one parent, Mr. Samuels wanted to make it very explicit that he saw this issue differently. He based this belief on the fact that the current superintendent was a black woman and that because of "lots of white-flight", people of color have been left to run the district and school board. While saying this however, he left plenty of room for the possibility that he may be entirely misperceiving the matter.

In broader conversations about school boundaries as well as conversations aimed specifically at who is responsible for determining school boundaries, several parents voiced concerns over what they called hidden interests and agendas. According to Mrs. Polk, an outside parent who lives south east of Unity and whose children both attend magnet schools (her 4th grader is in Unity's gifted-magnet and the other is a 9th grader at a highly coveted high school

²⁰ Note that all of these responses were not mutually exclusive. Some parents' referenced more than one entity in their responses.

magnet program), “There are some hidden agendas with the school boundaries, I really believe so.” Ms. Bains, a college-educated single mom who lives east of Unity and whose kindergartner is zoned for a low-performing, predominantly black and Latino school shared Mrs. Polk suspicions:

I think it’s the board, the school board, and superintendent. People that are voted in, they make those decisions and then there’s behind the scenes people I hear about. Behind the scenes, politicians or corporate people... I listen to a lot of talk radio and so forth. There’s certain people that have certain interests in certain areas or what have you.

The Thompsons, who not only agree with Ms. Bains’s assessment of those involved in the boundary drawing process, seized on the opportunity to talk about many of the vested entities they believe influence such decisions. They name entities like big tobacco and the private industry who they believe “work in the shadows” and “grease” politicians’ pockets.

Of the private prison industry, Mr. Thompson shared,

[W]hen we talk about the prisons and when we talk about politicians, you know, everybody wants to call the person crazy when they talk about conspiracies until the conspiracy, in their mind, touches them. And you know, the prison owners are not going to get anything done unless they have a politician that’s going to try to push that agenda forward. You know[.] I was watching HBO years ago in the mid-90s when I first heard about them privatizing prisons. When I saw that, I said okay, we’re in trouble as black people, as black men, you know...[S]o when you look at a school board and... I’m just using [West Bay] as an example. But you can pretty much say most school boards throughout...California. Especially when I think the percentage of black people in the state of California is under 11 percent.

These examples illustrate how the media can also influence parents’ beliefs about school boundaries. Ms. Bains and Mr. Thompson cite two non-mainstream media sources for their ideas, talk radio and a documentary shown via cable television. This might suggest that some African American parents may rely on more than mainstream sources in forming their beliefs about not only school boundaries, but other major U.S. institutions. Note that these examples run contrary to the example provided above where Mrs. Phillips based her conclusions about school

quality on what she considers “factual information.” While some African American parents may rely on “facts” prepared by many different institutions, other rely more on underground sources. The more likely conclusion however, is that African American parents rely on multiple sources of information to arrive at their beliefs.

Aside from participants who believed that shady corporations were influencing elected officials’ decisions on how and where school boundaries were drawn, other parent participants saw white, more affluent residents as another major culprit influencing the process of how school boundaries are decided. Some parents believed that in order for school board members and other district officials to keep their elected positions, their decisions regarding school boundaries were influenced by their desire to please white, affluent constituents. Among this group of parents holding this view, a few believed that school officials and representatives ignored the needs of African American constituents simply because they could. However, others felt that it was not so black and white. They claimed that the reason that African American residents were less likely to have their voices heard is because African Americans were less likely to raise their voices.

Outside parent Ms. Bains argued that

If you’re in an [affluent] area, for example, within the [West Bay] Unified school district ...there’s more people in there that are more [apt] to call their council person or what have you...[whereas] if you’re in a neighborhood, let’s say for example, [a poor black neighborhood] and it happens, we’re going to look at the tree or the crack, [or] the dips in the road... a little bit longer. Nobody’s going to really call to say hey, this happened or I noticed this, what have you. So it’s no accountability there or so forth.

Inside parents Mrs. Coleman and Mr. Samuels attributed this to “the squeaky wheel” getting the grease. Mrs. Coleman said,

If people want change or they see things that are occurring that they’re not happy with, I think sometimes people who are more familiar with the process – [you know], The squeaky wheel gets the grease—they will push that process and try to make sure that their voices are heard. So they feel like they have a stake. And I think sometimes particularly

people of lower socioeconomic status or people who don't realize that they are part of the process – they just think – more passive. Like: “That just is. That's just the way it is.”

Mr. Samuels agreed, saying

I think that the system really reacts to the squeaky wheel... Oftentimes these hearings are on a X night, one time. People have to arrange for child care, get off work early or what have you, arrange dinner for their children. So if they miss that night, they are just out of luck for having their voice heard... I think it reflects the overall political process. So not necessarily the schools. But there are those who follow the political process, and they may not even have kids. But they may be property owners within a district. And they'll make sure that they go to that hearing and voice their opinion of why they don't want a school to be letting out at this time because it messes with their sleeping pattern or because it messes with the traffic pattern. So there are people that make sure that they get their voices heard. And so oftentimes a smaller group will dominate and get heard. And, by the same token, many, many, many individuals just are not involved, whose voices aren't heard, period. Because not necessarily those people are louder, but their voices weren't even heard because they weren't able to go to said meeting.

Despite the foregoing, however, both Mrs. Coleman and Mr. Samuels felt while more affluent parents were more likely to have their voices heard, in the end, they were not likely to get the school officials to side with their points of view. Due to the district's large size and heavily bureaucratic nature, in their opinion, it was unlikely that anyone was able to get their way with the board. Many of the other parent participants, including the Thompsons, for instance, would strongly disagree.

Here, we can see that parents are divided over whether blacks are getting the proverbial short end of the stick because of their lack of participation in the process or because politicians simply care little if at all for the needs of black residents. However, I found that regardless of the reasons behind decision-makers' actual decisions regarding school boundaries, the parents in this study believed that ultimately, the system leads to an outcome that disproportionately disadvantages African American residents. Viewing both the district and the school board as white entities, many parents see black parents and white parents with different interests and different levels of influence over their local school board members. (In subsequent sections of

these findings, we will see Latina/-o parents emerge as another distinct faction also with different interests and political influence.)

Publicly available information provided by the district on the boundary-drawing process reveals that depending on the impetus for drawing school boundaries (creating new boundaries for a new school or to change existing boundaries), multiple actors such as the superintendent, an in-house research team, other district staff, school principals, parents, and concerned members of the community, may all participate to some extent in the boundary-making decision process. Further, when drawing school boundaries, the district claims it takes into account factors such as school capacity, census data on student population, ethnic makeup, and distance. In the next section, I will discuss parents' perceptions of the impact of school boundaries.

Impact of School Boundaries on School Quality

In discussing any of the potential positives or upsides of school boundaries, parents mentioned positive effects such as preventing overcrowding and underenrollment, ensuring shorter travel distances to and from school, and fostering a sense of community and strong social ties. I found it a bit ironic that the parents who live in the Unity school attendance boundary but rejected Unity as their children's assigned school were the most vocal about community cohesion. In addition to being a source of community pride when the local school is high performing, Ms. Davis argued that when people attend the same elementary, middle, and high school together, they develop long term relationships that extend well into middle age and beyond. She used her parents as an example, saying, "[B]ased on my parents, that's the way it used to be." Mrs. Coleman added that by going to the same schools, children can have friends in the neighborhood to do homework and projects with.

While these parents' remarks about school boundaries encouraging friendship and community cohesion felt genuine, it appears that the positives of sending one's child to school in the community were not enough to get these parents to stay at their home school. For these inside parents as well as the rest of the parents in this study, the long term negative effects of school boundaries took precedence over the so-called positives. In discussing the ways in which school boundaries impact a child's future, many parents alluded to the oft-cited phrase that a student's zip code can determine their future. In addition to Mrs. Phillips's suggestion that where a child goes to schools sets the foundation for the rest of a his or her life, others thought that school boundaries impacted schools most by determining school composition and school funding.

School Composition

One of the aspects of about the way school boundaries functioned that parents found most troubling was the way it concentrates poor and minority children together in the same schools. First, parents cited the negative peer effects involved when poor children are concentrated in one school. They reasoned that children who lived in communities where few people encourage learning, have attended college or aspire to go to college, or engage in enriching activities outside school, were not likely to do well in life. According to outside parent Mrs. Polk,

[W]e associate with what's around us and what we [see] and if we constantly [see] that the children do not plan enough for their futures and...parents don't come and...take part...[they] don't really have a future [in] going to college. You know, they're looking to get a job and not really going to further their education.

Ms. Ferguson, another outside parent, social worker, and single mom to a third-grader attending Unity, struck a similar tone:

If you see kids hanging out, not going to class, the chances of *you* going to college are slim. That's why I don't want him at [Heritage middle], because I don't want him to see other students...going to school where they have dated books...If you have a child whose parents are at home forcing education, forcing education, forcing education, and the kid stays [in the community], not [being] affected by the other things in the community,

they're going to go to college. If you have a parent that's not stressing education, not stressing education, school's not stressing education, neighborhood is not stressing education, they're not going to go.

Additionally, inside parent Mrs. Coleman argued that in her assessment of schools with high concentrations of poor children, teachers tend to have lower expectations of these students since, as Mrs. Coleman assumes, so many of them are already behind academically. While it is unclear where parents received information that shaped their ideas about the impact of school boundaries on school composition and how that impacted children's future prospects, their reasoning appears to be derived from widespread narratives about urban education that may have become "common sense" among certain groups or subgroups over time.

School Resources

The second aspect of school boundaries' impact on schools was school funding. composition that made parents uneasy was minority children's lack of exposure to children from other races and socioeconomic backgrounds. In explaining why exposure was so important to her and her children's education, Ms. Davis explained,

[A]nother reason I didn't even think about [Unity Elementary] for my kids is because it's a pretty homogenous student population...; I believe in exposure and diversity. Exposure to other cultures, other income brackets, and academic-wise [more] curriculum offerings. Just as much of the world that can be taken in and given to them, whether it be field trips...to the museum [next to the local top-tier university], field trips— just having them live and experience while in school.

Outside parent Ms. Bains also talked about having to take her child out of the community to engage in extracurricular activities such as chess and Tae Kwon Do. These extracurricular activities, she believes, can open him up to a new world and make him a more competitive as a student.

While these parents appear to be raising some very legitimate points about the benefits of exposure, I noted that they seemed less concerned about their children benefitting from being

exposed to specific ethnic or cultural characteristics of their non-African American peers and more about how exposure increases access to more resources. Inside parents Ms. Davis and Ms.

Terry speak about this more explicitly here. According to Ms. Davis,

[I]t goes back to...resources. I mean, the boundaries – anything is possible no matter what boundaries you come from, but...it could be more challenging because you haven't had those resources; you haven't been exposed to this or that. So I don't think the boundaries are determinative of future success, but some boundaries might have a whole lot more exposure and opportunity to things that, in other boundaries, kids aren't seeing or getting.

Ms. Terry adds,

Again, what the school has to offer you allows you the opportunities. If they have a relationship with companies or they're fundraising, or, again, parent involvement: all of those things help shape a child's future...[I]f they don't have the finances for the best books, and field trips, and to meet other people, or to get gifts from companies, then they are missing out. A lot.

Ever since the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the desegregation efforts that followed, some black parents have been keen on the idea that one way to ensure that their children receive comparable education with white children is for them to go to school alongside white children. Since, predominantly white, middle-class to affluent schools tend to be better funded than predominantly minority schools (whether due to state/district funding formulas or parent groups' fundraising efforts) and more accountable to white students and their parents (Gordon & Nocon, 2008). As we will see in the next chapter, other factors such as fit, interest (i.e., schools with thematic programs), and convenience also shape parents' school choices. This section, however, focused on parents' ideas of how school boundaries can shape a child's future prospects. In following sections, I will discuss parents' perceptions of open boundary policies and their ideas for a more equitable school boundary policy.

In the next chapter, I will discuss in detail how the outside parents who deliberately chose Unity as their children's school did so fully aware of the fact that the student body is

predominantly black, that nearly all the staff, faculty, and administration were black, and that the school's curriculum celebrates African American culture and history—all while being high-performing. For them, *exposure* ranked very low, if at all, on their list of priorities. For most inside parents, however, exposure was highly valued.

Another plausible explanation, perhaps, for why some parents (i.e., inside parents) might be adamant about their kids receiving exposure is resources. Not taking into account issues like within-school segregation or the disproportionately harsher discipline experienced by black students, when African American students attend well-funded, predominantly white schools, they have better access to important resources.

School Boundaries' Impact Over Where a Child Goes to School

While discussing how determinative school boundaries were in where a child goes to school, the vast majority of responses were that “it depends.” Parents recognized that for families with little resources available to them, school boundaries were almost entirely determinative of where their children went to school. The reason: in order for anyone to take advantage of the other school options available within and outside the district, one must be equipped with knowledge, time, resources like reliable transportation, cultural capital and the wherewithal necessary to opt out of their child's home school and send their kids to other, perhaps even better, schools. While discussing this with outside parent Ms. Ferguson, this is how she responded,

Researcher: How much do you think school boundaries determine where a child goes to school?

Ms. Ferguson: Now if you don't have the money to send kids anywhere else, you have to go to that school, because you don't have the money. Or you don't know someone, you have to go to that school. If you are not knowing – I advocate for my child. A lot of poor income families don't know how to advocate. If I didn't advocate for my

child and just went with what they were trying to tell me, he would be at [his homeschool or a nearby poor performing school]. So a lot of poor parents do not know how to advocate. Or don't know where to start to advocate for their children.

There's large impact. Because you living in that area, you have to deal with transportation. They don't have the proper transportation, kids right there. I have to figure out how my kid's going to get to school every morning. Because he can just walk...and go there. I'm not going to let him, but he could. For [Unity], I have to drive him every day. And when he goes to junior high, I'm going to drive him every day. If he goes to [the home middle school], he could walk or catch the bus...So a lot of people that do not have the money to send their kids – they have to transport their kids to walk to the school that's closer to them. Location is also a factor in this, especially when people do not have money to send their kids anywhere else.

Inside parent Ms. Davis also talked about the importance of material resources. However, she also talked a lot about “savvy” and determination. While discussing how determinative school boundaries were of where a child goes to school, she said,

Oh, I think it varies. Because if you have people that aren't as resourceful, aren't as savvy, don't have as many connections or even the ability to do the research on their own or do the legwork, or just don't wanna put forth that effort, then, yeah, your kid is going based on your address to whatever school it is, whatever the home school is. For some people, it is determinative. Because it's not their priority or they don't have that ability or knowledge or resourcefulness or network to know that there are other options, there are ways that you can move around this attendance zone issue. Yeah. So some people just don't know.

Throughout the rest of my findings we will see more examples of the importance parents place on determination and priorities.

In the process of reviewing the district's website on school choice, I noticed that the district offered a wide-array of options for families who wished to opt out of the local school and send their children elsewhere. These options include intra-district permits, inter-district permits, open enrollment (where student can apply for a seat at a school that is under capacity), magnet programs, charter schools, and more. Another option available to parents was what the district

refers to as a “Romero Transfer.” In 2010, the California legislature adopted an open enrollment act, also known as the “Romero Bill” designed to give students in what were deemed to be failing schools the opportunity to transfer to a better performing school or district in the state as long as their homeschool was listed among the 1,000 failing schools designated by the state. Many of the elementary schools surrounding Unity Elementary school boundary are on the list, as well as both of High Schools Unity’s feeder middle school *Heritage* feeds into, *Destiny High* and *Legacy High* (Unity’s feeder middle school is not on the list). The state uses a complicated formula to determine which schools will be included in the list and each school that is listed must inform parents by letter that they have the option to transfer to a better performing school. These school choices combined amount to what I call the districts’ “open boundary” policy because students are able to either cross school boundaries (with the prior authorization of the district or school in question). Private schools on the other hand obviate school boundaries altogether by allowing parents to enroll their children in school without regard to the family’s residence.

Parents’ responses on how big of an impact these programs had on giving parents’ options varied ranged from minimal impact to significant. Many said that even though these options were definitely better than nothing, they were really only available to the ones who are educated and who have the necessary resources. Mr. Samuels remarked that because of the districts’ size as well as the amount paperwork and information one must consume in order to get through the process, the overwhelming amount of work that goes in to school choice can be a deterrent. Ms. Davis felt similarly,

Well, I think they help [but] I think they probably only help some people. Because, again, it’s just first having even the knowledge that those options are available. And then even once you have the knowledge of the options being available, [it’s] how to navigate that and educate yourself about that. So that’s why I would say helpful to some people. But helpful in general because I guess it’s better than not having any options and just being mandated to your attendance zone. So that’s a little something at least to have available

Ms. Terry came to this issue from a different perspective. Instead of commenting on how many people are actually helped by open boundary policies, her reasoning was based more on how impactful open boundary policies are on those who are helped by them. She says,

They have a huge impact. Again, from my personal experience: my brother lived in the [Legacy] area for high school and was permitted to [a well-known, high performing, affluent school district]. The stresses of the everyday school activity that might occur at [Legacy] didn't happen [affluent school district]. He was able to focus more on his education than what he was wearing and things like that...My kids: the two older ones were on the magnet program. I thought it was great. It gave 'em a good opportunity. They saw things – just getting on the bus and going past the beautiful houses – that they could envision things that some people have never seen before, so going out of our area was an experience it itself.

Irrespective of the benefits of open boundary policies, most of the parents believed that school boundaries have a powerful impact on where a child goes to school. As I will discuss further in the next chapter, parents believe that only the most determined parents and the parents with the necessary resources are able to prevent school boundaries from determining their children's futures. But even for well educated, well-resourced families, the process, they believe, is still a very daunting one. Inside parent Ms. Davis said,

Boundaries definitely matter. 'Cause you're on a hope and a prayer. 'Cause even if you get into a magnet school, it might not be the magnet school of your choice... So then it becomes a game of strategy: "I'm gonna select magnet schools that I know I'm unlikely or my kid is unlikely to get into just so I can get those points accumulated so that, down the line, I could put the magnet school I really want them to get into, and I have a better chance 'cause now I've accumulated two or three years' worth of waitlist points." So that kinda goes back to: helpful to some people. Because not only do you have to know about the option and research it, but then you have to know how to strategize to play the game ...so that's why it's definitely very taxing emotionally [*laughs*], time-wise.

Better Boundary Policy

While discussing better or more equitable boundary policies, parents gave a range of answers. It came as no surprise that most parents felt that eliminating school boundaries altogether would be the best solution. This goes back to parental sovereignty. Parents felt that

where their children went to school should be their prerogative. But how does eliminating school boundaries lead to more equitable outcomes with respect to school choice? Parents that believed that boundaries should be eliminated drew on free market principles of competition and choice arguing that once boundaries were eliminated, schools would be better because they would all have to compete for students. In an effort to keep funding and other resources, schools would have to improve their performance and their offerings to draw in more students and encourage existing students to stay. Others envisioned mass flight of families from poor to schools to middle-class/affluent schools. Even Ms. Bryant, a fifteen-year teaching veteran who has taught at Unity for twelve of those fifteen years agreed. However, some admitted that the consequences of such a scheme would be overcrowding at high-performing schools and underenrollment at poorly performing schools. For example, Mr. Armstrong reasoned “if there’s no boundaries, it’s like okay, what’s stopping me from going to [out west]? Nothing, so I believe the schools on the [out west] would be over populated and the schools on the east side would be drastically underpopulated.”

While one parent even envisioned increased school diversity since students of color would no longer be locked into their assigned school boundary, other parents had a more sobering view of what would happen if school boundaries were eliminated. They admitted that even if families had more school choice, only a few could actually take advantage of it because of issues like distance from home to the better schools and poor parents’ lack of transportation. One parent, Ms. Davis, was not so sure that school boundaries would change anything because she felt that if we eliminated geographical boundaries for schools, people would simply come up with other ways to segregate themselves. She said,

In a society where there were no school boundaries [short pause]—I mean, people are people. People are prejudiced. People are protective. Even myself. When you become a

parent, you become maybe a little more conservative in your views and desires. So even if there were no boundaries, I just think that the population, citizens would, in effect, have invisible boundaries or take measures and do things that would basically in essence create boundaries anyway.

Ms. Davis's observation touches on the idea of multiple types of boundaries and suggests how other types of boundaries may be just as constraining as those regulated by law. In Chapter 9, I discuss symbolic boundaries, boundary-crossing, and the reproduction of school boundaries.

Some parents categorically rejected the premise that school boundaries were the problem. According to this group of parents, it was the inequitable allocation of funding that was the problem. These parents argued that they would not mind if school boundaries were left intact, as long as all schools received equitable funding. Per Mr. Thompson, "Boundaries mean absolutely nothing if the quality of school is solid." His wife, Mrs. Thompson chimed in, "If each school was given the same budget...you can leave the boundaries in place. Funding is everything." Along the same line of thought, Ms. Ferguson said, "Keep the school lines, but put the same quality in all the schools."

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed parents' perceptions of the purpose of school boundaries, which entities or individuals determine school boundaries, the impact school boundaries have on school quality, and to what extent school boundaries determine where a child goes to school. On each of these topics, parents' responses varied. Overall, while some parents felt that race or racial bias definitely played a role in the way school boundaries functioned and/or were created, others simply did not buy in to this belief. Parents in the former category based their perceptions on various sources of information such as narratives and common sense notions of black marginalization, visual observations of poorly maintained facilities, and non-mainstream media sources that expose shady politics and hidden agendas in policymaking. By and large parents

agreed that school boundaries had a substantial impact on school funding and school composition, both of which greatly influenced school quality. Even parents who did not believe that school boundaries were racist by design, at least acknowledged the fact that school boundaries had a negative impact on schools in predominantly black communities by impacting the aforementioned indicators of school quality. In the next chapter, we will see how factors such as school quality and school composition, motivated parents to leave their assigned schools and cross school boundaries.

CHAPTER 7 Crossing the Line: “Yes We Can!”

“Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment.”

—Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

In this chapter, I address my second research question, *How do parents’ perceptions of school boundaries shape their decisions to cross them?* Here, I discuss parents’ school preferences, parents’ motivations for crossing school boundaries, the challenges that parents face in the process of crossing school boundaries, the types of resources parents rely on in their effort to cross school boundaries, and examples where parents found that crossing school boundaries failed to produce the kinds of outcomes they might have hoped for.

Parents’ School Preferences

Before I turn to parents’ motivations for crossing school boundaries, I must first discuss parents’ school preferences. Of the twelve families interviewed in this study, eight had their elementary aged children enrolled in public school (five enrolled in Unity Elementary’s gifted-magnet program and seven enrolled in Unity’s community school), while four opted out of Unity as their children’s homeschool, enrolling a total of four children a charter schools and one in a magnet school. Although many of the study participants reported household incomes between either at or above \$100,000 and some reported having neighbors who sent their children to private school, when it came to paying for school, many of the parents said they either could not afford it or they found the prospect of spending their disposable income on private school untenable.

Ms. Bains, whose son attends Unity, reasoned that since all elementary schools offer a basic education anyway, ultimately playing such a small role in determining whether her son will

be qualified for a career once he reaches adulthood, she would rather put any money that she would end up spending on private school away for college. Mrs. Coleman, whose daughter attends a high-performing charter conversion school, said that sending her daughter to private school never even entered her mind. She found the price tag of many of the independent schools prohibitive. Even among her social circle of mostly black, white-collar professionals who did send their kids to private school, their children either received scholarships to the big price tag schools or they sent their children to Catholic school, which was oftentimes far less expensive. She said, “We did go to some fair when [my daughter] was in kindergarten and it was like crazy amounts of money for these schools. And I was like: ‘this is crazy! \$25,000 for kindergarten? Are you kidding me?’”

For a moment, single mom Ms. Ferguson considered sending her son to a private school. However, due to his disability (he has ADHD and requires an IEP), she worried that finding a school to educate her son as well as accommodate his special needs would cost an arm and a leg. Besides, she reasoned, why should she as a taxpayer, pay all that money for private school when public schools are required to accommodate student with special needs? At one point, single mom Ms. Davis did send her older son to a private Christian school. But like Ms. Ferguson, when the school was no longer able to meet her eldest child’s needs she turned to a charter schools for both of her boys. Based on the foregoing, we can see that parents rejected private schools for various reasons—money being the biggest.

Among the other school choices available to parents, magnets were the most preferable. According to Mrs. Thompson, she prefers magnets because they feel like private schools without the tuition (referring to the academic rigor of most magnet programs). Mr. Ruben, a district official who has been a teacher and school administrator in the district for several years but now

serves as a district coordinator overseeing a variety of issues in the district, including school boundary issues, believes that magnets are the most popular school choice because it is one of the district's longest running programs in the district. Intra- and inter-district permits were not as popular, he said, because very few parents understand the process or know that the option even exists.

Ms. Quincy, Unity's parent community liaison who attended Unity as child, sent her two adult daughters to Unity, and has worked at Unity for the past ten years in multiple capacities, explained that while it was true that parents preferred magnets over other types of schools, certain magnet schools are preferred over others. She said,

The public school is first through the magnet...Coming from here, [parents] are looking at the schools that are high-performing where our kids are going to fit in...All of those happen to be schools that are ... [located] west... First...[parents] would prefer to do that if they can get into those schools. And then they will look at charter. Then many parents—private school is a very small number where parents even think that's an option.

Ms. Quincy reported that black upwardly mobile and middle-class families in the community sought out magnet schools, but mostly those located further west. As their children matriculate through school moving from elementary school, middle school, and finally high school, the stakes become higher and higher. Below, Ms. Quincy explains why. When I asked what was it about school out west that made so many parents in the area want to send their children there.

She said,

Ms. Quincy: For [parents], it's knowing that academically, I don't have to worry about anything and then knowing [that] socially, my kids are going to fit in. They're going to be able to go and do what they need to do and not get bogged down with anything criminal.

Researcher: Did you say criminal?

Ms. Quincy: Absolutely criminal.

Ms. Quincy's reflection on parents' school preferences illustrates another piece of common sense knowledge shared by middle class African Americans.

In many urban centers, residential patterns are such that middle class African Americans often find themselves straddling two worlds: socially and geographically. Geographically, they often find themselves positioned in between middle class and affluent whites in one direction, and poor to working class blacks in the opposite direction. School boundaries are often drawn in a manner where middle class African Americans are zoned for the same schools as their less advantaged peers. Despite their middle-class status, race prevails and they feel locked into poor schools. However, because of their socioeconomic status, these parents are able to leverage their class privilege and escape poor performing schools. Many seek out schools in the opposite direction citing concerns over school quality, safety, and children who may have a bad influence on their children. The same goes for charter schools. Many of the better ones, I was told, are located out west.

Unity's principal, teachers, and other community members including Mr. Murphy, principal of Unity's feeder high school Legacy agree: while these parents' concerns may be slightly overblown, many feel certain that sending their children to school out west will greatly enhance their life chances. It was not clear why charter schools came next on the list of parents' school preferences

Motivation for Crossing

Parents' motivation for crossing school boundaries fell into two main categories: search for what they perceive to be better quality and parents' fear that their children are being neglected in schools where black children are outnumbered by (mostly poor) Latino students. In anticipation for middle and high school, parents also expressed their concerns over various issues

concerning school quality, school safety, and peer pressure, and their intention to cross school boundaries at the secondary school level.

Latino students

Often, issues concerning race and school inequality are seen as a black-white issue. In more diverse school districts, however, this black-white binary is challenged by the presence of a large number of other ethnic minorities. Here, aside from the two parent-participants who lived within Unity's attendance boundary and chose Unity because they were satisfied with Unity as their homeschool, among the parent-participants who lived outside Unity's attendance boundary and chose Unity over their homeschool, four out of six transferred from schools where Latino students outnumbered African-American children. (To be fair, these schools also had standardized test scores which were oftentimes far exceeded by Unity's standardized test scores.)

Mrs. Bennett, a mother to five children, two of whom were attending Unity at the time of the study, turned away from her son's homeschool because she was not satisfied with the school's test scores, overcrowding, and what she called the lack of physical upkeep of the campus. Of the social environment at the school she said, "[I]t didn't feel comfortable. The environment didn't feel comfortable for my children and it didn't feel safe for my children." This mostly subtle comment about being "uncomfortable" can be better understood when placed into context. According to 2014-2015 CDE data, Latino students significantly outnumbered African American students at the school. Among the school's total student population, 86% were Latino/-a, 14% were Black, and 94% of students were on Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL).

A few of the other outside parents whose homeschools were also such that Latino/-a students outnumber black students similarly expressed their dissatisfaction with their homeschools. ELL students represented from as low as 29% to over 50% of the student

population in these schools. The three remaining parents in this group felt that non-native speakers sapped schools of their resources and worried that their children's needs would be neglected as a result. More broadly, they felt that both schools and the district catered to this population's needs. Ms. Bain's son is assigned to a school immediately east of Unity. The school's population is almost 50/50 Black and Latino (with 80% of students on FRPL). On standardized tests, only 11% of students scored at above grade level in English and math, compared to 43% of Unity students who scored at or above grade level in English and 28% who scored at or above grade level in math. She said,

I noticed Latinos are—just speaking with a lot of families out there: they want their kids to do well, but yet they want to hold on to their culture...In these schools, I noticed that they have a lot of programs and resources that sort of cater to this population. And the black community, my own theory is that we all are English learners. Our children didn't pop out speaking English, so it's like a lot of – when I see that like oh, they got resources in order to keep that. It's like making – ...I see them making the children more competitive with our kids. Because they're learning a dual language, because they have their home language and then they have the language of the school and then they're beyond supported in that. But then our children that attend those schools end up slacking off, because they're being held back, because at home, they're speaking, you know, an English language [AAVE], but they might not need the reinforcement at school to speak English or so forth.

Unity parent Mrs. Thompson shared a similar perspective:

Mrs. Thompson: [W]hen you have a public school where 80 percent or 90 percent of the students at that school are ESL learners... How much focus is that teacher going to give your child who's a native English speaker? I know that my child is going to be sitting there waiting for some instruction while the teacher has to take time to explain to that ESL learner what – over and over again, because they don't understand English or the parent doesn't speak English at home.

Researcher: Do you think if your home school were more black your kids would probably be there?

Mrs. Thompson: Not necessarily. I think that if my home school was more of an English language school ... I would be more confident that my child would get a quality education. Because from the perspective of the child, if [she's] just sitting here waiting for the teacher to

give [her] another instruction, because she has to focus more time on the child who can't speak English, then [she's] going to look for something else to do and then it's going to be "your child doesn't sit down in class...I'm trying to help another child...your child...can't sit still." And then [they're] going to try to convince me that my child needs an IEP when really what's needed is you need to move these Mexicans to their own classroom and teach the English language kids in one class, and teach the ESL students in another class—because they're really the disruption.

To make matters even worse, these parents expressed their belief that Latino families "stick together," so much so that despite being broadly viewed as politically marginalized group, having power in numbers allows them to exert a certain amount of power over school administrators and district administrators.

Ms. Salinas, who works in the permits and transfers division of the district, confirmed that in her time in this position (just two years), parents have come into district offices complaints about the number of ELL students in the district.

School quality

The other major factor motivating parents to leave their homeschools was parents' search for better quality schooling. With respect to each of the schools that the outside parents left to come to Unity, none had standardized test scores exceeding Unity's. Unity's unique combination of a predominantly black faculty and student body and high academic performance was a significant pull factor for several of the parents who chose Unity. Parents praised the curriculum, teachers, principal, and overall environment. The Thompsons are well-known and well-respected at Unity. They are also outspoken advocates of the school, highly involved, and can be seen on campus quite often. Mr. Thompson is regarded as a mathematic genius and owns his own mathematics tutoring business contracting his services out to several school districts in the region. He said,

You have to protect the schools that are high performing (when you look at the API), that are predominantly black, with a staff that's predominantly black. I don't know where I've seen that. I don't know where there is anything like that that's comparable. [W]e moved heaven and earth to get our kids in there.

For outside parents like the Thompsons, school quality is about more than academics. It is about giving their children a great cultural foundation that celebrates African American culture, acknowledges racism and inequality, and fosters a positive self-esteem. It is also about teachers who serve as excellent role models for their children and strong parental involvement.

Both of the 5th grade teachers at Unity who participated in this study happily embraced their position as role models. Mrs. Elliot, one of the most decorated teachers in not just the school but the district, said, "Well this is my personal belief but...you have to teach your own. To me, you have a connection culturally with [the students] so you know what they need and you know how to diffuse the 'outside stuff.'" During the numerous instances when I have visited the Unity Elementary campus, I have witnessed both teachers sporting beautiful braids, smiling, and giving students hugs. These teachers were described as both kind and caring and they were trusted because they a solid grasp over who their students are, where their students come from, and what these students need. Strong parental involvement was also a draw, one parent saying, "Aspects of quality?..[P]arents volunteering their time to come for campus beautification, making sure [that] ...where their kids are spending most of their day is a nice, comfortable environment, whether it be by planting or cleaning up, you know, planting more trees or gardening." These descriptions about teaching staff and parental involvement will come up again in a subsequent section and chapter.

Some parents chose Unity because they recall being bused out of the community to predominantly white schools during integration back in the 70's and 80's and reported hating the experience. Other parents placed a great deal of confidence in Unity because the school has

become part of their family's legacy and they know firsthand how much of an asset the school is to the community. Ms. Lee, is a parent of two children attending Unity who lives so close to the school that it took her less than ten minutes to walk to the school for our interview. She said, "I went to this school. My sisters, my brothers. I have had cousins that lived [far north and far east], but sent their kids to live with my mother for [their] school years so that they could go to this school." Parents' negative and positive firsthand experience attending school seems to have positively shaped their decision to send their children to Unity.

Early on in this study, I learned that Despite Unity's many great qualities and positive reputation in the community, Unity Elementary was rejected by many of the locals (i.e., those who live in the Unity's attendance boundary and are thus assigned to the school). While out in the field, I would have casual conversations with parents and other members of the school community asking why they thought parents who lived in the area rejected the school. Many in the community, including school personnel, said that parents who rejected the school and opted to send their children to private, charter, and public schools out west, did so because "they think they're better." In fact, I was told by several people that it was almost unheard of for the middle-class and affluent parents in the community to send their children to the home school. This knowledge, which appears to be widespread in this area based on the research I have done about the community has been a little difficult to make sense of. Teachers and parents who live in Unity but decided to send their children to school elsewhere may provide some insight into this phenomenon.

Befuddled by the fact that so many parents living in other parts of the district are desperate to get their kids into Unity, but the parents who live in the area widely reject the school, teacher Ms. Bryant said, "[T]he flipside to the whole thing is the people that live this

community, [here] where I was raised...don't send their kids even here.” However, as a teacher and community member who has a strong affinity towards all things black, she assures me that this is hardly the case for all parents in the area. “[T]here’s a group, a core group of parents that are adamant about keeping their children in the community. They were raised here, they’re college educated [with] advanced degrees. [So do] their husbands [and] their parents. They’re adamant. It’s always a core group.”

Mrs. Coleman come at the issue from a different perspective. She was born and raised in one of the tougher parts of town, southeast of Unity. As a child, she never attended her assigned school. She will tell you that today, she would not even know where her assigned schools growing up are even located or what they look like. Her mother was a teacher who sent her to parochial school first, then bused her to a school up north, and then a magnet school before the family moved up north, where she attended a predominantly white public school. She later went off and got her bachelor’s degree at a highly competitive, private university in California. She later received an advanced degree in nursing. She along with her husband (who grew up in Unity and attended Unity elementary as a child) have lived in Unity for the past thirteen years and they send their nine-year old to a predominantly white school (white = 80%; black = 4%; Latino = 8%) located northwest of Unity where the students outperformed the students at Unity on standardized tests (73% of the students there performed at or above grade level on English, compared to 43% of students at Unity; and in math, 71% of the students performed at or above grade level compared to 28% of students at Unity). She said she does not know anyone who sends their kids to their local school—only charters and privates.

When asked if she thought this trend among the people she knows was a “status thing,” she said no, it was about fit, resources, smaller class sizes, and academic rigor. She then admitted

that status might play a minor role, given that it was simply understood that people like her do not send their children to the local school, but it was still mostly about quality. Later relayed a short anecdote about a conversation she had with her hair stylist, who also lives in the area. Even though she did not send her children to the local school, like Mrs. Coleman, the woman tried to supplement her daughter's education at a predominantly white school by putting her in activities in the community. One day, her daughter came home from a summer camp she attended with mostly black children in the area (including those from the "other side of the tracks") and referred to her doll as a "baby mama." The mother was so shocked by this she decided that she would not be sending her daughter back to that camp.

Abandoning any pretense, Mrs. Coleman finally admitted that the fact that the school accommodated so many students coming from the other side of the tracks, in this case, the other side of Sherman Boulevard, factored into why so many parents in the community reject the school. She believed that parents in the area did not want their children mixing with children from neighboring, lower income communities. None of the remaining outside parents were as forthcoming, but with the exception of Mr. Samuels, their reasons for choosing schools other than Unity were less about academic concerns and more about the schooling environment.

In the case of Ms. Davis and Ms. Terry, Unity academically outperformed the schools they wound up sending their children to, but the scores were far more comparable than the ones for the parents who left their homeschools to come to Unity. The schools Ms. Davis and Ms. Terry chose, were both whiter than Unity (16% and 18% white, compared to Unity which was less than 2% white) and had more Latino students than Unity (35% and 46% compared to 20% at Unity). Ms. Davis, the social worker, admitted that while her children's school may not be better performing than Unity in terms of academics, she was more concerned with ethics, character

building, and her children's socioemotional development, which she feels can be better fostered in what she perceives to be a more nurturing setting. She explained, "[F]or me, it's about becoming a good person, having good ethics, strong character. And as long as you don't have any learning disability or whatever, the academics come...I need a good, healthy child, and then they can learn and excel." To be fair, Ms. Davis also expressed her disdain for public schools, especially those in West Bay.

Ms. Terry came at the issue from a different angle. She had previously sent her child to Unity for a short time but unenrolled him when she witnessed multiple instances of what she called "degrading behavior" by Unity school personnel. She acknowledged that it occurred prior to the current principal's tenure and said that such behavior was likely due to a top-down management style by the later ousted principal. Afterwards she said that she wanted her son in an environment where the staff "have a sense of allowing the kids to express themselves a little bit. I think it's really important [for children] to know that just because you're eight doesn't mean that you don't have any sense. And a later conversation about teachers, she implied that she felt that teachers in more diverse or predominantly white schools are more nurturing while she perceived teachers in black schools are more harsh.

For Mr. Samuels, his motivation for leaving Unity it was almost entirely about quality. He was quite transparent about the fact that his search for the best school out there was to large degree, ego-driven, but also rooted in wanting the best for his children. One of his primary reasons for moving to Unity was because of the school. He said that prior to buying his home, he saw that the school scored a 7/10 on the website GreatSchools.com. Nonetheless, as a member of what he called the "aspirational class," he continued to search for better, based on API scores and school rankings. He insisted that he did not see Unity as a bad school at all, in fact, if worse

came to worst and he could not get the school of his choice, he would happily fall back on the home school and send his children there. However, as a parent, he just wants “the best of the best of the best.” You can’t argue with a ten, he reasoned. Another thing he was concerned about was school composition. Because his children are biracial, he definitely did not mind sending them to a school with a strong black presence. However, he wondered why in this day and age, the school was “*so black?*” He said he did not want them to be singled out in one way or another. In the end, the school he chose for his daughter who was to be entering kindergarten that fall wound up being both diverse and high-performing. The student population was 38% white, 26% Asian, 15% Latino, and 13% black. On standardized tests, 75% of the students performed at or above grade level (compared to 43% of Unity students) and 78% performed at or above grade level in math (compared to 28% of Unity students).

The parents in the study who both chose and rejected Unity as their child’s school relied on various types of knowledge and information to arrive at their decisions. Some used first-hand knowledge based on their current experience and personal recollection. Others relied on assumptions and biases they held about predominantly black schools and people living in low-income communities. Some simply decided based on their personal needs and preferences. In the next section I discuss parents’ perceptions of the local feeder middle and high school and demonstrate how for the local middle and high school information gathered through word of mouth was the most instrumental in shaping parents’ decisions to cross school boundaries.

Local Feeder Schools

Heritage Middle. At Unity, teachers, staff and administration interface with parents quite a bit when parents are thinking about their next steps. According to these school personnel, when it comes to middle school, parents become extremely anxious because aside from wanting to

their children to continue their strong academic performance, middle school is the time when a myriad of social problems emerge. Principal Mrs. Walker said that the social dynamics of middle school were a strong concern for parents and that parents also worried about middle school because they wanted their children to be on a good path to high school and college. Ms. Quincy said another reason parents were concerned about middle school was because “when you’re here and you work so hard with your kids to make sure they’re doing well, and then to watch them lose it—it doesn’t work.”

Community school teacher Ms. Bryant said parents seek her advice often and that to avoid some of the scarier aspects of middle school, many parents look for middle schools heading west. She said:

[S]ometimes I take it personal but I think what they're saying is they don't want to be around a bunch of drama with the students acting out, smoking, drinking, talking inappropriate to each other, inappropriate to the [teacher] disrupting instruction and any of that. They're constantly concerned about that. From the beginning of the school year in fifth [grade], all the way...until the end.

As a big advocate for black schools, she often tries to inform parents’ that their feeder middle school Heritage is also a high ability gifted-magnet with great students and a caring teaching staff. However, Heritage’s reputation in the community is so bad that few parents whose children attend Unity are willing to give Heritage try.

The general consensus among parents in this study was that there was no way under the sun that they would send their children to Heritage or the other middle schools in the community with similar reputations. Even among parents who were adamant about sending their children to a predominantly black elementary school, there was absolutely no way that they would allow their children to go to middle school in the community. In fact, this is what made parents cherish Unity even more. Some parents shared that since there were no middle schools in the district or

even the region where their children could receive a Unity style education (all black and high performing), it was important for their children to receive a strong foundation at Unity since they will never get an experience like that again. In order for their children to have the high self-esteem and ability to cope with the inevitable number of negative experiences associated with going to a non-black school, Unity is the best place to prepare them. Interestingly, when I informed parents that Heritage had a high-ability magnet, hardly any of them were aware of this fact.

By and large parents' feelings toward Heritage were based on the school's poor reputation and word of mouth. For some parents, however, feelings about Heritage were based on their experiences with their older children or older siblings. Outside parent Mrs. Polk has been a Unity parent for thirteen years. She has one child currently in the gifted-magnet and an adult daughter who attended Unity for elementary school. Several years ago, she sent her oldest to Unity and after her experience with her child, she talks about her decision as if it were one of her most regrettable. Several times during our interview she talked about having "lost" her older child to Heritage. While she assured me that her child is not dead, it was apparent that she had fallen into the wrong crowd there, which ultimately ending up derailing her future.

Another parent Ms. Davis also talked about how her three older siblings attending Heritage shaped her feelings about the school. And while she did not say so explicitly, from the way she spoke about how this experience precipitated her mother's decision to send her to an all-girls Catholic school for middle and high school and then on to college and postgraduate studies, I was left with the feeling that her older siblings wound up not amounting to much. It was another experience, however, that wound up being the nail in the coffin. In college, she worked for a literacy program, which was only operated in juvenile halls in the region. The only place

that hosted the program and wasn't a juvenile hall was Heritage Middle. The impression it left on her was that "basically [Heritage] is just a juvenile hall." She added that Both Heritage and the feeder high school Legacy were surrounded by areas known for gangs and gang activity. She said that if for whatever reason she was forced to send her children to either Heritage or Legacy, it would amount to signing her children up to "become a criminal or a high school dropout."

This harks back to Ms. Quincy's earlier comment about parents having concerns about the local middle and high school. According to Ms. Salinas, the district's permit coordinator, and Mr. Khalil, the other district coordinator, when both white and Latino parents request permits to leave the district or go to school in another part of the district, they cite safety concerns such as bullying. Often, however, the district finds that these claims have no merit and denies the permit. It is more than likely that stories like these are so vivid and so resonant that they leave a lasting impression on whoever hears them. Soon, these stories get repeated over and over and these schools earn bad reputations. This is not to say that parents' concerns are without merit, it is simply to acknowledge how bad news travels fast, but good news (i.e., Heritage's high ability program) not so much.

Legacy High. In the community, as well as among the Unity parents, teachers, school staff, and district staff interviewed in this study, Legacy High's reputation is just as bad if not worse than Heritage Middle's reputation. To make matters worse, Legacy, as well as its rival high school Destiny High, is included on the Romero list of the 1,000 failing schools. That means that in addition to citing the school's reputation for why they do not want to send their children there, by including the school on the list of the states 1,000 failing schools, the state has effectively formalized the school's poor reputation. Which begs the question: what role does the state play in shaping parents' perception of schools, and therefore parents' decision to cross to

school boundaries? Furthermore, what does the school's inclusion on the list of failing schools say about the students assigned to the school and take pride in attending the school? Although state's intention in compiling the list was obviously to allow parents to make informed decisions, such a policy could have negative consequences. Or is it possible that the school's reputation is so bad that regardless of the school's designation as failing or not, parents would reject the school?

While out in the field asking for permission to distribute my recruitment fliers, I struck up a conversation with an employee at the local library who asked me what my study was about. At some point during the short conversation, she remarked that parents of students who still went to Legacy did not care about them. Ms. Davis echoed a similar refrain, saying Legacy was for students whose parents did not know better. One of the district coordinators participating in this study said that among many of the boundary issues that he handles, parents wanting to transfer their children from Legacy to the high school located in the attendance boundary adjacent to it was the most common. Because of parents' negative perceptions about Legacy, he said, many come to him with different excuses for wanting to move to the other school—many “claiming safety and protection. Since many make this claim without proof or documentation, the request is often denied.

Though thoroughly aware of the school's reputation in the community, Legacy's principal, Mr. Murphy was nevertheless very disappointed about in how people in the community saw the school. Mr. Murphy is African American in his forties and a California native. During our interview, he was naturally defensive about the school and felt that it had gotten a bad rap. He said that many of the parents who held negative perceptions about the school, those perceptions were largely based on the school's reputation rather than fact. Of the

parents requesting approval to be released from the school in order to transfer to another high school, he estimates that 90% of them are those matriculating from the 8th to the 9th grade, meaning that many of them had never even stepped foot inside the school before making the determination that they did not want their children attending the school. He also noted that among the parents requesting transfers, the vast majority were Latino while the rest were African American.

During a candid moment in the interview, he claimed that Latino parents' motivation for leaving the school was their aversion to blacks and a perception of blacks as violent. Of the African American parents who reject the school, he believed that while some felt that they were really doing the best for their children, some were just elitist. Of Unity parents specifically, he noted that few if any attended Legacy. Most Unity parents, he said, either go to private school or an affluent school district west of Unity. Mr. Murphy admitted that in the 80s, the school did have a gang problem but that gang violence at Legacy was a bygone era. He credited movies about white female teachers coming to rescue and then inspire black and Latino students (sometime gang-affiliated) in high schools located in difficult parts of town. However, he assured me his school was safe, even showing me the clean walls and empty hallways on the school's surveillance system.

During the 2014-2015 school year, 74% of Legacy students performed below grade level in English and 95% performed below grade level in math. Between the 1995-1996 and 2015-2016 school years, the student population went from 74% to 52% black and 24% to 45% Latino. Mr. Murphy estimates that each year, he loses around 400 students to magnets, charters, and other public schools. He noted that although the school has a capacity to serve around 2,400 students, it currently serves 1,100. This amounts to a loss of 1,300 students. However, he assured

me that it's not just Legacy experiencing these shortages, other high schools in West Bay, particularly predominantly black high schools, are also operating at half capacity. He also echoed other parents' belief that the district caters to Latino students and that because of power in numbers, Latino parents are more empowered than their African American counterparts.

Boundary-Crossing

In the previous chapter, I discussed parents' perceptions of school boundaries and the impact they have on African American children's chances for upward social mobility. Parents described a system of actors reflecting the power structure in this country and policies designed to ensure the marginalization of African American children, limiting their access to quality education. However, as parents alluded to earlier, school boundaries are neither permanent nor fixed. In fact, several opportunities exist for those who reject school boundaries and refuse to be limited by them. It is this contested nature of school boundaries that is discussed in this section. Although school boundaries can be circumvented through various methods, parents must still contend with challenges these barriers pose. It is precisely during this stage of the process that power imbalances are exposed and themes like surveillance and control become even more pronounced. This section also demonstrates that once parents successfully overcome these challenges, school boundaries can also be seen as not just an institutional barrier but an apparatus for spatial and social mobility.

In this study, parents felt the burden and the gravity of school boundaries most in the process of trying to cross them. Rarely had the matter of school boundaries crossed their minds as they were going about their daily lives. When they thought about inequities in education or the lack of quality schools available to them, their concerns are specifically targeted, focusing on issues like school funding and the inequitable distribution of resources. Many admitted that prior

to this study, the role that school boundaries play in education inequality had hardly occurred to them. In this way, we can see that like many of the invisible institutional structures exerting control over our daily lives, school boundaries were largely invisible. Even when parents engaged in the act of boundary-crossing, they were really engaging in a sequence of decisions and actions aimed at achieving a single goal: putting their children in the school of their choice. Only a few participants in this study acknowledged that if African American parents stayed in their homeschools and worked on making them better, they could make a significant contribution to the community. But as Ms. Davis pointed out, no one is willing to sacrifice their child's education in the process.

Obstacles: Overwhelmed but Undeterred

While some of the parents in this study believed that the school district and/or school board were responsible for enforcing boundaries, most believed that the decision over who got to come in and who had to stay out was up to each individual school. In other words, a school's administration and staff held the most power in enforcing school boundaries. Some mentioned the transfer permit appeals process where parents could appeal a school's decision to the district if they were not pleased. District coordinators Mr. Ruben and Mr. Khalil are some of the district personnel who intervened when issues like this arose. Unity's principal and lead office clerk acknowledged that schools had a great deal of discretion over which students were allowed in their schools and admitted that sometimes schools may abuse their power.

During the boundary crossing process, some of the challenges that parents, teachers, and administrators said that parents experienced the most were securing a release from the home school, sitting on waiting lists, gathering the necessary documentation, meeting deadlines, filling out lengthy or complicated paperwork, navigating the online application process, securing a seat

at schools claiming to be overcapacity, dealing with the uncertainty that comes with lotteries, having to sift through too much information from the district, not getting their first choice, and overall, not having enough options. Many reported that the process was very frustrating and such a hassle that they lost sleep over it. Other parents described the process as stressful and emotionally draining. When two parents were asked why not just move to the districts or areas where they wanted their children to go to school, before I could even finish the sentence they each said “can’t afford it.”

Parent efficacy. Despite the numerous complaints parents had about going through the process of boundary-crossing, many credited their education and access to resources for their success. They said that knowledge and social networks were key in navigating the unnecessarily burdensome process. Many claimed that other characteristics such as knowledge, persistence, and family background were also important in being able to cross school boundaries. Some talked about mothers who were teachers and strongly pushed education in the home or simply growing up in households where education was a priority. While discussing what family characteristics prepared to navigate the school process for her own children, Ms. Davis said,

Well, I think it started definitely with my mom as a child. Because, like I said, I went to [Unity] through 5th grade and then she put me—from 6th through 12th – [in] Catholic school. And she’s a smart, resourceful lady. Not college-educated, but homeowner here in [Unity] zip code. I think she had the benefit – her career was legal secretary in... [an] international law firm. So she did have basically social capital and resources with the very well-to-do attorneys that she worked with. And people to reach out to... So I think that her exposing me to those possibilities in my middle school and high school applications and sending me to the schools that I was sent to increased my network and my social capital. And just my knowledge that there are these kinds of schools out here, and other schools. And that there’s choice. So yeah. I would say that’s where kind of my first introduction to educational options came from: her putting me through that for my middle school and high school.

Here we can see the inclination for African American parents dissatisfied with the schools in their neighborhood to go outside their school boundaries get passed on from one generation to

the next. From their own parents, they learn to navigate the system in order to overcome the barriers to upward social mobility. Even though Ms. Davis cited her MSW for helping her acquire the tools and resources needed to navigate the process, she noted that even though her mother was not college-educated, she was determined to make sure her daughter was.

Similarly, for some of the other parents in the study, being able to cross school boundaries was less about educational background and more about sacrifice and determination. While many parents acknowledged that having access to resources made the process a little easier, others felt that if a parent was disciplined and determined enough, they could get the job done. Mr. Armstrong said, “Not a lot of people stand up or try to say no, I don’t want to go to school here, I want to go to school where I feel my child would have a better chance of succeeding...a lot of parents would basically accept the decision that has already been made for them.” Another parent, Ms. Terry added that “Education is important. I don’t know that I ever considered any boundaries that were presented to me as a deterrent. It may have been a challenge, but not a deterrent...I don’t ever recall just saying, ‘All right. Well, this is what’s handed to me so I have to take it.’” Mr. Thompson was even more passionate about the issue. He said,

[I]f there was a wall, I’m going to kick it down, she’s [Mrs. Thompson] going to kick it down, we’re going through it. But you have most parents that might, you know, [gesturing drug use-sniffing] or drink a little bit. They ain’t got that fight. “Aww man, they said no, I’m done with that.” You understand what I’m saying? School boundaries are what keeps people from keeping their kids from going to the schools that they should go to, because not every parent is going to be like “You know what? I’m gonna do this and that.” And then there’s another thing: we’re trained. When a white person tells us that you can’t do that, we don’t do that. Let’s just be real about it. We’re trained in the sense that [when they say] “Nigga, I said no,” ... we’re going to be like “The dude said no.”

Like Mr. Thompson, many parents felt that this is what separated them from their less privileged counterparts. When it came to their children’s education, they simply refused to accept “no” for

an answer. They felt that for many poor parents, whether by fault or circumstance, their children's education was just not enough of a priority.

I found these responses be slightly baffling. While discussing school boundaries in the more abstract sense, parents were certain that school boundaries were real phenomenon having a significant and material impact on poor communities and communities of color. However, when the conversation turned the real, day-to-day implications of school boundaries, poor minority parents essentially have no excuse for not ensuring that their children receive the best quality education. In the next chapter, I will discuss what I believe to be the relationship between boundary-crossing status positioning. Could boundary-crossing be a tool for asserting one's middle-class identity?

Another problem with the logic that only the only parents who cross school boundaries are caring and determined is assumption that parents who send their children to their local schools are not satisfied with these schools. A parent can be caring, and determined and choose to send their child to their assigned school. Parents who have taken the opposite position fail to consider the various reasons why low-income parents might prefer their homeschool. It may be because it's closer to home or work. Or because parents might be more comfortable with the school's faculty and staff. Whatever the reason, judging other parents' school choices as "good" or "bad" has the potential to further marginalize already marginalized groups and subgroups.

Racial bias. Another challenge middle class African American families face in attempting to cross boundaries is racial bias. Similar to some parents' position in the previous chapter that race has nothing to the way school boundaries are drawn, some of the parents in this study rejected the idea that race plays a role in the way school boundaries are enforced. Ms. Terry, a parent-participant who throughout the course of this study emerged as the one who was

the least inclined to attribute almost any of the problems African American parents face to race, shared,

[O]ne of my best friends that I went to high school with lives [further north], and she had a lot of trouble with her school. And she's white. Jewish. And she had a lot of trouble with schools and her kids. She had three kids. So sometimes I think we put it on race. A lotta times people are just jerks You know what I mean? A lotta times they'll treat everybody the same, and they're just not nice. Sometimes they're not racist; they're just jerks. So we have to learn, even in jobs, how to decipher that: "You know what? This person just doesn't like anyone. Across the board."

A couple more parents, and even school and district personnel, also appeared not so willing to classify race as the, or a reason for why a parent might have a hard time during the boundary-crossing process. Some people felt like school and/or district staff that parents often interface with, were simply doing their jobs. While elsewhere in our interview the parent-community liaison said she believed race played a role in whether some schools decide to accept or deny students requesting permit transfers. Later in the interview, however, she said that race *could* be a factor and that it just really depends "on who the person is that's in front of you, really. It's about the interaction."

Mr. Ruben, the lead district coordinator said that he did not feel that school principals used race as a basis for accepting or denying a student's request to transfer. He said that most principals he knew in the district were willing to give students requesting transfers a chance. In his opinion, the whole thing was more of a numbers game than anything else. According to Mr. Murphy, schools (at the high school level at least) welcome students with open arms because of the funding that comes along with these students. He shared that after the deadline for norming (the day after which schools' funding is set for the rest of the school year), at the slightest hint of trouble, the principals who previously welcomed minority students with open arms were more

than happy to send these students back to their home school. In the business of education, apparently, money trumps race.

Regardless of what anyone had to say about the matter, most of the other parents in this study were convinced that race definitely plays a role—whether through the permit process, magnet application process, or lotteries. Mrs. Bennett said,

I think [African Americans] have more obstacles to go through...I think it's more questionable when it comes to black families whether or not a school wants them there or not if it's not their own boundary...White families, they probably can go anywhere they want. [If] Black families try to go to a school that the majority is white, they're going to question that, like, do we really want them there? We don't know what kind of people these are, but if it was just another white family or maybe an Asian family, it wouldn't be any question. Latino and black, it might be like I don't know, "let me check them out, see what kind of family they have."

Mr. Armstrong shared similar feelings. He said,

I think it's harder for African Americans to cross school boundaries...because quite honestly, I feel we're not wanted in other...schools. I feel we're not wanted over there, so I feel that [the registration process] is made difficult to try and discourage us from exercising our right as a parent...[T]he district does give every parent a right to choose what school they want to go to. And I feel that some schools, even though that policy is in place, regardless, automatically, you know, they're looking at us, looking at African Americans like "no, we don't want you over here."

Mr. Thompson argues that even though there are some opportunities for parents to enroll in schools other than their local schools, both schools and districts cherry-pick which types of parents and students they are willing to accept. He said, "They pick and choose. The good Negroes can cross boundaries. "Oh, I'm sorry, you're not like them [referring to "bad Negroes" apparently]. You come on, you know." They hand pick. It's been like that forever.

Here, Mrs. Bennett and Mr. Armstrong draw on narratives of black surveillance and control and the ways in which African Americans have been and continue to be systematically excluded from mainstream institutions through formal policies and practices of institutional gatekeepers. Mr. Thompson, on the other hand, reminds us that institutional barriers are never

fool-proof and that in some instances, institutional gatekeepers will allow a select few of African American to pass as long as they agree conform to mainstream norms and values. Once again, in the absence of or sometimes in addition to evidence of racial bias and discrimination, some African American parents rely on the assumption that race plays a role in the decisions of mainstream institutional actors while executing their daily duties. As we saw with Ms. Terry and the parent-community liaison, however, some African Americans can be a much more hesitant to arrive at such a conclusion. Whether racial bias is supported by evidence or not, these perceptions shape how some African American parents approach the boundary-crossing process and how they feel about school boundaries more generally.

Post-Crossing

While all the parents in this study appeared to be pleased with their final school choices for now, some shared disappointing stories about realizing that the grass is not always greener on the other side. Mr. Armstrong recalled his own experience with crossing school boundaries as a child. A couple of decades ago, he and a younger brother were attending Unity when the younger brother was identified as gifted. In order to foster his talents, his mother enrolled his brother in a gift-magnet program in a very affluent community across. To minimize the hassle, his mother sent Mr. Armstrong there too on a sibling permit. Mr. Armstrong wound up going to school in what he calls a “well-to-do, Caucasian community” all the way through high school. He said,

[M]y experience there was not a good one...I was definitely let known that I didn't belong over there. Some of the teachers, you know, made it clear. As I got older into high school, just as far as going into stores off campus...we were followed. And they made it painfully obvious that we're watching you.

Other parents talked about going through the huge trouble of getting their children into a school out west only to find that black and Latino students were not only segregated in these schools, but not given honors and AP classes. They also discussed harsher discipline practices. Mrs. Polk

shared that after she been through so much to get her daughter into one of the most stellar schools in the country, she was dissatisfied with what she saw as a pattern of abuse and neglect of students of color. She said,

I had her at a middle school that I wasn't all that happy with. It was a performance arts school [out west] and I was not satisfied with the way they...were treating African American children and Latino children...I felt as though they weren't – especially when it came to the African American boys — trying to educate them...I'm at a school every single day. My children never missed a day from school, so that means I'm there every day. So with that, I have [seen] where a large percentage of this one school [out west] where a lot of the children were being put out of the class. And [they were] all African American boys. I'm like "What the heck's going on?"...and Latino boys, too... So I would come and [say], "you guys better get in class." I was always trying to encourage them to go back to class. They always [said]: "[The teacher] looked at me the wrong way or teacher said something." Well, the teacher obviously didn't want them in there.

Another parent disclosed how for middle and high school, she sent her older daughter across town to an expensive, predominantly white private school so that her daughter can learn that despite the color of her skin, she was no different from her white peers, only for the young woman to later attend an Ivy League university and feel marginalized by some of her white classmates.

These stories are enough to make one to wonder: why would someone reject the schools in their own community only to find that they are not welcome at the schools in the community they worked so hard to get in? This is a perfect illustration of how middle-class African Americans suffer in the pursuit of upward social mobility only to find that they are still considered not good enough. This also illustrates the dilemma that many middle-class African Americans face when it comes to schools for their children.

Other parents talked about themselves or hearing stories about friends purchasing homes or moving to a community for the schools only to find that they were not zoned for the school in question. At least two talked about that once they got into the school of their choice, they were

disappointed to find that it wasn't a good fit for their child. High school principal Mr. Murphy explained how by leaving their Title I designated schools, students who use permits to go to higher performing schools miss out on scholarships targeting low-income students and reduce the likelihood of graduate among the top 9% of their class.²¹ Other school personnel discuss the resources and labor that is lost when African American parents decide to send their children to schools out of the community. When they leave, their precious resources, labor, and support goes right along with them. While many can make the argument for increased access to "better" schools just as many can make the argument for staying and building one's community schools. As a social good and a source of personal capital, African-American parents are ultimately confronted with two choices: creep singly up the hem of life or consolidate our weaknesses and move into the major folds of the garment.

Summary

This chapter examined parents' school preferences, motivations for crossing school boundaries, as well as parents' perceptions of the boundary-crossing process. While discussing their motivations for crossing school boundaries, parents cited two major reasons for leaving their home schools: the racial composition of the homeschool or a desire for what they perceived to be better school quality.²² For about a third of the parents interviewed, a homeschool where Latino/-a students outnumber African American students was a significantly off-putting. This is because they believed that while catering to the needs of Latino/-a students, these schools would neglect the needs of African American children. With respect to the parents who were motivated

²¹ High school students who graduate in the top 9 percent of their class at a participating California high school, may be eligible for a seat at a participating University of California campus.

²² Here it is important to note that these groups of parent are not mutually exclusive; some of the parents in each category were cited both concerns.

to leave their homeschool in search of better school quality, parents based quality on multiple factors, not just test scores. For some, a good education was described as one that provided their children with a good cultural foundation, while for others, it was about a school environment in which learning was encouraged and where smart black students served as good role models.

Similar to the previous chapter where the majority of parents reported that they believed that race played a significant role in how school boundaries were drawn, here a majority of parents also reported that they believed race played a significant role in the boundary-crossing process. Some, but not all, parents believed that school administrators engaged in race-based gatekeeping practices intended to exclude minority families from their schools. Some also believed white privilege and/or access to greater resources made it particularly easier for white families to cross school boundaries. Some parents argued that due to the bureaucratic nature of the district, they did not believe race exempted whites from the hassles of boundary-crossing in this district.

In the next chapter, I will show how school and district personnel's responses about which factors drive school administrators' decisions to accept or exclude students who live outside their boundaries complicate parents' perceptions about racial bias by school administrators.

CHAPTER 8

Redrawing the Line: Reshaping the Landscape or Reproducing Inequality?

“Human ecology is fundamentally interested in the effect of position, in both time and space, upon human institutions of behavior... These spatial relationships... are the products of competition and selection, and are continuously in process of change as new factors enter to disturb the competitive relations or to facilitate mobility. Human institutions and human nature itself become accommodated to certain spatial relationships of human beings. As these spatial relationships change, the physical basis of social relations is altered, thereby producing social and political problems.”

—Roderick McKenzie,
The Ecological Approach to the Study of Human Community (1920)

This chapter addresses my third and final research question: *How does the act of boundary-crossing among middle-class, African American parents' either disrupt or reproduce school boundaries?* Here, I focus on the effects of Unity parents' decisions to cross school boundaries and how this, as a collective practice, can simultaneously result in greater access for some, but lead to the further isolation of already marginalized groups.

Reshaping the Landscape

Drops in Student Enrollment

Ms. Quincy, Unity Elementary parent-community liaison and long-time Unity resident, reported that Unity elementary had been experiencing declining enrollment for years. As demonstrated in Table 1 below, between the 2000-2001 and 2015-2016 school years, the school's total population went from approximately 700 to 400 students²³.

Table 1 *Unity Elementary School Enrollment (2000-2015)*

school year	Black	Hispanic	White	Asian	FRPL	Total
2000-2001	90.1%	7.2%	1.1%	.6%	59.6%	706
2005-2006	88.0%	10.1%	.8%	.3%	70.4%	602
2010-2011	80.5%	16.4%	.8%	.8%	71.1%	476

²³ According to CDE data. Retrieved from <http://cde.ca.gov>

2015-2016	67.1%	24.5%	3.0%	.2%	71.5%	404
Note. Data from California Department of Education (CDE)						

Ms. Quincy credits the school’s declining enrollment to the community’s aging population.

Census tract data from the 2015 American Community Survey (ACS)²⁴ show that the median age for the census tract area covering Unity Elementary is approximately fifteen years older than the median age for the city, which help to might explain the decline in the number of school age children. However, district-wide, there have been drops in student enrollment, which the district attributes to declining birth rates, the number of students leaving the district (either for other public schools or other types of schools), students leaving the district, students opting for schools outside the district (both public and private), as well as other factors.

It is not clear exactly when Unity residents stopped using the local school, but as reported in the previous chapter, the practice of opting out of the homeschool has become quite common, particularly among the higher status parents in the area. Because the school does not keep track of the number of permits it approves for students transferring to schools outside Unity’s attendance boundary, or these students’ destinations, it is difficult to ascertain exactly how many students assigned to the school choose to go elsewhere. Moreover, since parents who send their children to charters or private schools are not obligated to inform the homeschool of this choice, it becomes increasingly difficult for schools to approximate the number of students who, if not for school choice, would be attending the home school. The school does, however, have data on the students who are currently enrolled at Unity and their home schools.

Changes in Unity’s Student Body

²⁴ Source: 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

According to the 2015-2016 student enrollment data provided to me by the school, Unity's student body included students residing within the Unity school attendance boundaries and students from 52 other schools in West Bay Unified and other neighboring school districts. Among the students enrolled in the community school (i.e., the non-magnet side of the school), approximately 40% of students lived outside the school's attendance boundaries, coming from 28 other public schools and 16 zip codes (including Unity's). Among the students enrolled in the magnet program, approximately 28% lived within the school attendance boundaries, while approximately 72% did not. Students from the gifted-magnet program came from 45 other public schools in West Bay and neighboring districts and from 19 different zip codes (including Unity Elementary's). Among the number of total students enrolled in both schools combined, approximately 44% were from the local community while approximately 55% came from schools in surrounding areas or schools from other parts of the city.

To be sure, it is expected that a community school with a magnet program attached would have a relatively higher number of students from outside its attendance boundaries than a school without a magnet program. However, since we do not know how prevalent boundary-crossing is in the district, it is hard to know whether 40% of students attending a community school from outside its boundaries (i.e., students on permit) is atypical or the norm.

The lead office clerk Mrs. Scarlett, is one of Unity's office staff. She along with Mr. Montgomery handle the school's enrollment and are some of the key actors in the boundary-crossing process for parents in and outside Unity's school boundaries. When asked to estimate how many students from the community actually enrolled in the school versus the students who enrolled from outside the school's boundaries, she estimated that only 10% of students enrolled actually resided within the school's attendance boundary, while the other 90% came from outside

the community. Ms. Quincy, was a little more generous, estimating that around 25% of the students in the community enrolled in the school, while the other 75% came from outside the school's boundary. Both mentioned that in addition to the students from outside the district enrolled on either an intra- or inter-district permit, they believed quite a few students claiming to be residents were actually using fake addresses (i.e., a friend's or relative's address).

When asked why she believes the school accepts so many students from outside its boundaries, Mrs. Scarlet said, "we've got to fill our classes up...so we can keep our teachers." Her observation is consistent with what Mr. Murphy discussed in the previous chapter about principals accepting out-of-boundary students in order to ensure district funding and what district coordinator Mr. Ruben said about principals "playing the numbers game." Mrs. Scarlett explained that in the last seven years, she has seen a near 50% drop in enrollment. She added that more recently, the "[C]ommunity school has tapered off quite a bit so I'm not sure if there's no kids in the neighborhood, or they're all grown up, or whatever. That's when we start pulling from the waiting list." As a community school, they give priority to students who live within its boundaries before they begin accepting students applying through the permit process.

The foregoing raises questions about how Unity got to where it is today with respect to the school's practice of accepting so many students from outside its boundary, such as whether this is the school's response to a decline in student enrollment, contributed to local parents' decision to abandon the school; or whether local parents' decision to send their children to schools elsewhere contributed to the school's policy of accepting so many out-of-boundary students.

As evident from Table 1 above, Unity experienced not only a drop in enrollment, but changes in the composition of its student body. While the school was 90% black back during the

2000-2001 school year, a decade and a half later the school is now 2/3 African American and the number of Latino students among the student body more than tripled. Table 1 further shows that students at Unity now come from more economically disadvantaged households than they did before, with the number of students receiving FRPL up from 60% to around 70%. According to Unity's teachers and staff, many of the students who attend Unity from outside its boundaries come from the nearby lower income neighborhoods.

Changes in Unity's School Culture

During the 2014-2015 school year, the student population at Parkview (i.e., one of the schools located east of and immediately adjacent to Unity and which sends a lot of its students to Unity) was almost 50/50, black and Latino. There were also more students on free and reduced-price lunch at Parkview compared to Unity. Due to the school's low performance on standardized tests, it has made the Romero list of failing schools twice in four years. The teachers and office clerks interviewed in this study said that many parents who come to Unity from Parkview come in search of better academic performance, teachers and staff, and student behavior. Mr. Montgomery said, "Many parents have heard good reports about the staff and teachers in both schools—community as well as magnet. High test scores, fairly good reports as far as staff and students, just good, clean environment. Minimum drama."

Mrs. Scarlett, worked at Parkview for a time prior to coming to Unity. She described the families there as mostly "non-working," lower-income families. When I asked her to compare the atmosphere at Parkview to that at Unity, she had excellent things to say about the teachers and staff at Parkview. Her feelings about the students, however were very different:

Researcher: What about the environment at [Parkview], compared to [Unity], in terms of behavior? Teachers—?

- Mrs. Scarlett: The one thing I can say that the environment over there is kind of like over here. There are really good staff, good teachers—it was just *they* were product of their environment.
- Researcher: Who, the kids?
- Mrs. Scarlett: The kids, yeah. But the staff was great. The staff was great, teachers were great, everybody was great but the kids were ... I could see the difference with the kids.
- Researcher: Okay. When you say product of their environment, what does that mean?
- Mrs. Scarlett: That means most of them ... I don't know if this has anything to do with anything ... they live in apartments, most of them are on welfare, most of them don't work and most of them are from broken families.
- Researcher: Broken families?
- Mrs. Scarlett: I'm not trying to stereotype or anything, but it is what it is. I saw it for myself. So I [can] see the difference over here.
- Researcher: Do they have behavioral problems?
- Mrs. Scarlett: They have a lot of behavioral problems.
- Researcher: Compared to [Unity]? A lot more?
- Mrs. Scarlett: Oh yeah.

In addition to interviewing Mrs. Scarlett about Parkview, I interviewed two parents, Ms. Bains and Ms. Ferguson, who both live in the Parkview school attendance boundary but opted out of their children's home school to send them to Unity. They largely shared Mrs. Scarlett's perspective on the students and families at Parkview.

Both Ms. Bains and Ms. Ferguson discussed concerns with respect to “types” of students and families who go to Parkview. Ms. Ferguson said she had heard stories about the school being locked down in the past because of violent activity in the neighborhood, and she did not want her son anywhere near that type of trouble. She said that she had also heard from a friend of hers

who is a counselor at the school that a couple of students with mental health issues had once had to be handcuffed and escorted off the premises. Again, she insisted, she did not want her child exposed to any of that. With respect to why she decided against enrolling her son at Parkview, Ms. Bains said,

I left because I didn't want— for one, you know I visited the park and some of the kids that are in the area. I definitely don't want my son to be exposed— there's certain things I will not have him be exposed to, behaviors, attitudes, and I want him to be in an area. Like, for example, I tried [Unity] out and I liked the school, the community, even though it's majority black and everything. I became okay with that because it's like wow, you know, these kids are really, you know, into what they're doing. They're really — education seems important for these families and so forth. That's why... I couldn't have him at [Parkview]... Some of the behaviors and attitudes...like families not caring. You go to the park, drinking or smoking, those types of behaviors. Kids are cursing. No respect. And then again, like, I touched on a little bit is like I want my son to be thinking about college and ...being educated. And not, you know, toy guns and, you know, stuff like being exposed to those types of things or whatever[.]

In addition to her concerns about behavior, Ms. Bains was extremely concerned about not letting her son go to school where, in her opinion, students harbored anti-intellectual attitudes. She talked about being not wanting her son to go to Parkview because she did not want him to be “looked down upon” for wanting to learn or teased for “acting white.”

Ms. Bains and Ms. Ferguson opted out of Parkview because they feared that the children there could either pose a danger to their children or have a negative influence on them. In the previous chapter, by contrast, Mrs. Coleman talked about how middle-class parents in Unity did not want their children attending Unity because Unity accepts so many children from Parkview and other nearby schools. When I asked the office clerk, Mrs. Scarlett, what impact if any she believed the students and families from schools outside Unity's attendance boundaries had on the school's culture, she said, “I don't really know. Because once they're here, they fall in line... They don't really stand out.” However, other school personnel had different experiences.

Some talked about problems with tardiness and students being chronically late. Both 5th grade teachers talked about how students attending Unity from outside its attendance boundaries had a harder time keeping up with the curriculum because it was more rigorous than the schools they came from. Mrs. Elliot, the 5th grade gifted-magnet teacher recalled teaching students who came to Unity from outside the school's attendance boundaries one summer:

Last summer, I did summer school here. Our summer school is for the kids who need it, so the community school kids, not the Magnet kids. I have them and then I had a few of my own [magnet kids] because I said, "You guys should just do summer school just to keep it going," because they weren't super low, but they could use a little boost. It was like so obvious. Even my [middle to lower performing magnet] kids looked like college graduates compared to what these kids have learned and it's the same age group, the same grade level. But because of their behaviors and their attention issues, it was like they missed out. So, 20 of the days of summer school, half of them are spent trying to get them to believe they can get something out of school each day if they just shut it up and focus and try to ... I do think that it can affect other kids, cause my students were looking like, "Oh my God, what's wrong with them?" ... [I]t's very sad...I always tell parents, "If your kid comes home and says my teacher can't teach because the kids are tearing up the room, do something." 'Cause you don't know who's in that room with your child 180 days, 6 hours a day. That could do a lot of damage.

Tardiness and academics are not the only issues. While talking to the Parent community liaison, Ms. Quincy explained why she thought so many people in the community might not want to send their children to Unity:

We have had some bullying issues, which we try and address right away but—how do I say this? [There are] hardcore...kids that come from homes where there are gangs and other issues, and that comes into the school because that's what they're being raised around. We can curtail it to an extent, but when they're out on the playground, you don't know what kind of interaction is happening. The talk, the conversation. So that could be it, as well. We can't be everywhere 24/7, so that could be a turn off.

It is not clear how commonplace these occurrences are or whether these examples represent much of a departure from the norm these professionals experienced at Unity prior to local parents leaving the school. What is important is how parents' perceptions of these types of interactions shape their decisions to send their children to the homeschool or not.

Mrs. Scarlett disclosed that there are certain methods that office staff in different schools use during the enrollment process to screen out students whom they perceive may pose a problem. She said that just by looking at a student, observing them in the lobby, or glancing through the enrollment application, they can determine whether or not this student will fit in at the school. The district's intra- and inter-district permit transfer applications include information such as home address, race/ethnicity, whether the student is designated as "Special Education" or currently under expulsion, and the name of most recently attended school. Other enrollment paperwork might include information such as a student's academic record, discipline record from the previous school, or whether a student has a learning disability. Office staff may flag these documents to let the principal know that they have a concern about these students prior to the principal making his or her final determination to approve or deny the transfer. In this way, school administration and staff concerned about the effects of accepting students from outside their boundaries on the school's culture have a certain degree of latitude over the transfer process. This is consistent with parents' perceptions about schools engaging in gatekeeping practices designed to exclude certain types of students from their schools. While on the one hand schools operating under capacity might need to accept students from outside the school's boundary, this concern is balanced with the school's desire to preserve a good reputation.

Broader Boundary Crossing Trends

Over the course of this study, several schools located out west were identified by both contacts and participants in this study as common destination schools for many of the families in this. Comparing the most recent school demographic data collected from the California Department of Education (CDE) with the most recent census tract data available for four of the most commonly named middle and high schools reveals some glaring differences between where

students live and where students go to school. These data were compiled in Table 2 and Table 3 included below.

Table 2. School and local Demographic Data for Middle schools (west)

	2015 Census tract data	School year (2015-2016)
Pine Oak Middle²⁵		
% white	40.7%	4.5%
% black	2.3%	42.0%
% Hispanic	24.9%	47.4%
% Asian	26.3%	0.8%
Walnut Grove Middle		
% White	68.9%	7.2%
% Black	2.1%	59.2%
% Hispanic	14.5%	27.6
% Asian	9.8%	2.3
Nathaniel Hawthorne Middle		
% White	57.8%	13.5%
% black	2.1%	24.8%
% Hispanic	13.6%	42.0%
% Asian	24.4%	13.8%
Fairley Middle		
% White	84.1%	53.7%
% black	1.5%	12.2%
% Hispanic	7.2%	21.3%
% Asian	4.3%	8.2%
*Note. These census tract data were not for the area covering the entire schools' entire catchment data, but for the census tract area where each school belonged.		

Table 3. School and local Demographic Data for High schools (west)

	2015 Census tract data	School year (2015-2016)
Westview High		
% white	32.1%	15.3%
% black	8.8%	28.4%
% Hispanic	39.4%	49.7%
% Asian	16.7%	2.6%
Amelia Earhart High		
% White	62.6%	10.2%
% Black	1.3%	23.5%
% Hispanic	15.8%	54.8%
% Asian	15.4%	7.4%
Abraham Lincoln High		
% White	59.8%	4.5%
% black	3.3%	73.1%

²⁵ all school names presented are pseudonyms

% Hispanic	11.7%	17.5%
% Asian	19.4%	1.3%
American High		
% White	79.0%	52.9%
% black	0.6%	14.2%
% Hispanic	9.8%	22.0%
% Asian	7.0%	7.9%

Note. These census tract data were not for the area covering the entire schools' entire catchment data, but for the census tract area where each school belonged.

From these tables we can see that though few African Americans reside in the areas surrounding these schools, they are overrepresented among the student body. These data show just how prevalent boundary-crossing by black students is in the district. While, we cannot tell where the students in these schools originate from looking at these data alone, these data combined with the qualitative data collected in this study appear to confirm the trend.

Although district coordinator Mr. Ruben reported that boundary-crossing is more common at the elementary school level, the other district coordinator Mr. Khalil discussed his observations pertaining to boundary-crossing at the high school level. He said that in West Bay, minority students are the majority in the public high schools. He explained that in some instances, however, if you separate out the magnet students from the rest of the school, you'll find more white students there than in the rest of the school. He said that many of the white families that choose to remain in the district's public schools, either take refuge in magnets or in transfers to charters. The rest may leave the district altogether, he said. He mentioned one affluent, predominantly white school district identified by others I talked to in this study.

Districts like this, which might be otherwise low on enrollment, often accept West Bay school district students with open arms, he said. While many of the predominantly white elementary schools in the district are usually able to hold onto their white student population, once it's time for middle and high school, white parents opt out of their home schools. Because middle and high schools in the district often have high populations of students of color, white parents are

more reluctant to send their children to these schools. He added that while many white parents cite concerns like bullying and safety, many of them send their children to schools in districts that are higher performing and that they perceive to be safe, but these schools have their own issues such as drug abuse.

Legacy's principal noted similar observations about students who leave Legacy in search for higher-performing, more integrated school settings. He noted problems with drug abuse and how African American students not from that side of town were particularly vulnerable to this type of peer pressure because of a desire to fit in. He also noted that many of these schools practice within-school segregation since black and Latino students are often excluded from honors and Advanced Placement classes. In the words of Legacy's principal,

[E]verybody who lives in their own community wants to go to the next community. So all the kids in [the middle class white community] want to go to [more affluent white community]. [Students in more affluent white community] want to go to private school... Everybody over here [at Legacy] want to run to [black school located out west], which is pretty much 70% white in the community, but the school is 80% black. Everybody [from Legacy] wants to run to [Westview High -- more integrated school located immediately northwest of Legacy], but they don't realize there's two [Westviews]. You have your [prestigious magnet program],... and it's predominately white...and then the regular [Westview, which] is no different than [Legacy]. [They are] clustered minorities. They're sitting there ... and you go walk in those classrooms and see what the teachers are teaching. The kids from the regular [Westview]: poor instruction. You know what I'm saying? You think as parent, "Oh my child goes to [Westview]." Yeah, if your child is not in that [magnet], which has a long waiting list, which is predominately Asian and white in there, and a few black sprinkled in there, then you're just going to a [school] ...that's no different than [Legacy]. The difference is you got staff [here] that are caring. You got staff that want to see you successful.

He went on to talk about the many students who come back to Legacy after becoming disillusioned with Westview. He also talked about how once Westview get their numbers (for funding), students with behavior problems or tardiness issues are gently encouraged to leave the school. He finds it ironic when students who fight tooth and nail to leave, all of a sudden embrace the homeschool after getting a report card full of bad grades at the transfer school. As a

school that had historically served black students in the community, he feels that Legacy has a more caring staff and a welcoming environment and is better equipped to meet these (local?) students' needs. He is further dismayed by the talented students who leave the school, taking with them their strong academic performance and parental labor and resources. To this point, he added,

I always tell parents this, "Take pride in your community." I tell kids, "Take pride." Because your tax dollars, your home values are based on how well schools do. What you're doing, all your kids ... our cream of the crop kids are getting heavily recruited. ...because the thing is if your scores are up, all these different things are going on positive, you're increasing someone else's home value. Why not build our own? If we were to take all the kids who truly lived in [all of the working and middle class to affluent black neighborhoods in West Bay], and put 'em all here, we could outperform [high performing, predominantly white affluent school], but we tend to think that we have to be as integrated with another race for us to feel like we're doing something when, in reality, you're not getting the same treatment. You're not getting that equitable treatment.

These findings further illustrate how middle-class African American parents' perceptions of schools and student characteristics influence them to cross school boundaries. In their pursuit of what they perceive to be better quality education, parents push their way out west, contributing to changing demographics of schools located in predominantly white communities. Some participants in this study argue that this undervaluation of schools in black communities contributes to drops in enrollment in these schools and a loss of precious assets that strong African American students and parents bring to these schools. Studies examining markets like the housing and education markets often focus on how the behavior of elites shape these markets. However, the findings of the present study demonstrate how those intermediate in the social hierarchy (i.e., those located at intersecting identities of race and class) also play a role in shaping these markets GREAT. In the next section, I look at class and parental involvement and the role they play in shaping middle class African American parents' perceptions of school boundaries and their decision to cross school boundaries. I discuss how these perceptions lead

parents to draw symbolic boundaries, which enable them to assert their identity as black and upwardly mobile or middle class.

Symbolic Boundaries and the Reproduction of School Boundaries Through Boundary-Crossing

About half way through this study, it became clear to me that parental involvement was critical to how parents perceived boundaries. I initially found it difficult to see the connection between parental involvement and school boundaries. After more interviews, the picture of how the two concepts were linked became clearer. However, I was careful not to place too much importance on it, as I did not want my early impressions to distort my overall findings. During data analysis, it became apparent that parental involvement was essential to school boundaries because school boundaries play a significant role in determining school composition. The more resourceful parents located within a given attendance boundary are, the better off the school. Parents like these bring to school precious resources such as time, money, and social networks needed for fundraising. Also, the more capital parents have—e.g., political or cultural capital—the more accountable schools are to them and their children. These are a few of the things parents and key participants in this study referenced or alluded to during interviews. Lurking beneath the surface of many of these concerns, however, was something less overt: class.

The data revealed that in addition to the types of children that parents did not want their children mixing or socializing with in poor schools, parents were equally concerned about the types of parents in these schools. When parents talked about middle-class to affluent schools or the types of schools they wanted their children to attend, they constantly brought up parental involvement. Even more, when describing themselves, they constantly used adjectives such as “involved” or referenced their record of school involvement. And this record of involvement wasn’t just important for reasons of personal pride: it was a valuable sign to others of her quality

as a parent and the potential quality of her child as a student. Ms. Terry explained that the school she transferred her son to did not require her to obtain a transfer permit because the principal at the school she wanted her son to attend was impressed with her record of parental involvement:

So, with my older children, I was very involved. I was on the [district's parent advisory board]. I was always underneath [i.e., near] the principal. I was always in the classroom. I knew all the teachers. I proved myself very active. So I think, going into [chosen school], when I was able to say, "I have this experience; I have done my homework as far as this school," that they expected that I would be involved, which I have been. So I think that that helps people decide whether or not they're going to work with you or not. Putting a face with a name, not just having a name, or someone walk in randomly.

In addition to discussing the perks that come along with parent involvement, many parents drew a connection between parental involvement and class. While some parents were sympathetic with poor parents and argued that their lack of available resources or other burdens associated with poverty like having to work multiple low wage jobs, others felt that regardless of their income, parents should be involved in their children's schools. While recalling an instance when Mrs. Polk sat in on a PTA meeting at a school middle her daughter had attended out west, she said,

I sat in a PTA meeting and they said we were out of funds. Right away, the families [shouted]: "I'll give \$1000", "I'll give \$2000", "I'll give \$3000." Where over in the east side, the south side, you have the low-income families and they're not able to say, you know, I'm willing to help out in that area. But then, also, it's not so much all the time the money. It's them being involved in their children's lives and school would help make a difference and help the school run better, too.

Other parents drew similar connections between class, parent involvement, and the privilege of having options, sympathizing with poor parents who do not have the education or resources to make well-informed choices, while others felt that regardless of a parent's socioeconomic status, it was a parent's obligation to make good school choices for their children.

While discussing the impact that school boundaries have on where a child goes to school, the Thompsons rejected the notion that limited resources somehow let a parent off the hook for making sure they choose the best schools for their children. Mrs. Thompson said,

I don't think school boundaries have an impact on where your child goes to school. I think that if you, as a parent, you've vested in your child, they can go to any school they want to go to. It's incumbent upon— to me, it's my responsibility as a parent to ensure that my child gets the best education.

When I asked about people who might not have the means to send their children to a better school, Mr. Thompson chimed in saying, "It's free, it's public school," adding,

They have [buses], they have the train. It's about you, as a parent, being totally vested in your child's education...[B]ecause I look at it like this. If it was getting your hair done or your nails done, you're going to find a way to get to whoever you need to get to, to get what you want. So you should, in turn, to me, it's your responsibility as a parent to move heaven and earth to supply whatever needs your child has.

At this point, we can see a few things happening. First, we can see that while these middle class parents claim that socioeconomic status should not limit people's ability to choose good schools for their children, in the end, they consistently fall back on class stereotypes of poor people prioritizing material items over their children's needs. More important, we see the Thompsons link school choice or willingness to engage in the school choice process with one's parenting and good character. Here, they imply that only dedicated parents are willing to sacrifice everything to ensure that their children go to the best schools. If a parent is not willing to sacrifice, then they are not dedicated enough and thereby not good parents.

This is (feels like) an abrupt shift in topic. A transition is needed to help the reader move into this new idea and understand its relationship to prior ideas. In the previous chapter I discussed how in addition to crediting the material resources available to them in choosing schools, the parents in this study also cited character traits like perseverance, sacrifice, and determination, all traits associated with good moral character. They also credited their success in

being able to cross school boundaries with (their demonstrations that education is important to them?) education being important to them. In another example of what?, we can see parents linking class, engagement with their children’s education, and character. While discussing what she liked most about Unity, Ms. Ferguson and I had the following exchange:

Researcher: [W]hat was it about the school that you liked?

Ms. Ferguson: The teachers. They’re very involved. The parents. These are *working parents*. These parents, they’re involved with their children.

Researcher: What does “working parents” mean?

Ms. Ferguson: They’re going to work every day.

Researcher:: As opposed to?

Ms. Ferguson: Parents that are on AFDC, or assist aid, not working.

Researcher: Okay.

Ms. Ferguson: I don’t believe – now this is assumption – that any of these parents here [at Unity] are gang members, whereas I’ve walked through the office of [Parkview Elementary]. I mean, an assumption. I assume they had some gang affiliation.

During several interviews, I heard parents use the term “working parents” and with the exception of only a few instances, the term was used in the same manner. In distinguishing themselves from their low-income counterparts, parents referred to themselves and other parents like them as “working parents.” For some, *working-parents* and *non-working parents* were simply used as adjectives indicating socioeconomic status. For others, however, being a *non-working* parent had a negative connotation.

Mrs. Phillips is an inside parent whose son attends his homeschool, Unity. In addition to running an afterschool program at Unity on weekday afternoons and evenings, she runs a homebased daycare from her home, just a few blocks away from Unity. Mrs. Phillips describes

herself as an involved parent and while discussing where she gets her ideas about school quality, she said,

Mrs. Phillips: Just from having kids come from different areas to my daycare. Parents, just seeing the different parents. Like my program – I have a free program... [J]ust being in a general area –I would say in the center – getting clients from [neighborhoods out west] and from the other side, I've had parents come and enroll their kids. From experience, the kids that I've had that – you know, looking at addresses, I see –

Researcher: You said their addresses?

Mrs. Phillips: Looking at their addresses, once they've enrolled in my program, which is a free program funded by [various state and local government funding sources], I see it where the parents are not involved when they come in. Because the only thing that's required is a birth certificate verifying the age. I see where a lot of the young mothers' birth certificates have the dad's name blank or either not there. And that's consistently throughout the last seven, eight years that I've seen. The dad's names aren't on the birth certificates. Then during drop-off and pickup, the way the kids come in the morning, eating Cheetos, the parents smelling like weed. It's just a difference as opposed to some of my working parents that live on [the other] side. Just knowing where these kids live at, that's their home school. With this Pre-K program I have, there's no boundaries, other than living [within the county]. So they can come from everywhere. But the majority I've seen – that's where I get my information.

Researcher: So, like where they live...the neighborhoods they come from will tell you a lot about that child's behavior, the parents' values and attitudes?

Mrs. Phillips: Exactly.

She added that living on the other side of town did not necessarily mean that a parent was uninvolved, however, she added that “I just haven't seen that. I haven't gotten many of those type of parents if so.” Again, we see expressing a low opinion of poor parents and their parenting habits. By describing themselves as involved parents, parents in this study are attempting to

distinguish themselves from parents who are not involved. Parents who are not involved do not work, accept government aid, are poorly educated, and live on the “wrong side” of town.

In this way, we can see parental involvement being used as a proxy for class. In noticing intergroup differences between themselves and parents they consider less involved, these parents draw symbolic boundaries. By characterizing poor parents as uninvolved parents and themselves as involved parents, using class as their primary social marker, these parents assert their identity as upwardly mobile or middle class. Although social boundaries already exist between social classes, these boundaries are attenuated for African Americans because of the close proximity in which they live with their poorer African American counterparts. Through the act of boundary-crossing, middle class parents are not only exercising their right to choose better schools for their children, they also attempt to communicate their socioeconomic status to their peers. Mr. Armstrong said, “That’s why me, as a parent, I’m involved and I’m grateful for the opportunity of choices. If I’m happy with my homeschool, if I don’t like it, I can choose to send my child to another school.” Here we can see “choice” as a status marker. Researchers have long shown the relationship between social mobility and spatial mobility. Along these lines, upwardly mobile and middle class African Americans are communicating to their neighbors that “I am not like you. I am not bound to (or limited by) my residential (i.e., geographic) location. I am both spatially mobile and socially mobile.”

While discussing whether school boundaries should be eliminated, home daycare owner Mrs. Phillips was the only parent who said no. Later she responded that one positive upside to school boundaries was that “it can keep the riffraff out, you know, the problem kids. I think that’s a benefit. Kids *and* parents.” At some point during each of their interviews, nearly all of the parent participants, including Mrs. Phillips, expressed some variation of “I believe every

child deserves access to a quality education.” Yet, throughout the rest of their interviews their other responses indicated that they preferred that poor children not to go to school with their own children.

Here we see school boundaries serving as an exclusionary tool for not just affluent white parents, schools, districts, and other persons and entities with power, but also those further down on the social ladder. In their pursuit to rise up the social ladder (during this generation or the next) middle class African Americans are willing to leave other, less privileged African Americans behind. Alternative explanation might be that middle-class African American parents engage in this practice in order to disassociate themselves from the stigma and negative stereotypes of black parents in general as unloving, uncaring, or not as invested in education. Historically, African Americans have mimicked whites or adopted middle class values as a strategy for mobility or as a means for survival. Whatever their motivation, school choice through boundary-crossing has turned out to be a far more complex phenomenon than I would have expected.

Summary

In this chapter I discussed how school boundary-crossing among families in and around Unity contributed to outcomes such as drops in school enrollment, changes in school composition, and potential changes in school culture at Unity. I also found how some of these trends were also evident at a larger scale, which was evident in changes in the composition of schools located out west, where the surrounding community was still predominantly white. As more affluent African American families in the community leave the local school for schools located outside the community, including those located further west, both middle class as well as

lower income parents from the lower-performing neighboring schools are now able to attend Unity.

This demonstrates how the collective act of resistance to school boundaries creates opportunities for higher income African American families to gain access to what they perceive to be better schools, while also creating opportunities for less affluent and lower-income families to also gain access to better schools. However, as illustrated by the second major finding in this chapter, boundary-crossing can also result in the reproduction of school boundaries. Hence, while some families are able to take advantage of the opportunities made available by the collective act of boundary-crossing, usually the families with the most resources, others might become further isolated in already struggling schools.

CHAPTER 9

Discussion and Conclusion

Through this qualitative case study, I sought to understand how middle-class, African American parents in a predominantly African American community socially constructed school boundaries. Although previous studies on school boundaries have primarily employed geospatial analyses as well as interpretations of quantitative data on boundary-crossing trends between and within school districts, this study focused primarily on parents' subjective perceptions of and experiences with school boundaries. Similarly, though studies on parent school choice have examined parents' school preferences and as well as parents' subjective beliefs about school quality, few if any have examined the role school boundaries play in shaping parents' school choices and/or perceptions of schools. By bridging these two bodies of literature, this study may inform education policy that is more attentive and more responsive to the needs of minority families seeking better public school options within the K-12 education system.

Guided by a theoretical framework that combined Critical Race Theory (CRT), social constructionism, and minority cultures of mobility, this case study asked the following broad research question: *How do African American parents socially construct school boundaries?* In order to effectively address this question, I divided it into the following three smaller research questions: (1) How do middle-class African American parents perceive, or make meaning of, school boundaries? (2) How do these parents' perceptions of school boundaries shape their decision to cross school boundaries or not? and (3) How does the act of boundary-crossing among these parents either disrupt or reproduce school boundaries?

Data for this study were collected during the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years. The geographical unit at the center of this case study was an elementary school catchment area located within a diverse, urban school district in California. Parent-participants in this study were

chosen because the either lived within this school catchment area or because their children attended the school designated for the aforementioned catchment area. The school is a high-performing, socioeconomically diverse, predominantly African American elementary school I call Unity. To meet the criteria for inclusion, parent participants had to be both middle-class and African American. I used a broad definition of middle-class to determine participants' eligibility. Although most of the participants reported household annual incomes between \$65,000 to over \$100,000, income was not the sole criterion of social class. I also considered other factors such as education, homeownership, residence, and personal attributes.

I chose African American families to explore this topic because I believed that they would be more attuned to analyzing school boundaries since they are more likely to come into contact with them. NCES data on school choice showed that whites and Asians were more likely than other ethnic groups to “move for the schools” while in search of alternative public school options (NCES, 2010b). Other research has also shown that white families are more likely to choose schools through the housing market (Holme, 2002), compared to, as outlined in Chapter 1 of this study, African American families who are more likely than any other group to use public schools outside their children's assigned schools—including magnets, charters, and inter- or intra-district transfer permits (NCES, 2010b). I also chose middle-class, African American parents because their class status brings them into more contact with whites (Neckerman et al., 1999).

Other study participants included key informants such as school personnel, district personnel, and other school leaders in the local community, namely, the principal of the Unity Elementary's feeder high school. Data sources included a total of 24 in-depth interviews. Interview data was composed of six (6) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six (6) parents

residing within Unity Elementary's school attendance boundary; six (6) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven (7) parents residing outside Unity Elementary's school attendance boundaries; and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the 11 key informants.

After the data were coded and analyzed, three major themes emerged. The first, "drawing the line", examined parents' perceptions around how and why school boundaries were drawn and how they functioned. The second was "crossing the line", which examined parents' motivations for crossing school boundaries and the obstacles they faced in the process. The last was, "redrawing the line", which examined how boundary-crossing among parents both disrupted and reinforced school boundaries.

Major findings revealed that most, but not all, parents in this study perceived school boundaries as either intentionally racist or as having a disproportionately negative impact on African Americans and predominantly African American schools. However, despite these perceptions, these parents were nonetheless able to cross school boundaries, though most perceived the process to be burdensome and easier for white families. Last, though boundary-crossing among middle-class, African American parents increased their access to what they perceived to be better school options, also increasing access to better school options for their poorer counterparts, boundary-crossing also reinforced school boundaries by contributing to the further isolation of already marginalized students in low-performing schools. In the following sections I provide my analysis and key observations of the study findings. Later in the chapter, I discuss the limitations, contributions to the literature, policy implications, and directions for future research.

Boundaries and Black Solidarity

In Chapter 6, I discussed my findings on parents' perceptions of school boundaries. The findings there provided a great deal of insight into how parents made sense of school boundaries. Primarily, I found that most, but not all parents believed that race played a role in how school boundaries were drawn. In order to make sense of this, one must place these ideas within the broader context of U.S. social structure and relations. Critical Race Theory (CRT), argues that race and racism are both deeply embedded in U.S. social structure and relations (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In addition to centering race in the analysis of U.S. institutions, in this case, education, one must both foreground the experiential knowledge of African American "drawn from [their] shared history as 'other'" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11) as well as take into account both the contextual and historical aspects of these institutions (Tate, 1997).

Today, in the U.S., African American students continue to lag behind their white and Asian counterparts in academic achievement due to opportunity gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2013). In addition, many continue to be both racially and socioeconomically segregated in schools (Orfield & Chungmei, 2005). These outcomes are not due to inequities in the education system, they are also due to broader patterns of racism in the housing and labor markets. For African Americans, education is essential for social mobility. Yet, barriers to high quality access persist, severely impact their ability to achieve social mobility (Dawkins & Braddock, 1994; Rothwell, 2012; Wells et al, 2009). For many of the parent-participants in this study, social inequities between African Americans and whites, racial disparities in the quality of schools, perceptions of who draws boundaries and the impact of school boundaries on the quality of predominantly African American schools greatly impacted their perceptions of school boundaries.

Gillborn (2005) argues that when examining educational policy, in this case, school assignment policy, one must "go beyond the expressed intent of policy-makers and practitioners

to examine how policy works in the real world” (p. 492). Thus, while nearly all parents acknowledged that the stated purpose of school boundaries was to balance enrollments, prevent overcrowding, and prevent students from travelling long distances for schools, most still believed that school boundaries were designed to contain or limit African Americans’ access to quality schooling. For most, much of this was due to the disparities they observed in the conditions of predominantly black versus predominantly white schools.

Gilborn adds that when examining education policies, questions must include (1) “who or what is driving education policy?” (2) “who wins and who loses as a result of education policy?” and (3) “what are the effects of policy?” With respect to who is driving educational policy, with the exception of only a few parents who did not perceive the district or school board to be a white entity, many parents perceived those in charge of drawing school boundaries as either white entities or individuals, whether they be the school board, district officials, self-interested private corporations, or more indirectly, affluent residents. Regarding who wins or loses, most nearly all parents agreed that blacks were disproportionately negatively impacted by school boundaries, either by resulting in schools with high concentrations of poor and minority students or by resulting in a lack of adequate resources. All of this contributed to many parents’ perception of African American schools as generally subpar and the conclusion that school boundaries were drawn in a manner that was biased against African Americans.

In articulating their ideas about school boundaries, many of the parents in this study drew on shared understandings of race and racism in the U.S. CRT posits that stories and narratives as just as essential to analyses of structures as other types of information. Many parents supported their views with not only personal observations or “objective” information such as data schools’ test scores, they also drew on historical narratives of racial oppression and exclusion in this

county. Although these parents were themselves able to successfully cross school boundaries, many still viewed school boundaries as designed to contain African Americans in their communities. In articulating this view, several used the pronoun “us” signifying their show of solidarity with in the plight of African Americans. In my analysis of this display of solidarity, I draw on Neckerman et al.’s (1999) minority culture of mobility perspective.

Neckerman et al (1999) argue that as black and middle-class, middle-class African American straddle two worlds: the white mainstream and the black community. In spite the benefits conferred by their class privilege, they still experience discrimination as well group disadvantage. Despite being able to work and go to school alongside whites, many middle-class blacks still maintain their contacts with lower-class blacks because they live in mixed-class neighborhoods. “These contacts,” Neckerman et al. argues, “both reflect and reinforce the solidarity forged by a shared history of racial subordination and resistance” (p. 955). Thus despite their class privilege that affords them greater access to better schools, for multiple reasons, middle-class African Americans parents conform more with their black identity in their view of school boundaries.

For one, I argue that it represents a show of solidarity and ethnic pride. Second, and perhaps more important, in order for these parents to formulate effective strategies needed to achieve social mobility, they must acknowledge how racism impact their options. This underscores the minority culture of mobility which explains the cultural toolkit that provides strategies for economic mobility. These strategies arise out of a “context of discrimination and group disadvantage, and respond[s] to distinctive problems that usually accompany minority middle-class status” (p. 946). Here we can see that parents’ perceptions of school boundaries is

at the same time a function of solidarity and self-interest, which I will discuss further later in this chapter.

Parents' belief that that school boundaries were designed to contain African Americans in their communities was also illuminating. Social scientists different disciplines who study boundaries of all types—geographical, social, cultural, symbolic, etc.—have long described boundaries as containers, which simultaneously keep some things in and other things out (Brown, 2016; Lamont, & Molnár, 2002; Lamont, Schmalzbauer, Waller, Weber, 1996; Latham, 2010; Newman, 2006; Walters, 2016). This conception of boundaries as a container can help us advance comprehensive framework for school boundaries. As many of the parents observed in this study, school boundaries played a significant role in shaping school quality by determining school composition and school resources. Because school assignment policies are based on residence, this coupled with existing residential or socioeconomic segregation can lead to the concentration of more affluent students in certain schools and districts and poorer students in others. In addition to the positive or negative peer effects that can occur in schools with high concentrations of students from the same background (Dawkins & Braddock 1994), school segregation can also result in disparities in school resources.

While some parents understood that disparities in school resources between white and blacks resulted primarily from fundraising and other efforts, others seemed to believe that African American schools were allocated less funding by either the state or district. And even though California's school finance scheme provides equitable funding to districts, parents who thought that disparities in school resources were due to inequitable funding were not necessarily incorrect. Within the context of white supremacy and asymmetrical power relations, common sense assumptions by African Americans about education and other U.S. institutions dominated

by whites are that whites have always found work-arounds for policies designed to guarantee equitable treatment. This is evidenced by the state's new funding formula giving districts more control over school spending under which some districts have been found to be taking advantage of loopholes in the law that have allowed them to use funds meant for disadvantaged students to fund other things, usually to the benefit of white students (Fensterwald, 2016). Other studies have noted disparities in per-pupil spending within districts which have allowed predominantly white schools to spend more on teacher salaries (Spatig-Amerikaner, 2012).

Fundraising and differential district funding coupled with schools' and districts' right to exclude students living outside their boundaries render affluent schools and districts essentially private rather than public institutions (Brown, 2016). A framework for school boundaries, at both the school and district levels, should take into account the various racial, social, and political dynamics that shape these structures.

Also in this chapter, aside from gaining a better understanding of most parents' perception of school boundaries as racist structures, I also found parents who pushed back on this notion equally informative. For a small minority of parents in this study, they found nothing biased nor inherently racist about school boundaries. In their assessment of the purpose of school boundaries, they placed greater emphasis on the practicality of school boundaries. Although this does not necessarily mean that these parents could not see the relationship between school boundaries and the condition predominantly black schools (one of these parents did see the relationship), by denying that race has anything to do with how or why school boundaries are drawn, this view of school boundaries as practical and therefore not racist justifies the use of school boundaries and the practice of basing school assignments on residence. The idea of school boundaries as rational is so deeply embedded in our society making it increasingly difficult to

adopt new approaches to school assignment. Further viewing structures as rational not only obscures the role racism plays in policy-making, it also prioritizes efficiency over equity, thereby justifying the continued practice of enforcing unfair policies.

Semi-Permeability and Multiple Axes of Quality

Chapter 7 addressed my findings from research question two, how do school boundaries shape parents' decision to cross them. There I discussed parents' school preferences, motivations for crossing school boundaries, the obstacles they face while attempting to cross school boundaries, the resources parents deployed in choosing schools and crossing boundaries, and the sometimes unfortunate outcomes of their decision. Within the education literature, much of the research on school choice has focused primarily on parents' preferences, resources, and strategies. And while some have taken into account how context shapes these factors (Bell, 2009; Ben-Porath, 2009; Bulman, 2004; Cooper, 2005), in most of these studies, parents' school choices are analyzed as a collection of individual choices rather than collective action.

Although the parent-participants in this study each represent unique individuals, these individuals are also embedded within a local context, a community within an urban school district. These individuals also share other characteristics such as race and class, which shape their perceptions of structures as well as courses of action. Due to wealth disparities and discrimination within the housing market combined with a lack of access to high quality schools in their own communities, school boundary-crossing has emerged a common social practice in response to these conditions. According to Barnes (2001), social systems are "ongoing, self-reproducing array of shared practices" (p. 25). Shared practice constitutes "clusters of individual habits which, precisely because they are individual, all differ in detail from each other" (p. 31).

When determining “what disposes people to enact the practices they do,” we must consider “their aims, their lived experience and their inherited knowledge” (p. 30).

In the previous section, I discussed parents’ perceptions of school boundaries. Here I discuss how does perceptions shape their decisions to cross school boundaries. In Chapter 6, I found that parents believed school boundaries impacted school quality and school characteristics by determining a school’s composition and its amount of resources. Parents often described these in terms of inputs. Thus, by clustering certain individuals together or by determining the amount of resources a school has at its disposal (whether through fundraising or government allocation), the boundaries impacted school quality. When parents talked about what motivated them to cross school boundaries, however, they did not talk about how their perceptions of school boundaries shaped their choices. Instead, parents talked about the quality and characteristics of their homeschools and the schools they preferred. However, as mentioned above, parents believed that to varying extents school boundaries determined school quality. As a result, we see that parents’ perceptions of school boundaries indirectly shaped their school choices and their decisions to cross school boundaries.

For the most part, both inside and outside parents in this study left their home schools either due to their desire for better school quality, their discomfort with the home school’s racial or socioeconomic composition, or both. When it came to school composition, parents’ motivations for leaving their homeschools exposed both inter- and intra-racial tensions. Parents leaving schools with high Latino/-a populations expressed their concerns about high numbers of students who are not English proficient. They believed that in the process of these schools working to address the language needs of these students, they would wind up neglecting the needs of the African American children. A few parents’ comments about this were particularly

harsh and might even be perceived as xenophobic against Latino/-as. However, these comments must be viewed within the larger context of a system where high quality education is a scarce resource and where affluent white children have the most access to these resources while minorities and middle to lower income families have to compete for the rest. These will inevitably create tensions between these groups motivate some African American parents to prefer schools that are predominantly African American. Even at the classroom level, the scarcity of teachers' time attention can lead to parents' fears about their children receiving quality instruction.

In contrast, for parent-participants whose children were in schools that were more racially mixed (half black, half Latino/-a) and had a high percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students (80% FRPL), they feared that being a school where their child was surrounded by these students would have a negative influence on their children. Studies have shown that negative peer effects in school can have both short- and long-term impacts, such as academic achievement as well as college-going (Dawkins & Braddock, 1994; Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, 2001).

Concerns over school composition discussed above came from outside parents who had chosen to cross school boundaries and enroll their children at Unity Elementary. For the inside parents, who rejected Unity and chose other schools, concerns over school composition did not come up as much. However, when it did, it was often less explicit. As a matter of fact, across the interviews I analyzed, I found these higher status parents were often a lot more subtle when it came to race and class. In discussing why she believed so many parents in the community like herself chose to opt out of their homeschool despite the school's good reputation, one parent said it was just understood among her peers that you don't send your children to the homeschool. In a different part of our interview she shared the anecdote about her hairdresser's daughter picking

up slang while attending summer camp with children from the community and the surrounding area. Another shared that while on the one hand he did like the idea of his child going to school where there was a strong black presence, he also did not want the school to be *too black*.

The other two inside parents talked a lot about wanting schools that gave their children lots of exposure. The concept of “exposure” was a little complex in that while talking about exposure, these parents drew on issues of both school composition and school quality. This is important because it illustrates the view by many African American parents who believe that schooling is best in integrated settings. When talking about school quality, these parents spoke less about any specific cultural characteristics their children got from non-black school peers and spoke more about the resources and opportunities afforded them by attending more diverse schools. Even one of the outside parents who had chosen to send her child to Unity remarked that

[I]nitially...I sort of was trying to pull him farther out in another school [because] I want him to have exposure. I want him not to just be able to function and relate with blacks and Hispanics, but I want him to be with other cultures. You know, because in the real world, you know...it's not all Hispanic people and so forth.

In a Harvard Law Journal article titled, “Brown’s Ghost,” legal scholar Richard T. Ford (2003) argues that school integration is beneficial for three reasons.

In the first, he argues that integration ensures equal access to resources. He writes,

One commonly cited rationale for integration is that integration will indirectly improve the educational resources and facilities used by subordinated minorities by requiring members of the empowered majority to use the same resources and facilities. The presumption underlying this position is that the politically empowered majority will improve the schools used by the relatively powerless minority if and only if their own children attend those schools as well: “green follows white,” the old motto holds. (p. 1310)

In the second and third, he cites research which demonstrating that sending low income and minority students to integrated schools disrupts the harmful effects of sending children to schools of concentrated poverty and that integrated schools promote “cross racial” understanding. It is

common sense knowledge among African Americans, middle class African American parents in particular, that the best way to ensure that children of color have the same resources as white children is to get them in the same building. Although research on within-school segregation shows this not to be case in all instances, this assumption prevails. This assumption draws on a principle within CRT called interest-convergence, which posits that whites will only adopt policies or support agendas that benefit blacks only if it benefits them as well (Ladson-Billings, 1998). With respect to the other two concerns, disrupting the harmful social effects of concentrated poverty and promoting cross racial understanding, parents' desire for these aspects of schooling must be understood within the context of white supremacy. Hence, I'll draw on CRT and minority culture of mobility.

Many blacks know that in order to achieve social mobility, they must be able to adopt the norms and preferences of whites (Neckerman et al., 1999). Blacks also benefit from frequent contacts with whites because it allows them to learn how to deal with whites. In other words, blacks will only learn the unspoken rules of succeeding in mainstream culture if they learn how to avoid the pitfalls of dealing with white people (Neckerman et al.). This is not just a matter of gaining resources, it is also a strategy for survival. Neckerman et al. cite research that shows that when "middle-class black encounter white strangers in public spaces... whites tend to assume that all black strangers are lower-class and respond accordingly, with fear, insult, or threat." In order to ensure their social, economic and physical survival, blacks must carefully navigate their relationships with whites and they can only learn this by increased contacts or "exposure" to whites.

School composition was not the only factor that motivated them to cross boundaries. Though parents were also concerned with school quality, they defined quality in many different

ways. For some, school test scores were a significant indicator of school quality. For others, quality was defined as safety and comfort. For yet another, quality was about having a strong home-school relationship between parents and teachers. For a certain group of parents, quality was about not only providing an environment where a child could thrive academically, it was also about providing the type of environment that affirmed students' black identity—either via the curriculum or school culture—and positive black role models. None of these aspects of school quality were mutually exclusive for parents. Some parents simply emphasized some more than others.

This demonstrates that multifaceted nature of middle-class African Americans parents' perceptions of quality. While some aspects of some parents' perceptions of quality conformed to normative white ideals about school quality, others squared more with an affinity for blackness and desire for black solidarity. However, in the same way that blacks occupy multiple identities at once, these perceptions of quality occurred along multiple axes. Hence, while on the one hand a parent might view it as important for their children to get a solid black cultural foundation at the school, a parent might also prefer that their child attend school with only other middle class black children. Here, the parent is reaffirming their black culture while at the same time subscribing to white supremacist ideals of merit and who deserves to be educated. This creates a complicated web of beliefs and ideas, which may seem contradictory on the surface, but considering the social constraints of living in a capitalist, white-dominated society, parents may subscribe to competing or even contradictory ideas in order to ensure their survival while remaining rooted in their ethnic identity. This illustrates the CRT principle of intersectionality, which argues that multiple identities are not additive but rather interactional (Crenshaw, 1989).

Another aspect of this chapter that was illuminating was parents' experiences and perceptions of crossing school boundaries. As previously mentioned, most of the parents in the study perceived school boundaries as barriers designed to lock black people into their communities. However, these parents were personally able to successfully cross school boundaries. When asked what they thought made it possible for them to succeed at crossing school boundaries, they discussed the importance of various types of resources such as knowledge, information, social contacts and networks, cultural capital, transportation, and time. Many acknowledged that socioeconomically disadvantaged families and other types of families who lacked available resources might find it either difficult or impossible to cross school boundaries. In addition to recognizing the importance of both tangible and intangible resources, parents also believed that personal attributes like sacrifice, determination, and perseverance played a significant role. Some even argued that such characteristics superseded the importance of available resources.

Here we begin to see some of the early cracks in the notion of black solidarity. While outlining all of the positive personal attributes which they believed it made it possible for them to cross school boundaries, these middle-class parents are making a subtle rebuke of lower income parents who do not have the means to cross school boundaries. For these parents, regardless of how little resources a parent has at their disposal, as long as they wanted it badly enough, they could accomplish boundary-crossing. This seems to imply that parents whose children are in lower performing schools had not done enough to prevent this from occurring. Here, parents appear to be drawing on notions of meritocracy and deservedness. According to Tate (1997), CRT challenges dominant claims of meritocracy and argues that these ideologies disguise the self-interests of those with more power in society.

In their paper titled *Understanding the Role of Everyday Practices of Privilege in the Perpetuation of Inequalities* Stephens and Gilles (2012) argue that “those in possession of material advantage work to maintain that distinction. The actions of those of high status (whether conscious or unconscious) work against the development of [the] poor” (p. 146). In addition, they highlight several studies which “show deliberate strategies used by those with more resources to advantage their own children” (p. 146). Although this interpretation of these parents’ views and actions as it relates to school boundaries are certainly valid, it is also important to once again consider a social context of scarce resources as a motivating factor for why some parents might sympathize less with their poorer African American peers. Additionally, holding such views might be another strategy for survival.

In the African American studies literature, “black respectability” is defined as

a strategy deployed primarily by the Black middle class but also by other individuals across the Black strata to demonstrate their adherence to and upholding of the dominant norms of society. It is hoped and expected that such conformity will confer full citizenship status, bring with it greater access, opportunities and mobility. (Cohen, 2004, p. 31)

Moore (2008) includes a politics of *respectability* in her framework of what she calls a “black habitus.” She argues that “the habitus of black middle class informs the actions they perceive as ‘reasonable’ and enhancing their ‘self-interest’” (p. 496). She adds that respectability “emphasizes morality and positive self-representation as a form of social status” (497). According to Moore, black respectability arose out of “the artificially flat occupational structure in the black community created by racial discrimination...[P]roper self-representation was an essential component of the assertion of black humanity and the struggle for political rights” (p. 497). It is likely that while some African Americans deploy respectability politics in a legitimate attempt at social survival, for others, it is a practice that is only used because it has been passed

down over generations. Though, in order to avoid falling into any essentialist notions of African American values and beliefs, it may well be the case that some parents simply hold such values without any thought to black respectability politics.

In addition to their perceptions of why they believed they were successful in being able to cross school boundaries, parents also talked about the inherent advantage whites' have in navigating the process of boundary-crossing. Several parents felt that this advantage was a function of both race and class, some parents emphasized white privilege more while other parents emphasized whites' greater access to the resources needed to cross school boundaries. A couple even argued that white parents did not need to cross school boundaries because they are already positioned in neighborhoods with high quality schools.

The foregoing adds another dimension to a potential theoretical framework for school boundaries. In addition to seeing boundaries as containers, which might ordinarily be thought of as fixed or impenetrable, we can now see that boundaries are perceived to be permeable to a certain extent. The fact that these parents were themselves successful in crossing school boundaries lends some support for viewing boundaries as permeable, but the fact that not all parents are successful in this regard lends support to the idea that boundaries *are* permeable, but only for a select few, including whites, middle class blacks, and only the most determined lower-income persons of color. This again adds to what I discussed in the previous section about rationalizing unfair social structures. So long as one can rationalize the way social structures work, the less likely they are to work towards disrupting them. Two parents acknowledged that things would be a lot better if middle-class, African American parents just stayed in their communities and helped to work toward improving their own local schools. However, they quickly pointed out that neither they nor most people would be willing to sacrifice their own

children in the process. Again, parents are seen here as rationalizing choices that might be contributing to the marginalization of more disadvantaged groups.

The other aspect of boundary-crossing was school officials' explanations for what motivates them to either approve or deny out-of-boundary students in their schools, which complicated parents' perceptions of school gatekeeping processes. School district personnel said that that due to concerns over low school capacity, school administrators were more interested in achieving certain enrollment goals to ensure they get adequate funding for the school year rather than screening out minority students. Unity's lead clerk agreed explaining that Unity accepted so many students from outside its attendance boundaries for funding purposes. However, she also admitted that school administrators and office staff do engage in gatekeeping and are selective about the students they accept. I believe that it is entirely possible for both to be true, especially when the feeder high school principal explained that after "norm day" when schools secure their allocation of funding for the year, school administrators in these schools quietly redirect problem students back to their home schools.

This practice is analogous to what was uncovered in Vaught's (2009) study where, drawing upon a CRT framework, she found that a local school district's funding scheme led to the commodification of black children for the benefit of white children leading to "localized classroom practices that produced and reproduced the racialized achievement gap." Similarly, as the feeder pattern high school principal discussed about the school many of his students of color sought transfers to, the students there who benefitted the most at this school, were the magnet students who were primarily white and Asian and disproportionately represented in honors classes, whereas black and Latino students, including those who transferred from his school, often found themselves isolated in "regular" classes receiving poor instruction. This example

complicates many of the African American parents in this study's perceptions of how schools work and the different factors that go into decision-making about boundary-crossing. For parents who do not believe that race factors into school administrators' decisions about who they accept in their schools, this demonstrates that while students of color might be allowed to transfer to a school, it does not mean that race did not factor into this decision. Also, for parents who believe that race does factor into school boundaries, it demonstrates that this calculation is far more complex than simply keeping African American students out.

This further adds to our school boundary framework in that it shows how school boundaries are mutually constructed by multiple social actors. Hence, in addition to the school board and district officials who determine where and how school boundaries are drawn, and addition to those who may influence these school board and district officials' decisions, school personnel and administration also contribute to the way boundaries work. Thus, we can see that school boundaries constitute far more than just visual representations of designated geographical areas on a map or the predetermined rules about what criteria students must meet to enroll in a certain school. School boundaries are also a constellation of norms, practices, procedures, and discourses taken up and enacted every day at any given moment by various social actors. According to Berger and Luckmann, "social order is a human product, or, more precisely, an ongoing human production" (p. 69). Hence, while some people who determine boundaries are far away, making policy without ever making contact with those who are affected by school boundaries, others interact with people who are affected by school boundaries face-to-face.

Reinforcing School Boundaries

In the final chapter of my dissertation findings, Chapter 8, I discussed my last research question, *How does boundary-crossing among middle-class African American parent either*

disrupt or reinforce school boundaries? In addition to the district acknowledging that it had experienced drops in student enrollment due to parents leaving the district to go to attend charter schools or schools in other districts, multiple key informants in this study indicated they had seen changes in enrollment numbers at both the school and district levels. Additionally, school personnel discussed some of the changes they had seen at the school in terms of behavior, academic performance, and tardiness among the students who attended the school from outside the schools boundary. Though there was not enough data to conclude that there was definitely a shift in the culture at the school, these findings suggest that it may be a strong possibility.

In this chapter, I also provided data demonstrating a mismatch between the school composition and the surrounding residential areas of schools located in one of the areas with a reputation for good schools. Though it was not clear where the disproportionately high numbers of African American students in this area originated from, multiple participants reported that schools here were a popular destination for parents who live in Unity's school boundaries. Though my overall data showed that the parent-participants in this study had successfully crossed school boundaries despite viewing them as racist and designed to keep them locked in their neighborhood schools, this coupled with the fact that there were disproportionately high numbers of African American students in some of the schools out west suggested that by engaging in boundary-crossing, these parents were disrupting these social structures. By now, we can see the progression from knowledge and belief, to action, to structures (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Parents' beliefs about school boundaries were informed by their personal observations, value, common sense knowledge, narratives of racism and oppression, and their lived experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), all of which were mediated by their social location as

both black and middle class (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Neckerman, et al. 1999). CRT helps us make sense of aforementioned because it argues that race is the organizing principle around U.S. social structure and relations. Being limited by or locked out of certain areas of the housing market (Pattillo, 2005), African American families must find other strategies to achieve their goal of choosing quality schools for their children. However, in the context of scarce education resources (i.e., more demand than supply of high quality schools), middle-class African American parents had to compete with other parents for these resources. Being middle-class, these parents were able to use their available resources and adapt strategies from their cultural toolkit (Neckerman, et al, 1999) to cross school boundaries. Hence, their race and their class not only structured their opportunities (Crenshaw, 1989) they also gave them strategies to overcome school boundaries as a social, political, and geographical barrier to quality schools.

Furthermore, as evidenced by the fact that Unity was forced to accept more children from outside its boundaries due to drops in school enrollment, middle-class parents' decision to cross school boundaries opened up other opportunities for parents in neighboring school attendance boundaries to attend Unity. While we cannot know for certain if these specific parent participants' actions led directly to the changes I am discussing here, it is not necessary to show direct causation. Barnes (2001), argues that "routine practice at the collective level as just so many individuals behaving in their own habituated ways, ways sufficiently similar through shared teaching to fit with each other for given purposes, but nonetheless distinct and different" (p. 31). However, while this revelation feels encouraging with respect to moving toward the greater goal of achieving more equitable access to quality schools for disadvantaged students, it is sobered by the fact that while creating additional opportunities for themselves and others—

either consciously or unconsciously—boundary-crossing by middle-class, African American parents may simultaneously reinforce school boundaries.

The frequent occurrence of references to parental involvement by the parents in this study signaled that there was perhaps more to parental involvement than volunteer work and fundraising. These parents' preoccupation with parental involvement suggested parents placed more than a practical value on this dimension of school quality. The data suggested that parents drew a relationship between parental involvement and boundary-crossing, and social class. The parents in this study did not themselves want to be in schools with less involved or lower-class parents and they also did not want their children in these schools. As a result, they left these types of schools and opted for schools that had more middle-class and involved parents.

According to Lamont, Schmalzbauer, Waller, and Weber (1996) these parents were drawing symbolic boundaries. They define symbolic boundaries as “criteria that individuals use to distinguish people they consider desirable from others” (p. 33). It was apparent that these parents preferred schools with strong parental involvement for their children not only because it meant that their children would have access to more resources, but also because parents who were more involved in their children's schooling were constructed as better parents and better people in general. Many of the parents in this study also constructed themselves in the same way and thus, preferred to be in schools with parents more like themselves. Crossing school boundaries, i.e., choosing other schools for their children, was another way that good parents engaged in their children's schooling. It is also reserved for parents who had enough resources to exercise this privilege. In this way, crossing school boundaries became synonymous with class. It is important to note however, that studies have found that despite common misperceptions of low income parents not being interested in their children's schooling, they in fact are (Lott, 2001).

Several studies have examined and discussed (and complicated) the relationship between spatial and social boundaries (Lamont, & Molnár, 2002, Pachucki, Pendergrass, & Lamont, M., 2007). Research has shown that middle-class, African Americans are more likely to live in closer proximity to their less advantaged African American counterparts (Pattillo, 2000; Pattillo, 2005) and to have closer social ties with poorer African Americans (Neckerman, et al., 1999). Due to this spatial and social proximity, which may blur social boundaries, I argue that some middle-class, African American parents may be using school boundary-crossing as a symbol or indicator of their middle-class status, thereby making their status/identity visible to their less advantaged peers. In this way, these parents are drawing symbolic boundaries (Lamont et al., 1996) based on school choice, to assert their identity as middle-class and/or upwardly mobile. This finding is similar to Cucchiara and Hovart's (2014) finding that the parents' school choices in their study were not simply about "the merits of individual schools" but also "based on their own sense of who they were and the ways in which the choice of a school would affirm or undermine the identity they valued and hoped to project" (p. 504).

In alluding to these tensions between middle-class and lower-income African Americans, these findings also speak to the sometimes tense inter-class (intra-ethnic) relations explained by the minority culture of mobility. Though these parents' initial perceptions of school boundaries as racist "both reflect and reinforce the solidarity forged" by their in-group membership as African American (Neckerman et al, 1999, p. 955), their action of leaving their community schools rather than sticking around to help improve these schools speaks to what Neckerman et al. call the "tug of obligation" or the "burden of working and helping" their poorer co-ethnics (p. 956). They add that "Even when it is not reflected in action, [an] ongoing conversation about ways to 'give back' is a response to implied questions about loyalty to the ethnic group" (p. 956).

Lamont et al. (1996) allude to the problems that can arise from symbolic boundaries.

They write that symbolic boundaries can

generate social boundaries because they strengthen conformity to group and occur concurrently with the creation of fields where specific cultural orientations come to be highly valued as a result of cultural constraints or preferences. By strengthening associations based on similar cultural orientations, symbolic boundaries indirectly shape inequality by creating distance toward those who do not share these orientations. (p. 33, citing Bourdieu, 1984)

Thus, while beneficial for some, the practice of boundary-crossing can result in structural changes. One outcome might be the further isolation of already marginalized students in disadvantaged schools. Nearly all of the outside parents in this study transferred to Unity from a homeschool with a larger percentage of students on free and reduced-price lunch. Even at Unity, we saw that over a 15-year span enrollment dropped significantly, there was a decrease in the number of African American students enrolled at the school, and an increase in the number of students receiving free or reduced lunch.

Different sources of knowledge, social practices, and discourses all helped to shape middle class African American parents' perceptions of school boundaries, which in turn shaped their own personal decisions, which collectively resulted in another set of knowledge, social practice and discourse (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In attempting to disrupt these structures, parents actually wind up reinforcing them. According to the social constructionism perspective, both social and cultural artifacts, school boundaries in this case, are made and remade and remade even again, and in this process structures, institutions, and social practices are reinforced. However, change can occur over time. One potential negative outcome of constant boundary crossing is school closings. For example, a school might be closed if it is being underutilized. Berger (1983) argues that:

On one hand, such changes eliminate administrative, custodial, and utility costs at the closed school and increase facility utilization, economies of scale, and minority percentages at [a] consolidated school. On the other hand, these actions rob a neighborhood of a major source of identification, threaten property values, constrain after-school participation, limit parental involvement, and increase white flight. (p. 7) Hence, both parents and school leaders need to evaluate why this practice is so common and policymakers need to adopt policies that can better address parents' education needs. The roots of boundary-crossing must be examined and addressed, otherwise it can result in grave outcomes for families and communities.

Limitations

Though this case study offers some illuminating insights into how the middle-class, African American parents in this study perceived schools and school boundaries, how these perceptions shaped their school choices and decision to cross school boundaries, and how these decisions may, in turn, have contributed to social and demographic changes to the neighborhood school, there are limitations to these findings. The selected research site and sample all limit the possibility of making broad or generalized claims about how middle-class, African American parents in general perceive schools and school boundaries, and how their perceptions may or may not influence their decision to cross school boundaries.

The research site used in this study was selected because of its rich history and ethnic diversity. These factors played a significant role in shaping study participants' experiences and therefore perceptions about various topics related to schools and school boundaries. Other local factors such as the level of income inequality, residential patterns, immigration trends, community demographic change over time, district funding schemes, and the physical landscape of the school district all contribute to school quality and the unequal distribution of educative resources in the district and larger metro area. As a result, parents' perceptions of schools and school boundaries in this study are likely to be context-dependent.

Similarly, study participants' occupations, personal backgrounds, and interests may have made them more likely to participate in this study versus other parents who may have met the study criteria. For example, since I recruited many of study participants through the school's PTA, I was less likely to make contacts with parents who did not participate in the PTA. Also, because interviews were conducted during school hours, parents who did not have the luxury of taking time off work during this time, could not participate. Had I recruited my sample through additional methods and sources, I might have ended up with a different sample. Such considerations should be taken into account while conducting case study research.

Nonetheless, findings from this study are useful in helping us understand how African American parents make sense of school boundaries and how their perceptions influence these parents' school choices. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that despite the bias in favor of generalizability of results from studies that take a quantitative approach, by focusing on depth rather than breadth, case study research is an important approach for the "sound development of social science" (p. 241).

Contribution to the Literature and Theoretical Implications

Over the past several decades, education researchers have begun to pay attention to more attention to the relationship between space and education inequality (Tate, 2008, 2012). This is important because as this body of research has shown that unequal geographies play a significant role in creating and/or maintaining education inequality (Bifulco, Cobb & Bell, 2009; Bischoff, 2008; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Holme & Richards, 2009; Richards & Stroub, 2015). Hence, now that this body of literature has taken shape and is continuing along a path of more discovery, education research in this area can make significant contributions to education policy, particularly as this pertains to the design of school districts and geographical distribution of

educative resources. However, many of these studies have focused primarily on more quantitative and geospatial analyses of school districts.

And although some studies have addressed the more subjective aspects of decision-making around issues related to school geography (Bartels & Donato, 2009; Frankenburg & Kotok, 2013; Jennings, 2010), few if any have looked at parents or how parents are perceiving geographical barriers to accessing quality education. While studies like Andre-Bechely's (2007) have examined parents' perceptions of time and distance, none have looked at how parents are perceiving institutional barriers somewhat embedded into the geographical/political landscape of education. Thus, this study makes a contribution by filling this gap in the literature. By examining how parents make sense of school boundaries and boundary-crossing, scholars can see how these institutional barriers are shaping parents' school choices.

In addition to improving our understanding of how parents are making school choices within the broader spatial, social, and cultural context, this study also has theoretical implications. Although the research cited in this study's literature review provide some insight into the concept of school boundaries, school boundaries remain undertheorized in the education literature. Using the observations from this study, I proposed a few preliminary elements of what may, in the near future hopefully, be further developed into a school boundaries framework. A school boundaries framework can help us to better analyze how these structures structure educational opportunity (or lack thereof) as well as how social actors shape them through perceptions and actions, and how they impact other intuitions.

Directions for Future Research

This qualitative study focused solely on middle-class, African American parents in one community and their perceptions of school boundaries and boundary crossing. Future studies

might look at the perception of school boundaries among parents from other ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Additional studies might want to compare the perceptions of parents from one community to those from other communities, thereby focusing on a larger geographical area like a district or metropolitan area. Other studies might adopt different methodological approaches such as surveys and/or or mixed methods. A mixed methods design might combine a quantitative analysis of boundary-crossing trends along with surveys of parents and school administrators in addition to a qualitative analysis of the perceptions of different ethnic groups perceptions of school boundaries.

By researching this question, researchers can make important policy recommendations for schools, school districts, and city or county governments with respect to how to address the problems associated with school and residential segregation and how structures such as school boundaries exacerbate these problems. I hope that more scholars will embark upon this line of inquiry in order to continue to make sense of how parents are making sense of these issues and contribute to positive changes.

Policy Implications

The findings from this study have several policy implications for school districts. For instance, some of the findings suggested that school assignments based on residence may be outdated. Many parents who are dissatisfied with their assigned school cross school boundaries in order to access what they consider to be better quality schools. Hence, in a way, these geographic barriers, do little to discourage parents from leaving their home schools. However, as many parents noted, not all families possess the resources necessary to cross school boundaries or choose other schools. Taking both of these scenarios into consideration, I argue that it more useful to eliminate school boundaries entirely (and by extension school assignments based on

residence), and devise more equitable scheme for assigning students to schools. Such a scheme should aim for both racial and socioeconomic diversity, and a corresponding funding formula which ensures that schools are more equitably-funded. In addition to increasing education equity and quality, this will increase parents' confidence in their local schools and reduce their need to leave their local schools.

Hagman (1997) points out that "boundary laws can be changed so that the richer and whiter communities have less chance to use boundary laws as a means of disadvantaging the poorer communities and those with a high percentage of minority residents. But no system of boundary change law could be devised that could not be used in a disadvantaging way" (p. 897). Taking this into account, if school districts determine that eliminating school boundaries and student assignment policies is infeasible, another way to address parents' concerns about school boundaries is for school districts to be more transparent about how school boundaries are decided and maintained and to adopt a more democratic process for deciding school boundaries where the district includes the input of parents in determining where and how school boundaries are drawn. Adopting such a policy might go a long way in improving parents' confidence in the process.

Another policy recommendation would be to make boundary-crossing easier for less advantaged families in the district. Although some efforts like the Romero Bill are designed to give parents in failing schools more options, it does not do nearly enough. The school district's efforts to increase poor to low-income parents' access should include additional support such as transportation and less paperwork. Because parents with more resource are often more likely to take advantage of school choice, school districts should come up with proposals that give poor to lower income families priority in the school choice process and additional support. This might

encourage more of these families to leave underperforming school and facilitate their ability to be more successful in achieving school choice.

The last policy recommendation would be for cities to propose plans that address the larger problem of income inequality. From the findings it is apparent that poor to low-income families are socially stigmatized and therefore seen as undesirable. Residents who live in close proximity with these families often engage in a variety of methods to either separate themselves from these groups or limit their contact with these groups. This leads to further isolation of already marginalized groups, and as a result, more group disadvantage among these populations. Hence, policy efforts need to be made to address both poverty and social inequality. By doing so, we might reduce middle class parents' and middle class, minority parents' desire to leave their local communities. Again, if schools in these communities are more diverse and better funded, parents might be more inclined to remain in their communities.

By examining how parents are making sense of school boundaries and the boundary-crossing process, we can uncover some of the major barriers to parents accessing better quality schools and recommend ways to address these problems. Further, these findings reinforce the importance of school funding. If local schools were better funded, parents would be less likely inclined to have to engage in boundary at all.

APPENDIX A

Table 4. *Parent Participant Characteristics*

Name*	Educational attainment	Annual Household Income	Resides	Child/ren Attend(s)
Mrs. Bennett	some college	< \$20,000	outside	Unity Elementary
Mr. Armstrong	some college	\$20,000 - \$39,000	outside	Unity Elementary
Ms. Bains	college degree	\$65,000 - \$79,000	outside	Unity Elementary
Mrs. Polk	college degree	> \$100,000	outside	Unity Elementary
Mr. Thompson	college degree	> \$100,000	outside	Unity Elementary
Mrs. Thompson	college degree	> \$100,000	outside	Unity Elementary
Ms. Ferguson	more than college	\$65,000 - \$79,000	outside	Unity Elementary
Mrs. Phillips	some college	> \$100,000	inside	Unity Elementary
Ms. Lee	college degree	< \$20,000	inside	Unity Elementary
Ms. Davis	more than college	> \$100,000	inside	Other school: charter
Ms. Terry	more than college	> \$100,000	inside	Other school: magnet
Mrs. Coleman	more than college	> \$100,000	inside	Other school: charter
Mr. Samuels	more than college	> \$100,000	inside	Other school: charter/magnet

Note. *All names are pseudonyms

APPENDIX B

Table 5. *List of Key Informants*

Name	Position
Mrs. Walker	Unity Elementary: Principal
Mrs. Scarlett	Unity Elementary: Lead Office Clerk
Mr. Montgomery	Unity Elementary: Office Clerk
Ms. Lewis	Unity Elementary: Pupil Services & Attendance Counselor
Ms. Quincy	Unity Elementary: Parent-Community Liaison
Mrs. Elliot	Unity Elementary: 5 th Grade Teacher (Gifted-Magnet)
Ms. Bryant	Unity Elementary: 5 th Grade Teacher (Community School)
Mr. Murphy	Legacy High School (feeder high school): Principal
Ms. Salinas	West Bay Unified School District: Permits & Transfers Coordinator
Mr. Khalil	West Bay Unified School District: Coordinator
Mr. Ruben	West Bay Unified School District: Coordinator

APPENDIX C

Table 6. Comparison Between Unity Demographics & Standardized Test Scores and "Outside" Parents' Home Schools

Name	Inside/ Outside	Current School	School Choice Type	FRPL	Students Met or Exceeded Grade Level English	Students Met or Exceeded Grade Level Math	Black	White	Latino	Asian	ELL
UNITY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL											
Mrs. Bennett	out	Unity	Magnet + Permit	68.6%	43%	28%	73.0%	1.6%	21.0%	.5%	4.4%
Mr. Armstrong	out	Unity	Permit	93.8%	21%	19%	13.5%	0.3%	85.7%	0%	54.6%
Ms. Bains	out	Unity	Magnet	51.5%	31%	26%	81.1%	6.2%	7.7%	.4%	1.5%
Mrs. Polk	out	Unity	Permit	81.3%	11%	11%	46.7%	1.7%	49.1%	0%	29.0%
Mr./Mrs. Thompson	out	Unity	Magnet + Permit	72.7%	15%	8%	70.3%	0%	27.3%	0%	10.5%
Ms. Ferguson	out	Unity	Permit	86.2%	12%	6%	25.3%	0.6%	73.7%	0%	38.4%
				81.3%	11%	11%	46.7%	1.7%	49.1%	0%	29.0%

Note. Table based on 2014-2015 CDE school data and 2015 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP)

Table 7. Comparison Between Unity Demographics & Standardized Test Scores and "Inside" Parents' Chosen Schools

Name	Inside/ Outside	Current School	School Choice Type	FRPL	Students Met or Exceeded Grade Level Math	Students Met or Exceeded Grade Level Math	Black	White	Latino	Asian	ELL
UNITY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL											
Ms. Davis	in	Other	Charter	68.6%	43%	28%	73.0%	1.6%	21.0%	.5%	4.4%
Ms. Terry	in	Other	Magnet	53.5%	42%	25%	28.0%	17.8%	46.5%	.6%	37.6%
Mrs. Coleman	in	Other	Charter	63.7%	33%	26%	37.8%	15.7%	34.7%	6.3%	18.1%
Mr. Samuels	in	Other	Charter/ Magnet	6.4%	73%	71%	3.7%	80.2%	8.3%	6.0%	4.1%
				25.6%	75%	78%	13.2%	38.0%	14.9%	26.2%	6.6%

Note. Table based on 2014-2015 CDE school data and 2015 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP)

APPENDIX D
Parent Interview Protocol

(What) Definition/purpose of school boundaries

1. Based on your knowledge or personal experience, how do you define school boundaries in your own words?
 - a. District Maps: What are your initial observations?
 - b. Who lives where? Who goes to school where?
2. Based on your knowledge or personal experience, what is the purpose of school boundaries?

(Who/How) Process of creation and/or maintenance of school boundaries

3. Based on your knowledge or personal experience, who decides where and how school boundaries are drawn?
 - a. Explain the process for when, where, and how school boundaries are drawn.
 - b. After these boundaries are created, who oversees school boundaries?
4. In your opinion do you think the process for how school boundaries are decided is fair?
5. In your opinion do you think the way school boundaries are enforced is fair?

Consequences of school boundaries

6. How would you compare the quality of the schools available in your neighborhood to the ones available in other neighborhoods? In general, how would you compare the schools available in African American neighborhoods to the ones available in predominantly white, Latino, or Asian neighborhoods?
7. How much of an impact do you think school boundaries have in determining the quality of a school? How/why?
8. How much do you think school boundaries determine where a child goes to school?
9. How much of an impact do you think school boundaries have on the quality of education a child receives and his or her future prospects (job, college)?
10. In what ways do you believe things might be different if we lived in a school district or county where there were no school boundaries? In what ways do you believe things might be different if we lived in a school district or county where there were school boundaries weren't eliminated entirely but drawn differently?

Influence on Parents' School choices

11. Do you live in this attendance zone?

- Yes: could you have chosen a school other than this one? What makes you so sure?
- No: why did you (a) leave your assigned school? (b) why did you choose this school? Was that process easy or difficult? Explain.

12. Do you ever think about school boundaries? When and how often? When you think about them, what do you think?

13. How much do you think school boundaries impact your school options or the schools available to you? How have school boundaries factored into your school choices?

14. What obstacles, if any, have you faced in trying to get your children into the kind of school you want them to attend or what obstacles, if any, do you anticipate you will face in trying to get your child(ren) into the schools or school districts you want them to attend?

(Race/Class) School boundaries, Access

15. My study examines the role school boundaries has on families' access to quality schooling.

- a. When you think about the function or the impact of boundaries, would you say that their function is neutral or unbiased (maintain certain balance in terms of preventing overcrowding, etc.), or would you say they serve another function? Who benefits from school boundaries? In what ways? Is anyone harmed by school boundaries? In what ways?
- b. We've mentioned some of the negative consequences of school boundaries. Do you think school boundaries have any positive impact?
- c. Do you think African American families are impacted any differently by the way school boundaries are drawn and enforced compared to their white counterparts? Latino counterparts? or Asian counterparts? Do school boundaries impact African Americans more, less, the same? How and Why?

16. As an African American parent, do you think your past experiences, current experiences, or your future experiences dealing with school boundaries (i.e., gaining access to schools outside your attendance boundary by securing permits, special programs, listing a different address, etc.), have/will differ from white/Latino/Asian parents' experiences?

- a. How and Why?

17. How much of a role do you think **race** or **class** or **both** determines how school boundaries are drawn and enforced? Race plays a minor role, substantial role, no role at all?

18. What do you think about open enrollment or other programs designed to increase minority or poor parents' access to better schools?

- a. Does it have an impact?
- b. How much?

APPENDIX E
Parent Questionnaire

Name _____

- I live [within] _____ [outside] _____ the school attendance boundary.
- My child attends the [magnet school] __ [community school] __ (child's grade ____)
- My child attends the [magnet school] __ [community school] __ (child's grade ____)

Annual household income range (optional) [check one box]:

- Below \$20,000 _____
- \$20,000 - \$39,000 _____
- \$40,000 - \$64,000 _____
- \$65,000 - \$79,000 _____
- \$80,000 - \$100,000 _____
- More than \$100,000 _____

Highest education attained

- Less than high school _____
- High school diploma or equivalent _____
- Some college _____
- College degree _____
- More than college degree _____

APPENDIX F
Interview Protocol School Personnel & Administration

- How long have you taught/been the principal at this school?
- Can you tell me a little about the community this school is situated in, the families who live in this area, and the children who attend this school?
- How often do parents either seek your guidance or assistance regarding which schools they should send their children to?
- What concerns have they expressed? [academics, behavior, facilities, quality of teachers, etc.]. If you could rank the school characteristics parents are most worried about, what would go first, then second, etc.?
- Based on your conversations with parents, how significant is it?
- In having these conversations with parents, what's been your advice?
- What obstacles or challenges do parents face in terms of trying to get their children into the kind of school they want them to attend?
- How much of an impact do you think race or class or both have on their experiences?
- What are parents' feelings towards this? [Have you ever gotten a sense of whether parents in this area think it's fair or unfair?]
- How much of an impact do you think school boundaries have on a child's future [in terms of the quality of education they receive and how well a child is prepared for college or able to get a job]?
- How much of an impact do you think school boundaries have on parents' school options? [are parents limited? If so how severely? Or do parents have any meaningful alternatives to sending their kids to the home school?]
- What patterns or trends have you seen among parents who tend to send their children to the assigned school versus those who send their children to a school outside the attendance boundary?
- As a teacher what impact do you think school boundaries have on your teaching? In what ways do attendance boundaries influence or shape your experience teaching here?
- What are some of the trends or patterns you've observed as far as where parents in this area send their children to school (geographical area + type—public, charter, private), how they go about that (magnet, permit), and how successful or unsuccessful they've been in achieving their goals?

APPENDIX G

Interview Protocol District Personnel

Intro/interaction w/ parents

- How long have you worked for the district?
- How often, if at all, do you interact with parents seeking to transfer their children from their assigned school to another school within or outside the district?
- What are some of the most common reasons why parents want to transfer their children from one district/school or another?

Parents' understanding of school boundaries

- How aware do you think parents are of school boundaries?
- How well do you think parents understand school boundaries (for this study school boundaries refer to district lines separating school districts or lines outline attendance zones for a given school)? By this, I mean, how well do you think they understand where school boundaries come from, the purpose of school boundaries, who controls/maintains schools boundaries, etc.?

Influence on Parents' School choices

- To what extent do you think the way school boundaries are drawn determine parents' school choices?

Consequences of school boundaries

- To what extent do you think school boundaries determine the quality of a child's education? How many parents in this district would agree with you?
- What obstacles, if any, do parents face in terms of trying to get their children into the kind of school they want them to attend?
- In dealing with parents seeking to cross school boundaries, have you ever get a sense of whether parents in this district think the way school boundaries are drawn and maintained fair or unfair? Explain.

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