**Modes of Belonging:
Debating School Demographics in Gentrifying New York**

Alexandra Freidus
Seton Hall University

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Abstract

This article examines the frameworks that stakeholders bring to discussions and debates about diversifying schools in gentrifying areas of New York City. Using critical ethnographic methods, I explore stakeholders' hopes and fears about the effects of shifting school demographics and the relationships between student demographics and school quality. I find that stakeholders use racialized discourses of belonging to discuss whether, why, and how student demographics matter. These discourses of belonging overlapped with perceptions of changing demographics as opportunities for integration, fears of gentrification, or threats to individual property. By complicating celebrations of "diversity," I explore the ways in which race is implicated in considerations of who belongs in a school and to whom a school belongs.

Keywords: diversity; gentrification; integration; school choice; school quality

Introduction

“Look at how the school zone is actually drawn. It was drawn in a redline type of deal where you make a project school.... Why was that? Let’s look at the history on that. Let’s actually have a dialogue about who that affected and how it impacted the public school system here in New York City. New York City has the most segregated schools in America. There is something to be said about that. If you are progressive, let’s not choose what we want to be progressive about, let’s actually roll our sleeves up and actually be ready to do the work.”

- Kimani, middle-class Black parent and PTA President

In their unanimous ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court declared that racial stigma is an inevitable result of school segregation: to separate Black children “from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race,” the decision proclaimed, “generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.” The *Brown* decision thus articulated links between race, damage, and segregation that continue to manifest themselves in contemporary conversations about school demographics. Decades of research, policy, and practice have rested upon the assumption that the problem with segregated schools lays in who attends them, rather than the quality of their educational offerings (Aggarwal, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Pattillo, 2014).

A half-century after *Brown*, increasing numbers of white, affluent families across the nation are enrolling their children in urban schools that have historically served low-income communities of color (Cucchiara, 2013; Freidus, 2016; Keels, Burdick-Will, & Keene, 2013; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Mordechay & Ayscue, 2017; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Siegel-Hawley, Thachik, & Bridges, 2016). While some parents, educators, and policymakers see these demographic shifts as opportunities to promote integration, others see the changes as threatening their access to quality education or community schools. In this study, I examine the assumptions and concerns that stakeholders bring to debates over school demographics in gentrifying areas of New York City. In an attempt to understand the conflicting ideologies, goals, and values at the core of these conversations, I use critical ethnographic methods to explore three related questions:

What hopes and fears do local policymakers, school staff, and parents have about the effects of shifting school demographics on their communities, schools, and families?

What frameworks do school and community stakeholders draw on as they discuss diversifying schools?

What assumptions do stakeholders make about the relationship between student demographics and school quality?

I find that school and community stakeholders use discourses of belonging to discuss how changing a school's demographics might change the school itself. In public meetings and private conversations, educators, policymakers, and families repeatedly alluded to the importance of feeling that they belonged in their school and their school belonged to them. As they talked about integration, segregation, and gentrification, stakeholders' comments reflected varying and often conflicted narratives about whether, why, and how student demographics matter (Abu El-Haj, 2006; Dumas, 2009; Pollock, 2005). These racialized narratives influence public perceptions of diversifying schools, perceptions that have profound implications for how district

administrators develop and implement policies related to school choice and student assignment; how parents select and participate in diversifying school communities; and how school leaders negotiate families' competing priorities (Cucchiara, 2013; Diem, Holme, Edwards, Haynes, & Epstein, 2018; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Quarles & Butler, 2018; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2016; Syeed, 2019; Turner, 2015).

Much of the research to date on school gentrification examines the role that “advantaged families in disadvantaged contexts” play in influencing school policies and practices (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014, p. 447). While many of these studies also address racial dynamics in diversifying schools, they focus primarily on class (for exceptions, see Lipman, 2009; Reay et al., 2007). This study makes a necessary intervention in this literature by centering the racialized nature of debates about changing school demographics. By complicating celebrations of student “diversity,” I explore the ways in which race is implicated in considerations of who belongs in a school and to whom a school belongs.

Analytic Framework and Related Literature

Several months into a critical ethnography of diversifying schools in gentrifying areas of New York City, I was struck by the frequency with which discussions of school demographics seemed to center upon questions of “belonging.” After reflecting on the many ways in which the term was being used, I looked the word up in the dictionary. As I suspected, “to belong” has multiple, related definitions: someone or something can “belong *in*” a space, as in a specified position or location; “belong *to*” someone, as in property or ownership; and “belong *within*” a group, as in community membership or affiliation (“belong,” n.d.). These meanings are often

overlapping (for example, location can signal both that something belongs to someone or within a group), but each mode of belonging carries specific, nuanced connotations.

I have aligned these notions of belonging with bodies of literature related to race, capital, and power in gentrifying schools and communities. In doing so, I foreground gaps and overlaps in our current theorizations of belonging. Several scholars have examined the politics of belonging as they relate to social location, emotional attachments, and political values (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011) and constructions of the national imaginary in schools (Abu El-Haj, 2015); others have explored the nature of belonging within the classroom community (Goodenow, 1993; Malsbary, 2014; Shalaby, 2017). In this study, I explicate the salience of belonging to processes and discourses associated with changes in school demographics, including desegregation, integration, and gentrification. In doing so, I make a case for the central role of belonging in analyses of racialized educational policy and practice.

Belonging In: Race, Space, and Pathology

At the heart of many debates over changes in school demographics is the question of how to decide who belongs in a given school. While this question may appear at face value to be racially neutral, it can never actually be so (Aggarwal, 2018; Bonilla-Silva, 2018). School catchment zones and choice policies “serve to produce and sustain racial meanings; they enact a public pedagogy about who belongs where and about what makes certain spaces desirable” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 15). This pedagogy is particularly powerful in the case of public schools.

When the Supreme Court ordered public schools desegregated in the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision, the Justices’ unanimous opinion was based on the argument that racial segregation “has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro

children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system.” The court thus framed racial segregation as irreparably damaging to Black children, both academically and psychologically. This narrative shaped public views of not only Black children, but also their parents and teachers. While there is a long history of scholarship that has refuted characterizations of Black schools as inherently inferior (D. A. Bell, 2005; Du Bois, 1935; Horsford, 2019; Siddle-Walker, 1996), the most common arguments for school desegregation have positioned Black students, families, and educators – rather than the lack of material resources available to Black schools – as the problem (Dumas, 2016).

More recently, the move toward “colorblind” desegregation plans based on socioeconomic status, rather than race, has muted explicit references to Black children (Kahlenberg, 2012). However, the substance of the case for integration has not shifted. Like the Warren court, proponents of socioeconomic integration segregated school systems in terms of the damage they do to disadvantaged students. Poor children isolated in high-poverty schools, the arguments goes, face overwhelming deficits due to the absence of the social capital that facilitates the success of their more advantaged peers (Coleman et al., 2010; Kahlenberg, 2001). Recent iterations of this line of thought treat class as a proxy for race, either implicitly or explicitly (Kahlenberg, 2001; Potter, Quick, & Davies, 2016). Integration advocates argue that because they isolate children of color and/or poor children, segregated schools erode students’ self-esteem, leading to lower educational aspirations and, ultimately, lower levels of academic achievement. Researchers and policy advocates alike assert that the best way to interrupt the vicious cycle of low achievement for poor students of color is to increase their contact with white, middle-class peers.

Advocates of socioeconomic integration often argue that *all* students, not just low-income children, are vulnerable to the dangers of peer effects. It is for this reason that “small numbers of middle-class children should not be assigned to schools in which a majority of children are poor,” because to do so would be to rob these students of their social capital, or the support offered by their familial resources and networks (Kahlenberg, 2001, p. 2). Arguments such as these powerfully reinscribe the pathology associated with segregated schools. This pathology is attached to both the students who attend them, as children who are deemed difficult to educate because they are underperforming, unruly, and culturally deficient, and the institutions themselves, as organizations assumed to be under-resourced, over-extended, and incapable of providing a quality education (Aggarwal, 2016; Lipman, 2009). Assumptions about school demographics therefore influence not only also stakeholders’ interactions with the school community, but also their perceptions of school quality (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Cucchiara, 2013; Saporito & Lareau, 1999). As they navigate policies and frameworks that position families as consumers in an educational marketplace (Cucchiara, 2013; Labaree, 1997), advantaged families frequently hesitate to view schools serving predominantly low-income students and students of color as places in which their children can or should belong.

Belonging To: Whiteness, Property, and Symbolic Capital

It is not surprising that white families, in particular, would consider access to a superior education a fundamental right, rather than a privilege.¹ Harris (1993) argues that “in ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent,” whiteness has long been codified into a “set of assumptions, privileges and benefits” (p. 1713). Legal policies and practices have “recognized and protected expectations grounded in white privilege” until, over time, “these expectations became

tantamount to property that could not permissibly be intruded upon without consent” (p. 1731). What is more, when these expectations are not met, whiteness can be “deployed as a resource” to secure greater power (p. 1734). This exercise of power is made visible as families negotiate an educational policy framework that, by privileging individual rights to choose schools over the equitable distribution of school resources, is predicated on exclusion (Aggarwal, 2018).

Empirically, race and class are highly correlated, making it difficult to disentangle the forms of advantage conferred by socioeconomic status and those conferred by race. However, scholars have convincingly shown that whiteness itself acts as a form of symbolic capital in a racialized school system, a system that confers privileges that are both related to and distinct from those conferred by class (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; A. E. Lewis, 2003; O’Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007; Reay et al., 2007). White families mobilize their symbolic capital (together with their extensive political and social capital) to advocate for educational policies that perpetuate school segregation and provide their children with additional resources (Noguera, 2003). Within individual schools and school systems, white families hoard opportunities to secure further advantages for their children (Lewis-McCoy, 2014; A. E. Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2018). In New York City and elsewhere, one of the opportunities that white families most carefully hoard is the opportunity to send children to schools that include a group of families very much like themselves (Cucchiara, 2013; Freidus, 2016; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). In this study, I offer new evidence of the connections between whiteness, property, and the multiple forms of capital that are utilized by families who seek to secure the “best possible school” for their children. By claiming certain schools as their own, these families simultaneously answer the questions of who belongs in a given school and to whom a given school belongs.

Belonging Within: Community Membership and School Gentrification

Urban neighborhoods, long associated with “white flight,” have recently become spaces of white return. This demographic inversion is due not only to innovations in mass transit and increased real estate development, but also to the growing appeal of the “urban” to the creative and professional classes (Ehrenhalt, 2012; Leonardo & Hunter, 2007). Inner-city spaces, long associated with Blackness, are rapidly becoming the sites of the displacement and marginalization of low-income communities and communities of color (Kennedy & Leonard, 2001; Lipman, 2008; J. L. Smith & Stovall, 2008). Residential gentrification may be further fueled by the expansion of school choice policies that provide expanded opportunities for children to attend schools outside their local catchment zones (Pearman & Swain, 2017).

Although some advocates celebrate gentrification as an opportunity to direct much-needed material resources to urban schools (Kahlenberg, 2001; Petrilli, 2012; Stillman, 2012), recent studies highlight the many ways in which the process of white return may exacerbate educational inequality. As they arrive, racially and socioeconomically advantaged families frequently bring not only new resources to urban schools, but also new demands. Newcomer parents are routinely offered (or create for themselves) opportunities to become “involved” and influence school policies and practices. As a result, the resources that these families bring to their new school are frequently dedicated to priorities that long-time school community members may not share (Cucchiara, 2013; Freidus, 2016; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Stillman, 2012; Syeed, 2019). Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara (2014) posit that an increase in middle-class families within an urban school frequently – although not inevitably – results in school gentrification.

Like residential gentrification, school gentrification frequently involves the displacement

and dispossession of the poor and working-class families of color who have long called these communities their homes. A gentrifying school is notable not only for its growing middle-class population and its upgraded programs and facilities, but also for changes in school culture and pervasive marginalization of low-income students and families (Posey-Maddox et al., 2014, p. 454). The gentrifying school – like the gentrifying neighborhood – tends to contain, marginalize, and ultimately displace the priorities and concerns of low-income families and families of color (Butler, Hamnett, & Ramsden, 2013; Lipman, 2008; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2012; J. L. Smith & Stovall, 2008). In my analysis below, I foreground the racialized nature of this dispossession – the loss of what had once belonged to Black families and communities.

Research Context and Methods

New York City: Social and Policy Context

Since 2002, New York City public schools have been centralized under the New York City Department of Education (DOE). In 2007, the DOE centralized citywide school admissions, streamlining the process by which families could actively choose their children's schools. Joel Klein, Schools Chancellor under then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg, believed that choice policies ensured that equal access to excellent education by decoupling schools from neighborhoods. In this new educational landscape, school desegregation policies were derided as “anachronistic” (Freidus & Noguera, 2015). Klein's critics, however, charged that the DOE's reform initiatives exacerbated school segregation by enacting neoliberal policies that place “the onus for desegregation on families (and the choices they make) rather than on school districts or municipal governments” (Aggarwal, 2018, p. 83).

Despite the hopes that the 2014 election of progressive mayor Bill de Blasio fostered

among integration advocates, the DOE continued to appear unconcerned by school segregation. When she was asked about plans to integrate city schools, de Blasio's new Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña suggested that students from different schools could become pen pals who "visit each other on different occasions and they understand that they live in different neighborhoods, but they're basically the same kind of kids" (Zimmer & Hurowitz, 2015). For the remainder of Fariña's term as chancellor, integration advocates made frequent sarcastic references to "pen pals" as the solution to segregated schools. They argued that the DOE did not have the political courage to name, let alone address, school segregation; instead, the chancellor and the mayor talked about school "diversity" (Shapiro, 2019; K. Taylor, 2017; Zimmerman, 2016).

City officials tend to point toward residential segregation as the root cause of school segregation. However, even in gentrifying areas of New York City, schools remain largely segregated – frequently more segregated than the neighborhoods surrounding them (Hemphill & Mader, 2016). While gentrification and resistance to residential displacement have a long history in New York City (Osman, 2012; N. Smith, 1996), these processes have rapidly accelerated over the past two decades in select areas of Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens (Bukspan, 2016; Cahill, 2007; Mason, Morlock, & Pisano, 2012). Although neighborhood newcomers frequently have liberal politics, they must navigate tensions between their avowed values and decisions about their children's schooling (Roda & Wells, 2013; Schlichtman, Patch, & Lamont Hill, 2017). Advantaged families' choices, within the context of market-based school reforms, frequently contribute to longstanding inequalities in educational opportunities and outcomes.

All elementary and middle schools in New York City are assigned to one of 32 local Community School Districts. Each of these districts is led by a superintendent and her staff, as

well as advanced by Community Education Councils (CECs) made up primarily of parent volunteers. In general, these councils have little decision-making power. However, CECs do have exclusive authority to accept or reject school zoning changes proposed by the DOE – and that is a power that some CECs have leveraged to advocate for school desegregation. For this project, in addition to observing meetings across the city, I selected one Community School District as my primary focus, which I call District 41.² I selected this district for several reasons: because it was among the most racially diverse in the city; because many parents in this district use school choice policies to “opt out” of locally zoned schools; because the CEC was actively discussing school segregation; and because it includes high-income neighborhoods, gentrifying neighborhoods, and several large public housing projects.

Citywide dialogue about school demographics has steadily increased since 2014, following the release of a highly-publicized report that named New York as one of the most segregated school systems in the country (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014). Educators, policymakers, and parents debate school segregation in CEC and district meetings and on radio call-in shows and neighborhood Facebook pages. Running throughout many of these public conversations is a sense that New York is a special place, unique not only for its racial and socioeconomic demographics but also for its liberal politics. As one District 41 administrator asked in a district meeting about school desegregation, “What would be the hope for Omaha, Nebraska, if in this city, we could not get the work done?”³

Data Collection and Analysis

The research design, data collection, and analysis for this critical ethnography examined the “circuits of dispossession and privilege” which link local practices, discourses, and

interactions to structural conditions and policy constraints (Weis & Fine, 2012, p. 174). Using the lens of “critical bifocality,” I situated ethnographic and narrative material in relationship to the political economy and racial formations (Weis & Fine, 2012, 2013). Through field notes (at times supplemented with audio recordings), I documented my observations of more than 30 CEC and district meetings, community events, and citywide political forums during the 2015-16 academic year. In these public meetings, a frequently overlapping cast of characters, at times far from their own home neighborhoods or schools, debated the significance of changing school demographics. I observed public and semi-public conversations about school diversity, including many meetings which were technically open to the community but typically attended only by CEC members or district administrators. Within 24 hours of each observation, I transformed jottings made in the field into extended fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). I supplemented my observations with media coverage of debates over school integration and gentrification in New York City, drawing on over 300 newspaper articles, blogs, radio show transcripts, and social media posts published between 2015 and 2017. I used these media archives to fill in gaps in my field notes and to document public responses to the events in question.

I was acutely aware that as a white, professional resident of a neighborhood that had gentrified only recently before I arrived, I entered these public conversations from the perspective of a newcomer, rather than a long-time resident. Even as I collected the data in this study, I was navigating my own son’s enrollment in the kindergarten lottery system. From firsthand experience, I simultaneously observed and benefitted from the ways in which school choice policies advantaged white, professional families – families like my own – with social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital. As a consequence, I generally restricted my own

participation in public meetings. This decision was also practical; I was often too busy jotting down notes to actively contribute to meeting agendas or side conversations.⁴

I also interviewed 30 District 41 staff, educators, CEC members, community volunteers, and parents about their expectations regarding how demographic shifts might change their schools and communities. I recruited interview participants at public meetings and through peer referrals. I selected my participants to get a diverse sample based on race, socioeconomic status, gender, and roles in the school and community. During interviews, I checked my interpretations of events that I had observed by asking participants about interactions and comments. Soon after most interviews, I wrote memos capturing my jottings about participants' facial expressions, gestures, and tone, as well as my own thoughts and feelings about the conversation.

I began more formal data analysis with an effort to describe and defamiliarize the data, in order "to think creatively and to find surprises lurking in ostensibly obvious observations" (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, p. 55). I went through an iterative process of coding and recoding in search for themes that cut across the field notes, interviews, and media coverage. Guided both deductively by literature on school diversity and gentrification, and inductively by my experiences throughout the data collection process, I created a codebook that described the relationships between schools and the neighborhood (such as real estate and school choice) as well as people's perceptions of school segregation and demographics (such as a sense of comfort or discomfort within the school community). I used Dedoose qualitative software to code the entire dataset. I then began a new round of memos, in which I puzzled through and at times recoded data that surprised me and worked to articulate the relationship between existing theoretical frames and the patterns I was seeing. This abductive process (Tavory &

Timmermans, 2014) allowed me to articulate the ways in which constructions of belonging recurred throughout the dataset.

A Note on Terminology

While the racial demographics of District 41 are quite diverse, including significant numbers of students who are Asian, Black, Latinx, white, and biracial, discussions of school segregation focused primarily on Black and white students and schools. As a result, I focus my analysis of local discourse on this binary. Throughout the research process, I was struck by the many ways in which participants used race and class as proxies for each other. At times, people seemed to rely on color-evasive language, often by using socioeconomic status as coded reference to race. At other times, people seemed to use whiteness as a shorthand for class privilege. In my discussion, I strive to avoid conflating race and class. When I refer to poor families of color, I am specifically describing families who are both low-income and of color. At other times, I describe families as “advantaged” in reference to the overlapping, systemic advantages that adhere to both whiteness and wealth (Roda & Wells, 2013). At the time when I collected these data, approximately 65% of Black students in District 41 were eligible for free or reduced lunch; the remaining one-third were from middle- and higher-income families. In some cases, these families were neighborhood newcomers whose experiences echo those found in studies of other Black gentrifiers (Pattillo, 2007; Schlichtman et al., 2017; M. M. Taylor, 1992). In other cases, they are Black parents who had grown up in the neighborhood, in poor, working-class, or middle-class households. When I share data, I include as much detail as possible about their class status and history in the community.

Unpacking racial and socioeconomic labels is always complex. Further complicating this

task is the fact that commonsense notions of class do not map neatly onto the economic realities of life in New York City. While I heard many references to “middle-class families” in conversations about neighborhoods and schools, that term was frequently misleading. Apartments in gentrifying neighborhoods regularly sell for over one million dollars, so the term “middle class” is not the most accurate description for new homeowners. Frequently, newcomer families seemed to identify as middle-class because they situated themselves in the figurative space between their neighbors who sent their children to private schools with \$40,000 tuition and their neighbors in public housing. At other times, some individuals appeared to assert middle class identities as a way of claiming certain values or shared experiences.

Some families who rent homes in gentrifying areas may, in fact, meet widely-accepted definitions of middle-class households. For example, one parent I interviewed detailed her family’s extended search for subsidized rental housing in the neighborhood, based on their income from her salary as an adjunct professor and her husband’s work as an artist. However, because much of my data is drawn from public meetings, it was frequently not possible for me to verify individual speakers’ socioeconomic status through common measures such as income, job, or educational attainment. Whenever I have those details, I share them. In other cases, I either refer to the terms with which people described themselves or use broader descriptors such as “professional” or “affluent” to describe these families’ relative socioeconomic resources. At times, I also describe families as newcomers or long-time community members, based on information they shared publicly or in interviews. I adopted these labels both because I heard them used widely within the school community and because they are common in the literature examining gentrification (see, for example, Cahill, 2007; Mason et al., 2012; Pattillo, 2007; Schlichtman et al., 2017).

Findings and Discussion

Stakeholders projected overlapping hopes and fears upon diversifying schools. In doing so, they drew upon available frameworks of integration and gentrification to make sense of demographic change. Some community members – both Black and white – hoped that a racially and socioeconomically diverse school could be a welcoming place where all families would belong. However, much of my data was dominated by stakeholders’ fears about shifts school demographics. A substantial number of Black stakeholders expressed serious concerns that their school’s demographic shift would entail the loss of yet another institution that had belonged to the community. Many white families, in contrast, feared that sending their children to a school attended primarily by low-income children of color would entail a loss of their right to quality education. I explore how these themes intersect with notions of belonging in my findings below, focusing first on stakeholders’ hopes for school integration; then on Black stakeholders’ fears of school gentrification; and, finally, on white parents’ fears about school quality.

Diversity and Integration: A School Where Everyone Belongs

At their most hopeful, community members imagined schools with diverse student bodies as idealized spaces. School and district leaders were particularly likely to remind community members of this ideal, as when a superintendent explained at a district meeting that one diversifying school was like “Ellis Island. We’re taking in everybody.” The affective experience of diversity was a frequent focus of conversations about student demographics; as one white teacher exclaimed to me, “I think it’d be amazing if we could be one of those schools that really, like, embraces diversity and makes everyone feel equal.” These advocates saw a diversifying

school as an integrating school, a school that belongs to everyone and a school where everyone feels like they belong.

In these conversations, Black and white parents, educators, administrators, and policymakers frequently conflated two distinct goals: increased *diversity* (or changes to student demographics) and *integration*, which Carter (2010) defines as “equity, fairness, and status equality, and not merely desegregation or physical proximity for racial and ethnic groups” (p. 1530). A diverse school community, these advocates argued, would both be rooted in and nurture what Carter (2012) calls cultural flexibility: the ability to “move across myriad social and cultural boundaries, and to embrace multiple cultural codes, practices, or currencies” (p. 9). Many stakeholders in diversifying schools hoped that by teaching children to cross boundaries, these schools would not only teach children that they belong within multiple social spaces; they would also promote status equality and integration.

Parents and teachers frequently referenced the goal of increased cultural flexibility, even as they acknowledged that reaching this goal might involve discomfort. Indeed, many educators, parents, and community members argued that all children would learn from exposure to difference, because “you gotta learn how to deal with different people” and “once you’re interacting with people with many different social levels, stuff rubs off on all sides.” Nancy, a white woman who worked as an adjunct professor at a local college, was troubled by her son’s placement in a school that primarily served students living in public housing. She told me she sometimes worried about her son being “the only” white child in kindergarten (although there were actually several other white children in his class and the grade), but she hoped that he would learn from the experience. Nancy explained that, although she was concerned about the possibility that he would be socially isolated in the short-term, she also kept a longer-term goal

in mind: “I feel like you can be put in any situation after being the odd man out and feel comfortable, you know, so there’s something to that.” She hoped that by placing her child in a school where he might not immediately feel a sense of belonging, he would be able to belong anywhere.

The general consensus in both public meetings and private conversations was that diversity was – at least in theory – a desirable goal, a “shared symbol” that the community could agree upon (Posey-Maddox, 2014, p. 86). The Black principal of an elementary school told me about a PTA event for new kindergarten families in idyllic terms, explaining that the picnic was “beautiful” because it was “50/50. It looked like an Oreo cookie. Literally. You had 50% Black/Latino, 50% Caucasian.” This is a view of cross-racial unity as an aesthetic marker, divorced of political, social, or historical context (Giroux, 2006). The principal both celebrated and elided markers of difference; by conflating “Black/Latino” families in comparison to “Caucasian” families, she highlighted distinctions between white families and families of color. Indeed, many stakeholders discussed diversity in terms of “middle-class-slash-white” families, as Michael Silver, a white CEC member put it, arguing that while “we’re hopefully mixing up socioeconomic levels,” the “real goal is we want a racially diverse student body around the city.” Like Michael, many diversity advocates passionately described the value they placed on both racial and socioeconomic diversity, expressing an almost taken-for-granted belief that “a just community is one that is integrated across dimensions of social difference; heterogeneity is the explicit value” (Abu El-Haj, 2006, p. 63). By conflating diversity and integration, these stakeholders saw changes to school demographics as an expression of social progress.

Paradoxically, even as they discursively embraced racially diverse schools as an expression of a just community, both parents and educators seemed concerned that white

families could never be comfortable in a school in which they were the minority. One white mother explained at a community meeting that “people’s ideas of a diverse school means at least 40% white... fewer than that and parents wouldn’t even consider a school for their child.” By “parents,” this woman seemed to mean white parents who wanted their schools to be what Leonardo and Hunter (2007) have called “a controlled place of difference” that contains “the ‘right amount’ of ethnic and racial difference, but not too much” (p. 781). After all, too much difference could turn people off. In an interview, one white administrator at a gentrifying school anxiously detailed her students’ deficits:

There’s definitely a population of children here that are extremely needy, whether it’s emotionally [or] financially. They’ve been through experiences that young children shouldn’t have to go through. They’ve been traumatized. They’ve been removed from their parents through ACS cases. Their caregiver is maybe a drug addict, maybe incarcerated, so that’s an ongoing concern.... Then you have this whole demographic of families that are affluent coming in. It’s interesting to see how that would blend... I think that we need the children that have emotional needs or who act out or who maybe are more aggressive – I’m concerned that families that are not – that families are going to be more concerned about *their* children and think this might not be the right place for them. So we really need to be able to service the children that, you know, are in trauma or experiencing trauma or need counseling so that we do coexist as a community.

Even as she avoided using overtly racial language, this educator evoked images of racialized pathology. By listing the deficits of children who needed to be “serviced” rather than taught, she simultaneously dehumanized and marginalized them. As she saw it, the overwhelming neediness within her school community was worrisome not only because it traumatized children, but

because families with other choices might think “this might not be the right place for them.”

This educator’s priority was to retain the school’s growing diversity by making newcomers feel like they could belong in this school.

As I detail in the third section of my findings, many advantaged families shared these concerns. Others, however, saw themselves as solving the problems of schools that served primarily poor children of color. Stephanie Levy, a white parent who was herself a teacher, described her son’s diversifying school as challenged by low test scores and problematic student behavior. However, she wasn’t worried about these observations. She had faith in the school’s leadership and believed shifting student demographics would inevitably resolve these challenges: “diversity will neutralize, equalize” the problem of “kids are norming with each other.... They need to be not just surrounded by people whose experiences in life are very similar.” Like many integration advocates, Stephanie believed in the power of peer effects (Coleman et al., 2010; Kahlenberg, 2001). She saw low-income children of color being “surrounded” by people similar to themselves as inherently damaging. With almost missionary zeal, Stephanie described her decision to send her son to a school attended by very few children from white, professional families. She looked searchingly in my eyes, paused dramatically, and said that she thought there ought to be “a middle-class finger in every school.” Stephanie, like many other white, professional parents, saw diversity as an antidote to the ills of segregation; their children’s presence would improve the quality of education that children unlike their own would receive.

At times, Black stakeholders directly challenged this perception. At a CEC meeting, a Black parent spoke directly to the relationship between a school’s demographics and its reputation, saying, “I think people need to get it out of their heads that a successful school is a white school.” Perhaps as a response to these perceptions, some stakeholders, primarily Black,

explicitly rejected a vision of demographic diversity as necessary for educational excellence. At one public panel about school integration, a Black former principal admonished his audience not to forget that the school he had led, which had “all Black kids, all Black teachers” was a wonderful place. He explained that if white people are uncomfortable with sending their children to a Black school, that doesn’t matter, because Black children “don’t have to go to school with somebody else to be successful.”

Similarly, Principal Myers of M.S. 917, a white man widely known for his political stances, rejected the argument that proximity to whiteness was a prerequisite for learning. His goal was integration, not diversity. He told me that his choice to welcome white families into his school was pragmatic, rather than philosophical:

Black kids don’t need to sit next to white kids to learn. There's nothing wrong with the Black kids, or the Black teachers, or Black administrators. There’s nothing magical about the presence of white kids... But I knew – and people hate it, I mean, no one wants to acknowledge it – we will get more resources when there are white kids here. They will fix the bathrooms, and change the floors, and replace the roof, and get us air conditioners. Pausing here, Principal Myers acknowledged that others might disagree, because people might want to believe “that’s not true anymore.” He sharply dismissed that argument, shaking his head and saying flatly, “But no.” Pausing to explain, he reminded me that “green follows white.” Teachers who had witnessed the change in his school agreed. Unprompted, several staff told me that the biggest change since the school had diversified was to facilities and funding improvements. As one teacher put it, “the white middle-class people came with benefits.”

For these educators, the focus was on integration, rather than diversity, as a means to educational justice. They explicitly rejected the antiblackness underlying many arguments for

school integration (Dumas, 2016), as well as the resentment, self-interest, and racism that informed many white stakeholders' advocacy for school diversity (Horsford, 2019). An integrated school was not simply a diverse school where everybody feels they can belong; it was a school with resources that belong to everyone.

Belonging and Gentrification: The Loss of a Community Institution

In gentrifying neighborhoods such as District 41, Black stakeholders faced the possibility of becoming the minority in schools in which they had always been the majority. One Black parent expressed his concern about the ways that shifting demographics might change the school, saying "I don't want us to be in a state where we're making the school comfortable for the affluent white people coming in." In the vignette that follows, I draw from fieldnotes to describe the racialized tensions that surfaced during one CEC meeting about a proposed change to school zone lines. These tensions highlighted the relationships between Black stakeholders' concerns about losing their school and white stakeholders' concerns about losing advantage in the educational marketplace.

Snapshot: Debating the rezoning of P.S. 200 and P.S. 411. *Five minutes before the scheduled start time, the room for the District 41 Community Education Council meeting was overflowing. Chairs were crammed into rows facing a makeshift stage at the front of a repurposed classroom. District staff were busy locating additional folding chairs and asking the crowd at the door to make way for more people. All around me, people folded paper to make fans.*

CEC President and integration advocate Michael Silver – a white parent and small business owner who had sent his own children to schools serving almost exclusively low-income students of color – introduced two white men in suits from the DOE Office of District Planning (ODP). Standing next to PowerPoint slides, one of the planners described how his office had redrawn the boundary lines of P.S. 200, a highly well-regarded elementary school attended primarily by children of white professional families; some of these students would now be zoned for P.S. 411, a school that served almost exclusively poor families of color living in nearby New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing. The ODP representatives took great care to demonstrate that they had consulted extensively with families about where to draw these lines, explaining that it was at times difficult to decide “which specific block belongs with which specific kind of community.” Through these conversations, they had learned that residents of City Square – a sprawling apartment complex located between the two schools – were “connected and involved and invested” in P.S. 200. As a result of these conversations, they made sure to keep these apartments within the P.S. 200 zone, even though it might have been more straightforward to move them to the other side of the zoning line.

While the DOE appeared to view the rezoning as a logical solution to school overcrowding, community members seemed to see it as a potential threat to “their” public schools. When Michael Silver opened the floor for public comments, hands shot up across the room. A white man spoke first, sharing his gratitude that the DOE had recognized the “unique position of City Square” as one of the only “high-quality housing options for people who are part of the city’s dwindling middle class.”⁵ He described the painstaking research he and his wife had completed before purchasing an apartment in City Square; they’d talked to other families, taken a school tour, and traced the walk to school with their toddler. After two more

white parents similarly shared their relief that City Square would remain in the P.S. 200 zone, Michael Silver raised his eyebrows and asked, “No disrespect to City Square, but are there any P.S. 411 parents here?” Immediately, several people of color raised their hands high.

A Black woman rose and argued that the current school zones make clear what everybody already knew: “P.S. 411 was created to be exactly the kind of school it is, a high-poverty, segregated school.” She argued that the school zone was originally drawn with the goal of containing students living in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) projects. She stopped here to clarify that many people at P.S. 411 would embrace opportunities for greater racial and socioeconomic integration – if the community was engaged in this process. However, they had not been consulted about the rezoning until the middle of August. P.S. 200, in contrast, had been warned about the proposed changes several months before. She closed by reminding the room that “our needs are no less important than P.S. 200’s.” Around the room, heads nodded emphatically.

The debate over the rezoning of P.S. 411 was notable not because it was unique – contemporary observers noted that it shared many key characteristics with several other hotly-contested disputes over school zone lines and student assignment policies in New York City – but because resistance to the rezoning was not restricted to the privileged families who had expected their children to attend a school populated primarily by “families like us.” It also came from Black families concerned that they would lose a valued community asset. P.S. 411 had received additional funding over the past few years, enabling the school to add enrichment classes and STEM labs. Just as the school’s resources were growing and reputation was improving, the rezoning was announced. In the discussion of marginalization and displacement that follow, I explore some of the ways in which fears of gentrification and loss of community

were expressed by Black stakeholders. In my third section of findings (titled “Belonging, Choice, and Schooling as Property”), I return to some of the fears expressed by white stakeholders in the scene above.

Marginalization in the policymaking process. After more than five months of community debate, the final vote on the rezoning of P.S. 411 arrived. Alistair, a Black CEC member who grew up in nearby NYCHA housing and worked in the area surrounding the school, urged his neighbors to let go of the past. Their neighborhood was changing and so was their school. He told the packed auditorium: “People are holding on to what they believe belongs to them, but gentrification has surrounded the NYCHA housing. Gentrification is here. It’s not going back to the old neighborhood that we remember. Those times are gone.” However, many community members and residents of public housing refused to let go of an institution which had long served as a “community anchor” (Lipman, 2011, p. 66). For them, the rezoning was not a move toward school integration or the creation of a school that welcomes “everybody.” Rather, they argued, it was gentrification. Like residential gentrification, this school gentrification hinged upon the marginalization and displacement of people of color (Freidus, 2016; Lipman, 2008; Marcuse, 1985; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; J. L. Smith & Stovall, 2008).

Community members argued throughout the rezoning process that the DOE had marginalized the NYCHA families who lived in the P.S. 411 zone. During the first CEC meeting, a Black P.S. 411 father told the DOE planners that “instead of kind of looking at us, we were looked through or looked around.” A Black CEC member at that same meeting expressed concerns that City Square families had “voiced out” and influenced the policymaking process. At subsequent meetings, African American community members demanded to be heard. In one of a

series of town halls about the proposed rezoning, a pastor in a local church strode to the microphone in the P.S. 411 auditorium and attacked the rezoning plan, saying that the white professional families are “new community members,” but “there was already a community in place at this school.” He argued that ignoring the “obvious racial tension” between the two communities in the hope that “everyone will flow together” is “naïve at best.” He closed his speech with a Black Power salute and promptly received a standing ovation from almost every Black person in the audience.

The defiant response of some Black stakeholders to the proposed rezoning may have taken the DOE by surprise, but their arguments were not new. Community members frequently reminded both each other and the DOE that “a fight for a school is never just about a school” (Ewing, 2018, p. 47). As Kimani argues in the quotation that introduces this article, P.S. 411 had always been segregated, due both to residential redlining and to the DOE’s longstanding zone lines. Segregated schools had been built to contain their children, rather than teach them (Ewing, 2018). In the face of this oppressive history, the community took great pride in P.S. 411’s growing reputation for excellence. Then, the city not only decided to dispossess them of this community anchor, but failed to consult them, while extensively involving families on the other side of the boundary line. Kimani explained to me later that much of the Black stakeholders’ opposition

came out of anxiety of not understanding what the zoning was, which lets you know they weren’t properly informed about the process. They weren’t educated about the process. Nobody went across the street and said, “Hey, we’re going to hold a meeting and we’re going to talk about what the rezoning entails. We’re going to talk about the history.”

Kimani continued with a rhetorical appeal to policymakers: “Give respect to where it’s due by acknowledging that these people in this community are part of the community and the development as a whole.” Many Black stakeholders deeply resented the idea that nobody at the DOE was hearing or valuing them, especially given the policy’s potential impact on one of the few remaining pillars of their community amidst neighborhood gentrification.

While P.S. 411 families may have been unique in forcefully voicing their sense of marginalization, they were not unique in the feeling that low-income communities and communities of color were frequently marginalized in New York City. During my observation of District 41 diversity committee meetings, Black educators and community organizers frequently worried aloud that it would be difficult to get input from all constituents because “the wealthy are the people at the table.” District 41 administrators told me that at community engagement sessions, families living in the almost exclusively Black, not-yet-gentrified part of the district had to be reassured that a desegregation pilot would be designed for “their kids, not for us.” These constituents asked pointedly why policy changes were being discussed only now that privileged newcomers were arriving in the neighborhood.

Stakeholders seemed more explicitly concerned about class than race in moments such as these, but the district’s changing demographics – as well as the tendency to use coded language – made their concerns difficult to disentangle. While some middle-class Black families had been in the neighborhood for generations, others were newcomers who arrived as gentrification began. However, in both public meetings and interviews with me, middle-class Black parents explicitly and consistently aligned themselves with neighborhood old-timers, regardless of how long they themselves had lived in the neighborhood. Like some other members of the Black middle-class, they seemed to see themselves as advocates for a shared community as it faced an uncertain

future – a stance which, at times, failed to recognize tensions between their own priorities and those of their neighbors (Pattillo, 2007). Despite these tensions, Black newcomers and long-timers alike appeared to fear losing the institutions that belonged to their community.

“Tipping,” marginalization, and displacement from the school community. Black stakeholders used metaphors that graphically illustrated their fears that diversifying schools, like diversifying neighborhoods, marked the loss of a space that had once belonged to them. District 41 educator and lifelong resident Annie Hames reminded me that some people in the neighborhood described the process by which advantaged families chose a school as developing a “critical mass.” She argued that longtime school community members and Black people like herself might see this term as “negative” and “scary,” because it signals that “we’re going to take [the school] over.” Rather than approaching the school with the message “let’s come together and make this school great with the people that are there,” the process leaves “the people who are there already really feel like they’re being invaded.” Echoing the claims of Neil Smith (1996, p. 22), who argues that “the myth of the frontier is an invention that rationalizes the violence of gentrification and displacement,” Annie told me, “It’s like Cowboys and Indians... It’s a little bit like Columbus ‘discovered’ America.” Drawing from a similar discourse of gentrification as conquest, a P.S. 411 parent leader proclaimed at a district meeting, “We don’t need any gallivanting knights coming in there and trying to change 411 into an image that it’s not.”

Analogies describing newcomers as conquistadores and knights illustrate both the depth and the complexity of Black stakeholders’ fears that they would lose control over their community institutions. Like long-time members of gentrifying communities, parents and educators were angered and alarmed by a process that signaled “a loss of self, community and

culture” (Cahill, 2007, p. 219). They heard the language of “economic integration” and “social balance” as code for an influx of white and wealthy neighbors (N. Smith, 1996, p. 160). In almost every public forum I observed and in many of my interviews with Black parents, teachers, and administrators, people expressed a widely-held fear that diversifying schools might “tip.” One Black teacher explained to me:

If our classrooms are a mix of New York City, we have Caucasian kids, we have Arabic kids, we have Black and Latino kids, then that’s cool. But if we’re all shifting in one direction, then I think it’s [the school is] kinda losing its identity. We’re going from one extreme to the next extreme. So that’s more my worry there.

The principal at P.S. 411 said she believed that many of her staff shared this teacher’s fear; as the student population changed, teachers wondered, “Are we still the school as we know the school?” These educators worried that, as the student body changed, their schools’ sense of purpose and community might also be lost (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Posey-Maddox, 2014).

However, fears about “tipping” went beyond anxiety about school identity. Teachers, administrators, and long-timer families expressed concerns that the school would no longer belong to them. As a Black P.S. 411 parent told a room full of parents, “When rich people come, they have the money to force people to do what they want.” At multiple diversifying schools, I heard stories about groups of privileged families conspiring with each other to predetermine the agenda for PTA meetings. The fears of longtime community members were justified: a growing body of literature documents significant changes in the culture, decision-making, and governance processes of diversifying urban schools (Cucchiara, 2013; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2016). They no longer belong there.

At a meeting of the District 41 desegregation committee, members shared tales of unequal treatment as schools diversified. A Black community organizer argued that when schools got more diverse things quickly became “nasty and ugly.” An influx of white parents in the school was often accompanied by a rapid increase of tension within the school community, because while “everybody said they wanted a diverse student body,” there soon appeared to be two or three “distinct groups of families” rather than a united school community. Nadine Ferguson, a West Indian educator and committee member, shook her head as she listened, then shared her story about having sent her own son to a school that was beginning to attract white professional families, more than ten years earlier. She’d been “sickened” by the way the principal spoke about bringing “special people” to the school, saying she was quite clear what he meant: “we weren’t special to him.”

Despite multiple assurances that tipping was not the goal of school diversity and rezoning policies, Black families could not easily shake their fears of displacement and marginalization. Kimani described the gentrification process to me as slow but painful:

So basically, it’s like someone took a box of sand and just started sifting. Just sifting it out and then all of the sudden they’re just starting to shake it out. All the dust, all the fine sand is being just dwindled out and then all the rough ends are basically going to be dumped. That’s basically what’s happening. You’re sifting it to the point where everything looks fine, and just nice, and soft, and looks great, and then all the sudden what you do with the rest? You just drop it away. Those are the individuals like, “You know what? I’m not going to compete with a giant. I can’t compete with these giants. There’s no way I can buy a two-million-dollar brownstone. There’s no way I can afford \$2,600 in rent. There’s no way. I have to move.”

Families who had been attending P.S. 411 for generations were concerned that school gentrification, like residential gentrification, would necessarily involve their eventual displacement and dispossession. Throughout the rezoning hearings, Black P.S. 411 families expressed fears that “these people want to push our kids out of this spot” and the DOE was letting it happen. These fears were only heightened when families came to share their concerns with Schools Chancellor Fariña at a community town hall. After residents had expressed concerns about segregation, enrollment, and distribution of resources, the chancellor encouraged the District 41 Superintendent to “sell” local schools to the families moving into the area. Fariña suggested the superintendent should have lunch with local real estate agents and leverage relationships with developers in an effort to send newcomer families to district schools. In doing so, the schools chancellor embraced the market-based logics of “choice” and “development” that mark neoliberal policy approaches (Lipman, 2011).

Few parents or advocates believed that DOE staff members were explicitly motivated by racism. Like other Black communities dispossessed of schools by neoliberal policies, stakeholders often focused on the impact, rather than the intent, of these decisions (Ewing, 2018). What, for example, would happen when less than 60% of students were eligible for Free or Reduced-Price lunch and the school lost vital Title I funding? How would the school shift its priorities and its programming to accommodate the concerns of advantaged families? These stakeholders charged that the DOE’s planning and messaging were symptomatic of urban planning and educational policy-making processes that consistently prioritize the concerns of white and professional families over those of low-income communities of color (Cucchiara, 2013; Lipman, 2008; J. L. Smith & Stovall, 2008). The gentrification of a school, like the gentrification of a neighborhood, would entail the loss of a beloved community institution.

Belonging, Choice, and Schooling as Property

If Black families feared that they would lose access to the schools that had long belonged to them, white families had analogous fears of their own. Like many of the advantaged parents in the meeting about school rezoning, neighborhood newcomers saw procuring access to quality schools as central to good parenting. At later hearings about the rezoning of P.S. 200 and P.S. 411, parents – almost exclusively white – lined up at the microphones, waiting their turn to share stories about how they had purchased their homes based on school zones, and that this “education strategy” was “the most important choice parents can make.” CEC member Susan Willis told me, sighing heavily, that she felt some sympathy with advantaged parents “who felt sort of stopped in their tracks or like a deer caught in the headlights, whatever cliché you want to use” by changes to their school zone. They were in shock because they believed, “We abided by whatever rules we thought were in our head.” However, she shrugged, “One could also, if you know the city well, have a little bit more of a dispassionate view and say, ‘That sounds a little entitled.’”

A white woman and a freelancer who had recently pushed out of her long-time neighborhood by skyrocketing rents, Susan had very little patience with entitlement. Other families didn’t see it that way. During discussions of changes to student assignment, affluent families frequently argued that their personal and financial choices had secured them the right to certain, quality schools. These schools belonged to them. Several underlying assumptions were notable in these comments: that some schools will always be better than others; that individual choice is a right that supersedes other, competing concerns; and that public schools are goods that can be selected from a marketplace (Cucchiara, 2013; Labaree, 1997).

During intense debates over proposed changes to DOE policies, the link between real estate and school quality became explicit. A news report quoted outraged parents whose homes had been rezoned to low-income schools: “It will take a hundred thousand dollars off the value of my apartment... We moved here for that school, and that school is kind of our right.” A caller to a local public radio show explained that “the reason that the real estate here is so high, it’s because of that school.” And homeowners were not alone in their assumptions about property rights. When a reporter asked Mayor Bill de Blasio why the city could not create rezone schools to promote integration, de Blasio replied that you have to “respect” families who had “made massive life decisions and investments because of which school their kid would go to” (Wall, 2015). Several times, I heard advocates for P.S. 411 marvel at the presence of multiple city council members and state representatives at meetings about the school rezoning. They wondered aloud what it would take to get this public attention dedicated to the needs of their community, rather than the fears of families who had been rezoned from P.S. 200 to P.S. 411. It was clear to all parties that affluent parents could leverage the “sheer political clout” required to demand the attention of politicians and policy-makers (Noguera, 2003, p. 33).

Most advantaged families explained their fears about changes to school assignment policies as based in concerns about their children’s learning and growth. They simply could not believe that their kids would receive a quality education in schools that served predominantly low-income children of color. However, as one mother explained in a public comment following a news article, they also feared that their families were being asked “to accept poorer conditions in the name of equality.” In contrast, advantaged families frequently expressed confidence that low-income students of color would benefit from the presence of their children in the classroom.

When the host of the public radio show asked that same caller if he would send his son to P.S. 411, the seller said no:

We would be afraid that the kids around him wouldn't have that kind of, I guess, preparedness that he is surrounded by now. It really is that. I think the children moving to that school over here by the projects, it will probably raise the children around that school to a higher bar, to a higher level. However, that's not what we bargained for when we moved here.

Newcomer families saw themselves as having made a deal with the city through which, in return for living in certain neighborhoods, they would be guaranteed to access to schools attended by families like their own.

Indeed, many advantaged families appeared more interested in *who* a school served than with the school's resources, or even its test scores, as a marker of quality. They saw racially and socioeconomically segregated schools as troubled or unhealthy – not because they provided unequal access to educational resources to low-income children of color, but simply because of the presence of large numbers of low-income children of color. Parents were likely to explicitly cite concerns related to students' socioeconomic status, rather than race, but the terms in which they framed their responses were frequently racialized. For example, Nancy, the mother who had expressed fears about her son being “the only” white child in his class, told me vivid, racialized stories of her observations of “project behavior,” “aggressive parenting,” and “behavioral issues” in the hallways. While she felt a sense of moral obligation to support school integration, she could not move past her concern that she might be hurting her son: “I don't want my child to suffer because I'm trying to be considerate of other people too... I want to root for the school, but it just makes me nervous sometimes. [*She pauses for a beat, searching my face*

anxiously for my opinion.] Is that class wild?” Nancy’s fears about student behavior relied on tropes of wild, uncivilized Black children (Ferguson, 2001). She anxiously positioned families like her own “as civilizing agents and low-income children and parents as the symbolic Other” (Cucchiara, 2013, p. 110). Although she felt a social responsibility to “bring up” the school, she wasn’t sure it was possible for the institution to become a space where her son would belong. The following year, Nancy moved her child to another school.

Like many others, Nancy associated institutions that served low-income communities of color with pathology. These associations were deeply held, and at times flew in the face of empirical data. Observers of several school rezonings noted that many of the schools which advantaged parents tried so hard to avoid had smaller student-teacher ratios, more space, and greater access to resources than other schools these families considered desirable. Susan Willis, who met with families that had been rezoned from P.S. 200 to P.S. 411 as part of her work for the CEC, told me that they frequently made claims about their new school “being of poor quality or being dangerous or this and that, without any nuance, depth of real knowledge, just hearsay.... Whether they meant it or not, sounding incredibly racist and ignorant.” In a lunchtime conversation in the teachers’ lounge, P.S. 411 teachers noted that a local news article had questioned their qualifications, saying they’d “have to be retrained” to teach the incoming students. They were hurt and angry. As one Black teacher explained, she’d worked really hard to become a good teacher, and “now these people are going to question my intelligence?” While both Black and white P.S. 411 staff were offended and angry by perceptions of their school as low-quality, Black educators appeared particularly affected. They were particularly likely to raise the topic during informal conversations with each other, as well as interviews with me. In these conversations, they appeared to perceive public perceptions as personal attacks and, at

times, part of a broader “scrutiny of Black performance” that affected both students and teachers in their school (Royal & Dodo Seriki, 2018, p. 197).

Several members of the P.S. 411 staff, both Black and white, told me that they’d stopped attending rezoning meetings in an effort to protect themselves from hearing derogatory remarks about the school and their professional work. P.S. 411 stakeholders spoke with pride of their school’s accomplishments; they and their advocates resented the fact that the institution was the object of public scrutiny, while the quality of P.S. 200 was taken for granted. They felt that their school had been summarily judged “not good enough” for families new to the neighborhood.

Ultimately, the CEC approved the DOE’s proposal to rezone P.S. 411. When I spoke with CEC and community members over the course of the year following the rezoning, several people told me the same story. In voices that were alternately outraged or disbelieving, loud or hushed, they said that one of the anonymous public comments they had received during the rezoning debate requested a favor, if the rezoning were to actually pass: Could the school entrance be moved to the other side of the building? The families from P.S. 200 wanted to be able to avoid walking past the public housing while taking their children to school. It was difficult for many newcomer families to believe that the schools serving NYCHA projects such as these could possibly be the right place for their children. Even as advantaged families feared they might lose their right to “high quality schools,” they argued that they simply could never belong in spaces like P.S. 411.

Conclusion

At first glance, commitments to the rights of some families to access superior schools may appear to be rooted in class, rather than race. However, debates over access to quality

education are not (and never could be) race-neutral (Dumas, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lipsitz, 2011). The claims of parents rezoned from P.S. 200 to P.S. 411 were rooted in a long history of racialized dispossession and the “legal legitimization of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline, while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination” (Harris, 1993, p. 1715). Because whiteness has long conferred both private and public benefits, and because the legal system has legitimated these forms of social advantage as individual rights, many community members imagined “their neighborhoods, and the public schools in their neighborhoods, as their own” (Dumas, 2014, p. 306). This sense of ownership led an audience at a community forum to ask whether homeowners could be given priority over renters for seats at popular schools. As Dumas argues, arguments such as these are “never articulated as, or even imagined as, a racial entitlement” (p. 307). However, these economic advantages are rooted in racial advantage; they shape the logics of belonging.

Indeed, racialized perceptions and systems of advantage shaped intersecting discourses of belonging in discussions of New York City schools. Questions of diversity and integration – or who belonged in a school – could not be separated from questions of possession and property rights – or to whom a school belonged. These modes of belonging clearly influenced the rezoning process, prompting the ODP planners to think out loud about how school zone lines could best reflect “which specific block belongs with which specific kind of community.” As Lipsitz (2011) argues, segregated public spaces (such as public housing or schools) are racialized, not only demographically, but also ideologically:

Concentrated residential segregation enacted in concrete spatial form the core ideology of white supremacy—that Black people “belonged” somewhere else. In a deft paraphrase, Charles Mills represents the moral geography of whiteness as “saying” to Blacks that

“you are what you are in part because you originate from a certain kind of space, and that space has those properties in part because it is inhabited by creatures like yourself.” (p. 28)

If this is the case, then what would it mean for white families to send their children to that “certain kind of space”?

Difficult questions about race and belonging, however, are rarely asked out loud. Instead, many advocates and researchers have relied upon the “happy talk” of diversity (J. M. Bell & Hartmann, 2007) to express their hopes that changes to school demographics would improve school quality. As a result of these silences, broader questions about the nature of belonging in schools with shifting demographics have gone largely unexamined. Advocates frequently prefer to focus on stakeholders’ hopes, rather than their fears, for diversifying schools. However, moments of perceived crisis such as the rezoning of P.S. 411 can push stakeholders articulate their assumptions about to whom schools belonged and who belonged in what kinds of schools. Fears, rather than hopes, dominated many of the public conversations in P.S. 411. At the heart of these discussions and debates lay another critical question: Who would benefit from diversifying schools?

While many advocates celebrated demographic change as a form of integration and a learning opportunity for all students, Black stakeholders concerned about gentrification and white stakeholders preoccupied with their loss of property made explicit the ways in which their interests diverged (D. A. Bell, 1980). By framing demographic change as gentrification, rather than integration, many Black stakeholders flipped the script about who benefits from increased school diversity. Invoking images of Black loss and white entitlement, they protested that changes to school demographics would result in the Black community, once again, losing a

valued community asset. Like some of the original New York City activists for community control, these stakeholders argued that segregation was not just a matter of student demographics; it was also a question of the degree to which schools were controlled by outsiders of any race, rather than rooted in the hopes and dreams of the communities they served (H. Lewis, 2013; Stulberg, 2008). They sounded the alarm that “whiteness is the face of gentrification” and “the more of them who come in, the more of us are forced to leave” (Cahill, 2007, p. 208). While racial balance and cultural flexibility might be admirable goals – and even goals they often shared – these Black stakeholders demanded that their right to the city be considered an equally important priority.

Interrelated processes of demographic change, such as school desegregation and gentrification, offer an opportunity to “desegregate the research” on Black perspectives, white policy interests, and theorizing race in education (Horsford, 2019). Color-evasive policymaking efforts frequently reflect a “possessive investment in whiteness” (Lipsitz, 2006, 2011) that ignores the cumulative, continuing effects of racial discrimination, within and outside of schools. While Black stakeholders in New York were displaced from and marginalized within educational institutions and policy, many white families argued that their property rights to quality education were being threatened. Even as they made their case to local politicians and educational policymakers, newcomers to gentrifying areas were dispossessing Black families not only of their homes, but also of their schools – paired resources that are frequently the anchors of community history and the pillars of community pride, despite the ways in which policies have rendered them under-resourced and disinvested (Ewing, 2018). Black and white stakeholders may both see moments of demographic shift as threatening their access to the schools which rightfully belonged to them. To name these competing conceptual frameworks is not to render

them equivalent. Rather, we can use them as an opportunity to better understand the multiple ways that modes of belonging influence educational policy, discourse, and practice.

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Notes

¹ Following Dumas (2016), I choose to capitalize “Black” while leaving “white” lowercase in order to reflect the differences in their social meaning.

² Like all names (except those of public figures) used in this project, this is a pseudonym. In order to protect the anonymity of individuals and communities, I have at times paraphrased quotations from public meetings or media coverage and I have not cited the sources from which some of them originate. I have also slightly altered details that might identify specific schools.

³ Unless noted otherwise, all quotations are based on fieldnotes, audio recordings of public meetings, or interviews.

⁴ This changed over time, as I continued to attend meetings even after the close of this phase of data collection. In subsequent years, I became a much more active participant in these discussions, although I continued to periodically jot down observations and write up memos about events that confirmed or challenged my developing analysis.

⁵ As noted previously, discussion of the “middle class” status of gentrifying families was commonplace but at times misleading. A two-bedroom apartment in City Square typically sold for approximately \$700,000 in 2015. The area’s 2015 median income was approximately \$50,000 per year.

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