From "Middle Class" to "Trailer Trash:" Teachers' Perceptions of White Students in a Predominately Minority School

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This article explores how teachers perceived and interacted with white students in a predominately racial/ethnic minority school in Texas. On the basis of ethnographic data, the author found that different teachers expressed different views of the family and class backgrounds of white students in this setting, which ranged from "middle class" to "trailer trash." These views of social class stemmed from how teachers interpreted the whiteness of students in this predominately minority context and influenced how they reacted to these students academically. An interesting finding was that the black teachers and the white teachers had different perceptions of these white students. The black teachers typically saw the white students as middle class and good students, whereas the white teachers tended to view the students as low income and unremarkable students. The results of this study clarify the processes of teachers' perceptions and white advantage.

Most scientific and journalistic accounts of predominately minority urban schools have (understandably) focused on African American and Latino students, but many predominately racial/ethnic minority schools across the United States actually contain a small numerical minority of white students. These white students have typically been dismissed as anomalies. However, I argue that much can be learned from focusing on, rather than ignoring, these students. Specifically, these students present an especially interesting case for exploring how race, social class, and place intersect to structure educational advantages. Many scholars have argued that schools and teachers tend implicitly or unwittingly to favor white students over students of other racial/ethnic backgrounds (see, e.g., Delpit 1995; Fine et al. 1997; McIntyre 1997; see R. F. Ferguson 1998 for a review). But do white students still receive such educational advantages within predominately low-income and racial/ethnic minority schools?

In this article, I pursue this question using ethnographic data from a low-income and minority school in Texas. I focus on a key intermediary in the academic experiences of white students in this school: their teachers. I found that the academic advantages of these white students depended largely on how the teachers perceived these students' race, class, and academic ability. Different teachers expressed different views of the family and class backgrounds of white students in this setting, which ranged from "middle class" to "trailer trash." These views of social class emanated from how the teachers interpreted whiteness in the context and history of this neighborhood and school and shaped how they reacted to these students academically.

In describing the interactions and percep-

tions in this school, I show how race and class work in combination. It may be helpful heuristically to separate these concepts, but race and class are often interrelated in complex ways that tend to defy a clear division. Often in social interaction, one of these concepts symbolizes the other. In this article, I argue that students' race—in this case whiteness—symbolized a particular class background to the teachers. Those who linked whiteness to a higher class and status position tended to react more positively to white students and to perceive them as more academically able. Furthermore, how the teachers interpreted whiteness varied according to their racial backgrounds. The black teachers typically saw the white students as being middle class and good students, whereas the white teachers tended to view the white students as low income and unremarkable students. These perceptions of class background and academic ability stemmed from how the different teachers made sense of the unique situation of the white students in this predominately minority context.

STUDYING WHITE STUDENTS

While most research on educational inequality has focused on racial/ethnic minority students, a growing number of studies have critically examined the experiences of white students. Rather than look solely at the disadvantages that minority students face, this research has asked how white students gain advantages in educational settings (Blau 2003; Fine et al. 1997; Lewis 2001). The concept of white privilege is central to this work (Blau 2003; McIntosh 1998). White privilege refers to the idea that white people, in general, including white students, profit from hidden institutional benefits that stem from their whiteness. Lareau and Horvat (1999:42), for instance, found that whiteness functions as an invisible but powerful "cultural resource," aiding white parents and their children in school settings. In Bourdieu's terms, whiteness can be seen as a form of capital that privileges white students academically (Lareau and Horvat 1999; see also, Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Much of the work on white privilege, however, has inadequately disentangled the impacts of race and social class. White middle- and upper-class students undoubtedly benefit from their whiteness as well as their class background, but this line of research has not often explored whiteness in the lives of poor and working-class students.

Bettie (2000, 2002, 2003), however, has sought to show how race and class (along with gender) intersect in the lives of white students. For example, she compared white working-class students with Mexican American working-class students in a mixed-race school (Bettie 2002) and argued that although their class background hinders their upward mobility through education, white working-class students still benefit from their race. For instance, "white working-class students can escape tracking more easily [than can Mexican American working-class students] because their class does not as easily appear encoded onto the body" (Bettie 2002:420). Thus, according to Bettie, the whiteness of students may signal high status, regardless of the students' actual class backgrounds.

The process through which teachers develop such perceptions of race and class remains underexplored, however. Much ethnographic work has documented how youths develop race- and class-based identities that impel them either to embrace school or to disengage from it (Bettie 2003; Flores-Gonzalez 2002; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; MacLeod 1995; Willis 1977). In addition, several studies have suggested that teachers' perceptions of students play a profound role in shaping students' educational experiences (Alexander, Entwisle, and Thompson 1987; Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, and Brewer 1995; R. F. Ferguson 1998; Muller, Katz, and Dance, 1999; Oates 2003; Rist 1970). But neither avenue of research has thoroughly examined how teachers actually *perceive* students' race and class identities. To understand the full impact of race and class in the educational experiences of students, including white students, sociologists must explore the process through which teachers interpret these characteristics.

PERCEIVING RACE AND SOCIAL CLASS

There is reason to believe that how people interpret race and social class varies significantly according to their social contexts and backgrounds. Furthermore, the social position one holds or attempts to project does not always directly correspond to the social position that others interpret. Observers tend to rely especially on visible cues and social context to develop interpretations of those they interact with (Anderson 1990). These cues are often highly interwoven, so that some can imply others. Because of its high social visibility, race often signals a range of characteristics, including social-class position. Feagin (1991), for instance, reported that several middle-class African Americans whom he interviewed complained that many white strangers assumed they were from a lower social class solely because they were black. Similarly, Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991) found that many employers in their study perceived black (and, to some extent, Latino) applicants as "lower-class" "inner-city" residents and therefore (in their view) as undesirable workers. In contrast, the employers tended to equate white applicants with middle-class status and therefore considered them desirable workers.

Thus, whiteness often signals middle-class status, and it may be this very signal that results in forms of white privilege. However, social class carries its own identifiers, the perception of which may alter the perception of race, including whiteness (West and Fenstermaker 1995). For example, certain styles of speech, dress, and behavior (Bernstein 1986; Heath 1983), as well as urban, predominately minority, residential locations (Anderson 1990; Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991) can be interpreted as "lower class." Observers, including teachers, undoubtedly rely on their understanding of neighborhood location and context, along with attention to styles of interaction, to develop their interpretation of a person's social background. Teachers may react negatively to students who exhibit such "lower-class" and "street-based" markers (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Dance 2002; Valenzuela 1999). Most previous research in the United States has focused on the educational experiences of racial/ethnic minority students who carry such markers. Few have considered how teachers may view *white* students who live in predominately minority areas and may display these "street-based" styles. How may teachers react to these unusual white students?

Teachers' reactions will undoubtedly depend on how they interpret this unique form of whiteness. That whiteness in predominately poor and racial/ethnic minority locations can acquire a different meaning than can whiteness in predominately white locations (Hartigan 1999; Perry 2002) points to the importance of context, especially residential context, in framing perceptions of race. Residential segregation typically inhibits the wide interaction between members of different racial groups, especially white people and black people (Massey and Denton 1993). Thus, people's understandings of whiteness (and race, in general) tend to be influenced by the surrounding racial context, as well as how they have interpreted whiteness in the past.

Perhaps because of infrequent and fleeting cross-racial social interactions, people perceive those they consider to be from their own racial group differently from those they consider to be from a separate racial group (Hill 2002). The less actual contact that people have with those they perceive as being from a different racial group, the more they may be influenced to draw on cultural assumptions in perceiving members of this group, which perpetuates ideas about essential racial differences and qualities (Allport 1958; Omi and Winant 1994). In this way, "race," along with the particular ideas it may represent, becomes part of how we organize our social experience. As Hill (2002:106) stated, the "perception of other-race individuals is filtered through a powerful social prism" that is based on one's own racial background and racialized experience.

For teachers, such a prism could refract different understandings and interpretations of the class background and academic ability of their students. Black teachers and white teachers, to the extent that they have had dif-

ferent residential and social experiences, may have different perceptions of whiteness in a predominately minority context. Whites who live in predominately white suburban areas tend to view predominately black areas as dangerous, poor, and exotic (Farley et al. 1994; Lewis 2001). African Americans tend to view predominately black areas less negatively, probably because they have often had closer physical and emotional connections to such areas (Collins 1990; Farley et al. 1994). In the case of white students in a predominately racial/ethnic minority urban area, one may expect that these different frames of reference that are based on teachers' race could influence teachers' interpretations of these students.

This article shows that how the teachers responded to the white students in a predominately minority school differed according to the teachers' race and that this differential response affected these students' academic experiences. It is interesting that the African American teachers tended to perceive and interact with the white students more positively than did the white teachers. Although this finding may seem counterintuitive, the whiteness of these students had a different meaning for the white and African American teachers in this context. The African American teachers viewed the white students as having relatively high status, whereas the white teachers viewed them as having relatively low status. These different understandings of whiteness stemmed largely from how the white and the black teachers interpreted this predominately minority area and school and the importance that they assigned to race on the basis of their own racialized experiences. While this dynamic created certain advantages for white students in the black teachers' classrooms, it did not result in these teachers developing stronger relationships with these students. Instead, as I argue, for the black teachers, whiteness appeared to represent a "symbolic" form of capital (see Bourdieu 1986) that linked these students to a larger system of privilege and power and encouraged favorable treatment of them.

METHODS

The data for this study came from a two-year ethnographic study of Matthews Middle School (a pseudonym, as are all the names in this article), located in a large Texas city. This school encompassed the seventh and eighth grades and enrolled over 1,000 students. During the course of the study, which began in August 2000 and continued through June 2002, I observed in classrooms, the library, the lunchroom, and outside areas after school. From August to December 2000, I visited the school only a few times, but starting in January 2001, I began to visit it more regularly. From January 2001 through June 2002, I observed at the school two to four days a week every week that the school was in session. I volunteered as a tutor both within classrooms and after school. I conducted semistructured interviews with the teachers and administrators, conversed with most of the teachers, conversed with and tutored many students, and conducted a survey of the students. I attended after-school activities, such as sporting events, club meetings, and various festivals and performances. During my time at the school, most of the teachers and students became familiar with me. The principal referred to me as "one of the staff," and many students knew me as "Mr. Ed," a college student who was "doing a research project" at the school.

Much of my time at the school was focused on classroom observations. My classroom observations did not follow a set pattern according to particular students or teachers. Rather, I tried to vary my observations as much as possible to cover a range of teachers, grades, and subjects. But I did observe some classrooms more than others for various reasons, such as because I was asked specifically to tutor in those classes or I found the student composition and dynamics particularly interesting. I generally observed about three classes during the days that I visited the school. When I was not participating as a tutor in a classroom, I typically wrote notes from observations in a small notebook as they occurred. When I helped in a class or sensed that my note taking might appear obtrusive in a situation, I wrote down notes as

soon as possible afterward (see Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). I also wrote down my conversations with teachers and students in classrooms as soon as possible after they occurred, usually in the school library, lunchroom, or my car. I did not use my conversations with the teachers or students outside classroom situations or any statement that was prefaced with "off the record" as direct data (see also, Spradley 1979), although such conversations did affect my general thinking.

I tape-recorded two interviews with teachers, but because of the uneasiness that tape-recording caused the interviewees, I wrote down the other interviews as I conducted them (I conducted 14 formal interviews of teachers in all).[1] I interviewed teachers with different levels of experience (from 1 year to almost 30 years), racial backgrounds (approximately half were white and half were African American), and subject areas. These interviews followed a semistructured format. I used an interview schedule, but occasionally deviated from this guide to pursue topics of interest that I did not have specific questions for. I also altered the guide somewhat as I became more acquainted with the field. However, I followed the same basic schedule with all the interviewees, particularly in the second year of my research, when I conducted the bulk of the interviews. All the interviews occurred in the teachers' classrooms during their off-periods and lasted about one hour each. When I was unsure of an interviewee's statement, I asked him or her for clarification. If I was unsure about the wording of a statement made to me or that I overheard, I did not record it as a quote. Thus, while the quotes presented here are not verbatim, they are reasonably accurate.

Although I observed many different classes, teachers, and students, the majority of my observations concentrated on classes and interactions involving white students. According to the school records when I began research at the school (2000–01), the student body was 47 percent African American, 40 percent Hispanic, 9 percent Asian, and 4 percent white, with 60 percent of the students receiving free or reduced-price lunches.[2] The neighborhood surrounding the school was predominately working class and minority, but not located in the central part of the city and not as impoverished as many central-city middle schools were.[3] The neighborhood and school experienced a rapid demographic change during the 1980s, when the white student population, once the overwhelming majority, declined steadily. During my observation period, the student body had only a handful of white students, about 30–40 each year that I conducted fieldwork.

I chose Matthews for several reasons. First, the relatively mixed racial and class composition created a context that highlighted how people develop an understanding of these concepts, especially regarding white students, the main focus of my research. The middle school period also intrigued me. Few ethnographies have explored middle school, but it is a crucial time for both identity formation and organizational stratification procedures (i.e., tracking and course sequencing) that shape future academic opportunities (Dauber, Alexander, and Entwisle 1996; Gamoran 1992; Stevenson, Schiller, and Schneider 1994). In addition, Texas was an interesting location for the study. Several recent school ethnographies have been conducted in California (e.g., Bettie 2003; Lewis 2003; Perry 2002). Texas is similar to California in its rapidly increasing multiracial and immigrant population, particularly in cities. However, its southern legacy distinguishes it from California, and its African American, Mexican, and Anglo influences have historically generated complicated interactions of race and class (Foley 1997; Montejano 1987). Texas's southern legacy was especially important for my study for two main reasons. First, poor white people of southern origin have often been characterized as "white trash," a term that indicates a denigrated form of whiteness (Foley 1997; Hartigan 1997). Second, African Americans in the South have historically been expected to show deference to whites and have often faced harsh consequences if they did not (Glenn 2002).

The faculty of Matthews was roughly two thirds African American and one third white, and the principal was an African American woman.[4] Because the school employed few

Latino and Asian American teachers and my larger study centered on white students, the framework for this article follows a black-white dichotomy (this framework does not suggest that how the teachers viewed and reacted to Latino and Asian American students was unimportant; however, I explore these stories in more depth in Morris in press). Like Matthews, the student body of the school district as a whole was predominately black and Latino, but several schools on the outskirts of the district were predominately white, and most of the district administrators were white. Several black teachers at Matthews described the district administrators as biased and racist, stating that these administrators did not give minority schools and teachers the respect that they deserved.

I analyzed the data in a similar way to the modified version of the grounded-theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), advocated by Emerson et al. (1995). That is, I remained relatively open to making new discoveries from the data, but entered the field with a broad focus in mind and developed ideas through data collection that shaped the way I approached subsequent data. I used the focused-coding method to code my data (see Emerson et al. 1995:160–62), identifying key themes that I interpreted as important to the processes of race, class, gender, and academic experiences at the school. I entered the field with a broad interest in race, class, and gender inequality and a focus on the numerical minority of white students. After I spent some time in the field, I narrowed this interest to more-specific subthemes, one of which concerned teachers' perceptions of white students. After I collected the data, I read through my field notes and transcripts of interviews, searching for examples that fell within this subtheme and coded them as such. In this process, I identified various instances in which the white students were called on or disciplined; how the teachers described the students and interacted with them; and, more generally, how the teachers perceived the neighborhood and their role as teachers.

During my fieldwork, as I discuss next, I noticed that the black teachers described and reacted to the white students more positively than the white teachers did. There is reason to believe that my presence in the classroom might have influenced this finding. Because I am white, the African American teachers may have reacted more positively to the white students in my presence and made sure to tell me of white students they considered good students. Similarly, the white teachers may have downplayed their relationships with the white students and embellished their positive perceptions of the students of color to project to me an appearance of racial equity.

I cannot know precisely how these factors may have shaped the data I collected. However, I believe that I mitigated their potential impact through my continued presence and rapport at the school. As the teachers, both black and white, became more familiar with me, they also seemed to say and do things more freely in my presence. As the excerpts from the interviews attest, many teachers spoke frankly with me, even on sensitive topics, such as race. Furthermore, I used a range of techniques to collect data for this analysis, including interviews with teachers; observations of classrooms in which I did not participate; observations of classrooms in which I participated as a tutor; and observations of interactions in the hallways, library, and lunchroom. All these sources yielded consistent results. Thus, while my presence certainly influenced some of what I observed, I do not think it made a significant-enough impact to warrant an alternative interpretation of the findings presented here.

FINDINGS

How the teachers interpreted the white students in the predominately racial/ethnic minority setting of Matthews stemmed from several factors. These factors consisted of a complex interplay of perceptions that were related to the type of school and neighborhood, social class, and race. In this section, I discuss these factors, beginning with the teachers' perceptions of the students in the school in general and then narrowing this focus to how the teachers perceived and interacted specifically with the white students.

Teachers' Perceptions of the School and Their Role as Teachers

The teachers at Matthews saw the school and their role in it in various ways. When asked why they got into teaching, the white teachers tended to see themselves in somewhat of a missionary role, with the goal of helping disadvantaged kids:[5]

> I chose to teach these kids because I think they deserve a quality education. Not that I'm like the greatest teacher or something, but they deserve the same education as rich kids. (Ms. McCain, interview, April 26, 2002)

> I was driving down the street one day, and I saw a group of young black males in a ghetto-type area with nothing to do than pitch pennies. I decided then that I wanted to go into education, so these kids could grow up and have more opportunities and more to do than just sitting around pitching pennies. (Mr. Wilson, interview, May 15, 2002)

Many white teachers thought of Matthews as a disadvantaged inner-city school, whose students they wanted to help. The black teachers, however, seemed reluctant to characterize the school as "inner city" or even particularly disadvantaged:

> I worked over in [another school district] through a computer company for a while. People say this school is an inner-city school, and I guess it is, but over there, they had a lot more problems. (Ms. Lewis, interview, February 22, 2002)

> I guess this is the inner city, but not like where I taught [before]. These kids need to learn that they have opportunities. (Ms. Boyd, field notes, February 22, 2001)

Few teachers, white or black, lived in the immediate vicinity of the school. Most African American teachers, however, lived closer to the school than did most white teachers (many white teachers said they drove more than an hour to get to the school). Some African American teachers even had children in nearby schools and told me that they would see their students at area supermarkets. Thus, for many black teachers, the school was less a distant or "other" reality than for many white teachers, which appeared to shape the way each group of teachers saw the students in the school. The white teachers saw most students as having serious educational and social needs, whereas the black teachers stressed that most students actually had "opportunities" for learning and upward mobility.

Like the white teachers, many of the African American teachers saw themselves as helping disadvantaged kids, but when asked about teaching, they often connected it more specifically to race and combating racism:

> My parents and schools gave me the tools for how to deal with racism. One of the things I try to teach these kids is how to survive in a racist society . . . but not to hate. Sooner or later, they find out that education is the atomic bomb for dealing with racism. (Mr. Caldwell, interview, April 24, 2002)

The black teachers tended to direct this racial focus especially toward the black students in the school. They sometimes mentioned that Latinos also suffered from racial discrimination, but emphasized this discrimination far less in conversations and teaching. The black teachers expressed an acute consciousness of race, especially in terms of the disadvantages that the African American students faced. This consciousness shaped their teaching styles and influenced the way in which they perceived students of different racial backgrounds. The African American teachers tended to be more aware of the variations and needs of African American students. In addition, race itself acted as a primary organizing principle for their perceptions of students in general. I suggest that this race-based focus attuned the African American teachers to the importance of race for racial minority students, as well as for other students, for whom they often interpreted race to be an advantage. By focusing on the race-based disadvantages of black students, the black teachers often constructed other groups of students as comparatively better off.

The white teachers, in contrast, denied that race played much of a role in shaping social processes in the school (see also, Lewis 2001; Pollock 2001). Mr. Wilson, for example, responded with the following when I asked him what he thought about the white students at the school:

> I've never thought about it really. I don't think about race when I teach. When I look in [the classroom], I don't see black, white, Asian, I just see kids, and that's the way I treat them. And with my coworkers, I don't see that either. . . . When we look in that classroom, we don't look at skin color. (Interview, May 15, 2002)

The white teachers, such as Mr. Wilson, often couched their discussion of educational inequalities in class-based, rather than race-based, terms and espoused a "color-blind" perspective. Perhaps because they experienced their race as a form of advantage, the white teachers downplayed its potential significance (Frankenberg 1993). With some exceptions, the white teachers I spoke with tended to see all the students at the school as disadvantaged and related this disadvantage especially to class background. Ms. McCain, for instance, stated that "the kids here are all on the same SES [socioeconomic status] anyway" (Interview, April 26, 2002).

This reluctance to highlight race did not mean that race was unimportant to the white teachers, however. Previous research found that whites tend to stereotype predominately racial/ethnic minority residential contexts as having high rates of poverty and crime (Farley et al. 1994; Lewis 2001). I found a similar perception at Matthews. The white teachers characterized the school and the area as particularly poor, although it had a lower proportion of students who received free or reduced-price lunches (60 percent) than did several other middle schools in the city. The predominance of black and Latino students at the school appeared to influence the white teachers' view of Matthews as very poor, which was not necessarily the black teachers' perception. However, although race may have been a factor in their perceptions of the school, the white teachers did not highlight it in their descriptions of educational processes, which led them to downplay race per se as a potential source of educational disadvantage or advantage.

Social Class and Academic Ability

Although the black teachers and the white teachers had different views of the importance of race at Matthews, neither group attributed a causal role to race per se in students' academic ability. Rather, they tended to relate ability to social class. The teachers used the term *middle class* to imply that a student was a good student. Many would point out a student whom they considered intelligent and then tell me that the student's parents had middle-income occupations, such as police officer, teacher, or lawyer, emphasizing how unique the parents' occupations were in this context and implying that it explained the student's intelligence. In contrast, the term *poor* indicated that the student faced greater obstacles in academics. For instance, Mr. Reed, a black teacher, described the practical challenges that poor students faced: "It's hard to think about academics if you're just worried about surviving" (Interview, April 5, 2002). Living in rented apartments represented poverty to many teachers, and many considered students from such residential backgrounds as having a low academic ability. For example, Ms. Taylor, a black teacher, connected parents' reliance on public assistance and living in apartments to students' lack of motivation. In describing some students whom she considered to be troublesome, she said, "They live in apartments, and they don't want to live anywhere else; it just shows you how much motivation they have" (Field notes, March 25, 2002).

This discussion should not imply that the teachers were necessarily *wrong* in their assessment of the connection between social class and academic competence (see, e.g., Lareau 2002), but that, in the teachers' discourse, social class corresponded to academic ability more directly than did race. Thus, how the teachers perceived a student's social class was the most proximate factor in how they perceived that student's academic potential. Because social class did not have the same immediate visual impact of race, and the teachers did not check the school records of the students whom they classified as "economically disadvantaged," determining social class was a complicated process in which the teachers relied on various cues. As I mentioned earlier, the parents' occupations and residence served as two such cues. The teachers gleaned other cues from direct interactions with the students, such as how the

students spoke and, especially, how they dressed (see also, Bernstein 1986; Heath 1983; Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991).

The school required a dress code of khaki or blue pants, shorts, or skirts and blue, red, or white shirts that were required to be tucked in at all times. Despite this uniform dress code, students who wore neat and clean clothing gained more positive reactions from the teachers and less disciplinary action. The teachers interpreted this clothing to indicate a middle-class background or upward mobility. In my conversations with the teachers, some would even intertwine dress, family income, and being a good student so that one would imply the others. For example, Mr. Simms a white teacher, stated that one of his students was wealthy, explaining that "he wears nice clothes and is a good student" (Interview, May 8, 2002). For Mr. Simms and other teachers, wearing "nice clothes" and being a "good student" indicated a relatively wealthy background. The teachers linked their perceptions of students' academic performance and potential largely to their perceptions of the students' class backgrounds.

School History and Perceptions of Students

How the teachers perceived the social class of students also stemmed from their understanding of the history of the school. The teachers shared an oral and local history of the school among themselves, which most participated in learning and teaching to new staff. This history related especially to the socioeconomic and racial changes that the school had experienced since it opened in the 1970s. These changes represented a classic case of white flight—many white residents near Matthews had moved away as more racial/ethnic minority residents moved in (Farley et al. 1994). Ms. Delaney, a white administrator, described this white flight and its affect on the school:

> When Matthews first opened, it was a white middle-class school—can you believe that? ... [The neighborhood surrounding Matthews] was once a suburb of [the city]. Then, as minorities started wanting to get out of rough areas, a lot moved here. Then the whites said, "We don't want to live next to THEM" and moved even farther out. . . . Matthews was one of the first schools (in the district) to feel this change, and we've been through it. Now we've got these other middle schools calling us up, saying, "Help, we don't know what to do!" (laughs). (Interview, October 1, 2001)

The teachers at Matthews tended to associate this change, either implicitly or explicitly, with a more difficult student population. Ms. Delaney, for example, implied that the poorer and minority student population presented new and different problems for Matthews. Other teachers were more explicit and saw the current students as more troublesome—"wilder" in the words of one teacher. In either case, the history of the school framed the perception of many teachers that the most economically advantaged and stable families had left the area of the school. According to this view, Matthews was currently populated with poorer and more difficult-to-manage students. Corresponding to their association of apartment dwelling with impoverished and difficult students mentioned earlier, many teachers attributed this change to the growth of apartments in the area. When asked about changes at the school, for instance, Ms. Phillips, a white teacher, stated:

> Around the mid-1980s, they sold off a lot of the empty land near the school. The developers came in, and they turned it all into apartments because that was the way they thought they could turn the quickest profit. The apartments started advertising $1 move ins, and this brought a lot of low-income people in. (Interview, November 26, 2001)

The black teachers also described the changes at the school and linked them to the proliferation of apartments. It is interesting, however, that those like Mr. Caldwell specifically described apartment-dwelling families as black and Hispanic:

> They moved out here in [the neighborhood]—a bunch of whites—to get away from everyone else. But the mistake they made was building a bunch of apartments. So, people who could only afford to rent moved out here. So now, if you look at the schools, all the students are black and Hispanic. (Interview, April 24, 2002)

While Ms. Phillips connected apartments to "low-income" families without specifying race, Mr. Caldwell specifically cast apartment dwellers as black and Hispanic. Mr. Caldwell also described the previous population of the neighborhood as white without clarifying their class background. The white teachers tended to stress that the previous population was white and "wealthy" or "middle class." This discrepancy reflects that the white and black teachers at Matthews talked differently about race and class in this context, especially regarding white residents. The white teachers tended to emphasize class differences more in their discussion of white people in the history of the neighborhood, whereas the African American teachers tended to characterize whites especially in terms of race. These notions are related to how the white and black teachers viewed the class background of the current students and their families.

Perceptions of the White Students' Class Background

The black and white teachers viewed the class background of white students at Matthews differently. Whereas the white teachers thought that most or all of the white students at Matthews were poor, the African American teachers thought that these students were middle class. Mr. Wilson, for example, thought that the white families in the area had low incomes and were drawn to the area because of affordable housing:

> E.M.: Now, the few whites that are still here, what do you think their income level is? Are their families sort of holdouts from before the change?
>
> Mr. Wilson: Well, this is a predominately low-income area, and those that are here, whatever race, are probably of that group. So, I don't think they are holdouts, but just for those families, the availability of housing in the area is what they can afford. (Interview, May 15, 2002)

Ms. McCain expressed a similar view in answering this question:

> Most white students, yes, they're from the same SES as the other students. I have some of these [white] students; one young man I know, they have like five kids, and the girl the same way—just like the other kids. For the most part, I think their parents probably bought a house here in like 1978, when it was real hot. And then they were blue collar, so they didn't have the same opportunities to leave like the other whites when it started changing. (Interview, April 26, 2002)

Thus, the white teachers thought that the white students at Matthews came from economically disadvantaged families who could not find better housing elsewhere. This perception indicates that many white teachers at Matthews understood white families in the area as a particular type—those who lacked the resources or ambition to live in a "better" neighborhood and were therefore particularly unfortunate. These families could not or would not seize the opportunity to live in a wealthier and whiter area, which made their competence suspect to many white teachers. Mr. Simms, a white teacher, expressed his perception of the white students and their families directly when I asked about their income level:

> No, they're [the white students] from low-income families, too. . . . To say it bluntly, they're what you would call "trailer trash" (laughs). (Interview, May 8, 2002)

The white teachers' perceptions that the families of white students at Matthews were poor or "trashy" contrasted sharply with the perceptions of the African American teachers and administrators. Black teachers, such as Ms. Remier, told me that the white students at the school came from middle-class backgrounds:

> Ms. Remier: Yes, they [the white families] have been here for a while (interruption—telephone). What was I saying? Oh yes, they've been here—if we have 30, maybe 5 have moved in recently.
>
> E.M.: What do you think their income level is then?
>
> Ms. Remier: Oh, they're middle class. (Interview, May 16, 2002)

Ms. Boyd also thought that the white students were middle class and used their performance on the Texas Assessment of

Academic Skills (TAAS), the state achievement test,[6] as evidence:

> E.M.: What do you think the SES of [white and Asian] students is?
>
> Ms. Boyd: I would say [that] the Asian kids [are] probably upper middle [and] the white kids [are] middle to upper middle. You don't see the poverty as much with those students. And I know, like if you look at the TAAS scores, the white kids and the Asian kids here score phenomenally on [the] TAAS. (Interview, May 10, 2002)

I want to emphasize two points about this comment by Ms. Boyd. First, Ms. Boyd, like the other teachers, linked class background to academic performance and used one as proof of the other. She also linked race to class and achievement through her presumption that whites and Asians at the school were middle class, partly because of their scores on the TAAS. However, the TAAS performance of white students at Matthews was not outstanding. As Table 1 shows, although the white eighth graders had the highest passing rate overall on the TAAS, the white seventh graders had one of the lowest passing rates.[7] In addition, the passing rates of white students at Matthews were considerably lower than the state average for white students in virtually every subject. In 2001, for example, 67 percent of the white seventh graders at Matthews, versus 92 percent of the white seventh graders statewide, passed all the TAAS tests for that grade.

Second, Ms. Boyd described the primary way in which the teachers assessed students' class backgrounds—through what the students looked like. In this assessment, it appears that race itself shaped the perception of social class. The white (and Asian) students did not *appear* to be poor to Ms. Boyd or other African American teachers. Instead, the African American teachers thought that the white students looked middle class. This perspective contrasts sharply with Mr. Simms's perception of the same students as poor "trailer trash."

How the Teachers Evaluated and Interacted with the White Students

As I mentioned earlier, the white students at Matthews exhibited marginally higher achievement than did their minority peers in some areas. In the 2000–01 school year, the white students in the eighth grade had the highest passing rate on the TAAS for "all tests" of any racial subgroup (see Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage of Students at Matthews Who Passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills Test in 2001, by Race/Ethnicity

Grade Level	African American	Hispanic (Latino)	Asian/ Pacific Islander	White
Grade 7				
Reading	82	69	91	88
Math	75	74	88	67
All tests	68	62	85	67
Grade 8				
Reading	91	74	89	100
Writing	76	53	77	86
Math	79	81	95	92
Science	87	73	95	100
Social studies	62	44	81	85
All tests	52	34	66	79

Note: Figures have been rounded.
Source: Texas Education Agency; available on-line at http://www.tea.state.tx.us

However, the seventh-grade white students did not perform substantially better than did their peers and were the lowest-performing subgroup at the school in math. According to my observations and the school records, the white students were overrepresented in accelerated "pre-Advanced Placement" (pre-AP) courses (they made up 8 percent of the enrollment in pre-AP courses but 4 percent of the student body), but many took "regular" courses, and some, who were classified as special-needs students, took remedial "resource" courses. The students' academic behavior ranged from complete disengagement from classroom activities to active "ability shows" (Tyson 2002) to gain the teachers' attention and demonstrate aptitude. The white students, like other students at Matthews, displayed behavior across this continuum.

Although the white students did not appear to be academically unique compared to the other students, I found that teachers of different racial backgrounds perceived their academic ability differently. It is interesting that the African American teachers whom I spoke to evaluated the white students more highly than did the white teachers. During my classroom observations, the white teachers never described a white student to me as intelligent or talented, whereas the African American teachers frequently did so, as the following examples from my field notes illustrate:

> March 8, 2001, 2:20: Ms. Boyd's class. Students are writing a murder mystery from different angles. They are brainstorming in groups to come up with a story. Ms. Boyd, a black woman, sits down next to me and points out Damien, a black boy, who, she says, "just can't sit down" and gets in trouble a lot. She also talks to me about Greg, the lone white student in the class. Ms. Boyd contrasts Damien with Greg, whom she sees as a good student. She says, "That boy over there, Greg, he's always saying something funny. He's real bright."

> March 30, 2001, 11:00: Ms. Taylor's class. There are 12 students, including 1 blonde white boy named Jeremy. Jeremy yells out answers to all the questions. He is very persistent and keeps trying to get the correct pronunciation for the word *caricature*. He demands a lot of attention from Ms. Taylor. Jeremy wears his pleated khaki pants pretty high up over his hips, and his shirt is tightly tucked in.
>
> After class, I talk to Ms. Taylor, a black woman, about Jeremy, who is relatively new to the school and whose family has moved around a lot. I ask, "Is his family in the military or something? I can't believe he has traveled that much." Ms. Taylor answers: "I don't know, but something like that. I joke that his dad is a spy. He knows a lot, though . . . he knows a lot about other cultures. . . . But his family thinks he will stay here until the end of the semester and maybe even until he finishes high school, which is good because he is very bright—smart as a whip."

The African American teachers also called on white students frequently in class, even when the African American students were also eager to answer:

> Field notes: October 10, 2001, 1:00: Mr. Kyle's class. There are 22 students in the class, including 1 white girl named Valerie. Valerie is petite, with light brown hair tied back in a loose ponytail. She sits with a black girl and a Latina, both of whom are pretty quiet. During the lesson, the teacher, an African American man named Mr. Kyle, calls on Valerie the most of any student, and she provides the most correct answers. Despite her diminutive size and quiet voice, Valerie is not afraid to volunteer—her hand shoots into the air like a rocket at every question. She has tough competition from an African American girl named Chartrice, though, who also seems bright and is eager to answer. But Mr. Kyle calls on Valerie the most, and he calls on her frequently early in the class. After a while, he seems to realize that only a few students have been talking, and he tries to spread the questioning around more.

The black teachers tended to give the white students positive feedback in the classes I observed. As with Mr. Kyle in the foregoing example, many called on the white students first and often and responded positively to their remarks and work. In my observations, the African American teachers regularly described the work of the white students as exceptional, as the following excerpt from my field notes shows:

> November 14, 2001, 9:10: Ms. Lewis's class. The class is doing Power Point presentations on careers. Ms. Lewis, a black woman, has invited the parents to see the presentations for extra credit for their children. She asks John to go first because his mother is there, and he completes his presentation with no errors. Ms. Lewis seems to think it was one of the best presentations. She tells his mother, "Now, I used John's as a model for other students to look at because he did everything I asked for and even finished it early. He did a very nice job."

I observed several of Ms. Lewis's classes when parents were present, but this was the only time that I heard Ms. Lewis directly praise a student in front of his or her parent. Ms. Lewis was cordial to the other parents, all black and Latino, and thanked them for coming, but she did not give them any evaluation of their children's work, as she chose to with John.

I observed John in several other classrooms during my time at Matthews. He appeared to be a fairly good student who took regular classes in the seventh grade and pre-AP classes in the eighth grade. In my conversations with them, however, the white teachers never described him as an exceptional student. For example, Mr. Lang, a white teacher, once picked a few students to do their English presentations for me. He claimed that these students—all African American girls—had developed the best presentations. Although he mentioned that John's presentation was good, Mr. Lang did not consider it to be one of the best.

The racialized difference in the teachers' evaluations of the white students was also evident in the end-of-year honors that were announced at the eighth-grade graduation ceremony. Matthews, like many middle schools, organized its teachers into "teams," composed of teachers of different subjects who all taught the same group of students. At the end of the year, each team selected 2 students whom they considered to be the best all-around students. Although whites composed only 4 percent of the student body, 2 white students were among those who were selected in this group of 8 elite students: John, mentioned earlier, and Samantha. There were only 8 white students out of all 258 students from whom the teams selected John and Samantha as exceptional students. It is interesting that black teachers predominated on each of these two teams. In contrast, a team of predominately white teachers chose two Asian American students as their best students.

Indeed, unlike the black teachers, the white teachers did not appear to perceive white students as academically distinguished. Overall, the white teachers I observed rarely singled out white students to me for praise, even if these students took pre-AP classes or other teachers considered them to be good students. Instead, the white teachers tended to mention African American girls as exceptional students. On occasion, they also mentioned Asian American students; in my observations, East Asian boys were the only students whom the teachers described to me as "geniuses" (e.g., "he's a genius—Mensa material"). The few times that the white teachers did mention white students to me, they implied that the students were organized, but not necessarily bright, as in the following example from my field notes:

> April 5, 2001, 2:30: Ms. Scott's class. Ms. Scott, a white woman, sits down next to me and goes through all the students in the class, loudly proclaiming their strengths and weaknesses. Among those she thinks are the better students, she seems to describe many of the boys: She described Pablo, a Latino boy; Ricky, a tall black boy with eyeglasses; and Tony, an Asian boy whom she sent to the office for disciplinary reasons, as "bright." She described many of the girls as "conscientious" or "hard workers." Ms. Scott described an Indian girl who was wearing a head scarf as "very bright" and mentioned that this girl went to school in India last year because her parents wanted her to become more enriched in Indian culture. Ms. Scott told me that Martha, the lone white student, is the oldest of seven children. She described Martha as organized and said that Martha likes to make sure that things get done, "like an oldest child would."

This was one of the only times, however, that a white teacher told me of the academic strengths of a white student. In contrast to the black teachers, the white teachers seemed to overlook these students academically. In

my observations, the white teachers did not frequently call on the white students and tended not to discuss them with me.

Although the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy suggests that students adapt their behavior to meet the perceptions of their teachers, I did not observe the white students displaying markedly different comportment in the white teachers' classrooms than in the black teachers' classrooms. The students appeared to be relatively consistent in their participation, behavior, and interactive styles across classrooms. In many cases, however, I observed similar behaviors by students interpreted differently, depending on the teacher or administrator, especially in the case of disciplinary patterns, discussed next.

DISCIPLINE OF WHITE STUDENTS

Similar to other research (e.g., A. A. Ferguson 2000), I observed that the black and Latino boys were the most consistently and sternly disciplined group at Matthews by both the white and the African American teachers. However, the adults differed in how they disciplined the white students. In my observations, the white teachers and administrators tended to discipline the white students for behaviors that the black teachers tended to ignore. Sometimes, this discipline took the form of minor scolding or reprimands in classrooms, as in the following example:

> Field notes, January 31, 2001, 1:00: Mr. Wilson's class. There are 14 students, including 1 white girl named Ashley. Ashley is much more boisterous than the other white girls I've seen and is laughing and talking the whole time. She mostly talks with Randall—a black boy who sits near her. Randall gets reprimanded several times during this class, but Mr. Wilson, a white man, also sternly reprimands Ashley, which prompts the entire class to yell "oooh!" in unison. It seems that Ashley does not get scolded very much, at least not as much as Randall.

The social class-based displays of individual white students influenced the discipline they received. Several white students at the school presented a working-class, or "street," type of identity. This identity incorporated several elements of black popular culture, including wearing gold or silver chains outside their shirts; wearing braided hair in cornrows (for girls); and speaking in a style similar to many African American students at the school, what many would call "Black English" (Labov 1972). The white students who enacted this style were especially susceptible to discipline from the white teachers, but not necessarily from the black teachers.

One white student of this type was named Jackson. In a student survey that I conducted, I asked the students to name their race, giving them a choice of several categories to circle and leaving an "Other" space for them to name a category that was not listed. Jackson circled "white" on this form, and in the "Other" space wrote in "white chocolate." Jackson reflected this "white chocolate" identity by enacting styles of dress and behavior that were similar to those of many black students at the school. He wore his brown hair very short, almost shaved; hung out with mostly black friends; and spoke in a style that was similar to that of many black students. The black and Latino boys who projected a similar "street" style tended to be closely monitored and disciplined by the adults. According to my observations and the school records, Jackson did "get in trouble" quite a bit, but the white teachers seemed to be more concerned with him than were the black teachers, as the following example illustrates:

> Field notes, January 16, 2002, 8:30. I get there just as the kids are moving to advisory (homeroom). Several adults are in the halls telling kids to get to class and tuck in their shirts. I am standing near Ms. Oates, an African American administrator. She tells a short black boy who walks by, "Get to class and tuck in that shirt, please." Then, Jackson roams by wearing a blue headband with his shirt not tucked in. He does not have advisory in [this part of the school]. But Ms. Oates does not tell him to tuck in his shirt or get to his advisory. Ms. Oates then tells another black boy to tuck in his shirt and asks why he is over here and not in his advisory in [another part of the school]. She tells him to get to class.

In this example, Ms. Oates simply appeared to be unaware of Jackson and focused her disciplinary attention on the black boys. In the

final year of my research, Jackson, along with several black boys at Matthews, began wearing headbands similar to those worn by many African American professional basketball players at the time. Headbands fell under a gray area in the dress code, and the document I collected from Matthews delineating the dress code did not specifically mention them. However, I saw several black teachers and administrators tell black boys to take their headbands off or confiscate them. Jackson, by contrast, often wore his headband with impunity. However, later on the same day as in the field note just quoted, I saw a white teacher reprimand him for it:

> Field notes, 10:35. It is between classes, and Ms. McCain, a white woman, is standing outside her classroom. Jackson tries to enter the class, but Ms. McCain says "Uh-uh—wrong class—and get that headband off!" Jackson turns to go to his correct class but does not remove his headband.

Thus, whereas a black administrator had all but ignored Jackson's behavior earlier, this white teacher made sure to reprimand him for being in the wrong place and violating the dress code.

Jackson was one of the few white students whom I ever saw the African American school officials reprimand, however. Many seemed to identify that he could engage in troublesome behavior, but still treated him with kid gloves, indicating that they did not consider his transgressions to be of grave concern:

> Field notes, December 3, 2001,12:55: Ms. Rogers's class. Jackson is hanging out in the classroom before class begins, his shirt untucked as usual. He is getting some sort of note from Ms. Rogers, a black woman, to go to his next class (or to get out of this one—I'm not sure which). Ms. Rogers asks her student aide, a black girl named Rachel, to escort Jackson to his next class. She says, "Make sure he goes to class, 'cause he'll play all day if you let him."

The white adults at the school, by contrast, often identified Jackson's behavior as more serious than the African American adults did:

> Field notes, May 13, 2002, 1:00. I am tutoring for the class of a white teacher named Ms. Jacobs, which is in the library during this period. I notice that several kids are running around the library (which has Ms. Jacobs's class and another class in it) as I'm tutoring. The kids who are running around include Jackson, who is hitting some other kids with a rolled-up notebook. The scene is somewhat chaotic, and the teachers seem unable to control all the kids. Mr. Newman, a black administrator, comes in at one point and looks menacing. He folds his arms and glares at some of the students, who momentarily quiet down, but he does not say anything to Jackson.
>
> I go to Ms. Jacobs's room at the end of the period to drop off some information on the tutoring session. She thanks me and apologizes for the commotion in the library, which she seems somewhat upset about. She says, "Yeah, that kid in the gray sweatshirt [Jackson] wasn't even in either class—he was just roaming the halls!" I tell her I know him from other classes, and she continues, "Yeah, we called the front office, and they never did anything about him!"

Ms. Jacobs singled Jackson out as the main source of the disruptive behavior in the library and appeared to be exasperated that Mr. Newman did not discipline him specifically. When black and Latino boys engaged in behaviors similar to Jackson's, they were often sternly reprimanded by the black teachers and administrators. But many black teachers hesitated to view white students, such as Jackson, as problems or worthy of punishment. In contrast, white teachers, such as Ms. Jacobs, tended to find Jackson far more disagreeable and unruly than the black teachers did.

Of course, the stricter discipline of the black students by the black teachers in this context could be interpreted as supportive. The black teachers could have focused their disciplinary efforts on black students as a way of preparing them to face a white-dominated society (see Delpit 1995; Tyson 2003). In addition, my social position as a racial outsider could have impeded me from recognizing the supportive nature of this discipline. However, similar to A. A. Ferguson (2000), I observed that such discipline fostered more resistance from the students than attachment to schooling. Furthermore, in my observations, the black teachers did not hesitate to discipline the Latino students. Because the

black teachers avoided reprimanding the white students, in particular, the white students were latently constructed as exemplars of the norms of the school.

The reluctance of the African American teachers to discipline the white students is understandable, given the power that whiteness represented to these teachers, even in a predominately minority context. A desire to avoid retaliation by white parents may have influenced the black teachers not to reprimand the white students. This perspective makes particular sense, given the southern legacy of Texas—a legacy in which African Americans have been forced to use deference and care in their interactions with whites. The black teachers' perceptions of the school district administrators also appeared to play an important role. As I mentioned earlier, several African American teachers complained about the conservative and white-dominated leadership of the school district. Mr. Caldwell, for example, called the district "a very racist school district" (Interview, April 24, 2002). Similarly, the black teachers perceived a broader institutionalized racism that benefited white students, in general, including those at Matthews. For example, when I asked Mr. Neal, an African American teacher, if he thought that the white kids at Matthews were as disadvantaged as the other kids at the school, he replied:

> No, because they [the white kids] get the benefits of the system. I'll see these black boys around here, and they are always thumping and hitting these black girls. But you won't see them thump a white girl. Why? Because they've learned that the system will be against them if they mess with a white girl. (Field notes, March 1, 2002)

I suggest that many African American teachers at Matthews viewed the white students the way Mr. Neal suggested that the black boys did—as privileged by the system. This perceived institutionalized privilege, combined with an understandable apprehension of white retaliation, may have influenced the black teachers to avoid disciplining the white students. Ironically, this evasion of discipline only reinforced the privileged, normative status of the white students at Matthews.

DISCUSSION

In sum, many white teachers at Matthews viewed the white students as poor and their families as unfortunate. In my observations, the white teachers did not react especially positively to these students. They tended to overlook the white students academically and to focus more disciplinary attention on them than the African American teachers did. On the basis of this evidence, I argue that for many white teachers, the white students' markers of social class held a particular stigma (Goffman 1963), which influenced teacher-student interactions. The white teachers remained especially aware of cues that marked these students as impoverished, inner-city residents. Hairstyles, methods of speech and interaction, and especially living in a predominately minority and low-income area seemed to shade the whiteness of many of these students for the white teachers (see also, Hartigan 1999; Perry 2002). The whiteness of these students did not, in my observations, act as a form of privilege in the eyes of the white teachers. Instead, the white teachers viewed the white students in this setting as somewhat anomalous and extended more positive attention to students of other racial groups.

This finding is consistent with the notion that many people, especially many white people, consider poor whites to be particularly aberrant and backward. Hartigan (1997: 317) argued, for instance, white people often invoke the term *white trash* to distance themselves from "whites who [have] disrupted the social decorums that have supported the hegemonic, unmarked status of whiteness." At Matthews, white students and their families seemed to represent a disruption of these "decorums" through their proximity to urban African Americans and Latinos in residential location and interactive style. Many white teachers interpreted the unique social location of these white students and families as indicating severe poverty and misfortune. I propose that this perception by the white teachers, which highlighted the white students' presumed disadvantaged class background, influenced the less-than-positive way in which the white teachers interacted with the white students at Matthews.[8]

In contrast, the African American teachers at Matthews tended to interpret the white students as middle class and reacted positively to them. I argue that for many black teachers, the whiteness of white students represented a high social status. These teachers did not interpret the geographic location and social styles of these white students to indicate a disadvantaged background. Instead, they considered the white students to be among the highest in the school in terms of income level, achievement, and self-discipline. This view is not surprising when one considers the salience of race for most of these teachers. These teachers' awareness of the impact of race appears to have influenced them to view white students as privileged in multiple ways. Many African American teachers assumed that whiteness—even in this predominately nonwhite setting—represented educational advantage and status and carried with it the privileges of "the system," in the words of Mr. Neal. It is interesting that the black teachers did not see themselves as part of this system that bestowed privileges on the white students, even though they mediated these students' educational experiences. Their failure to do so, I propose, obscured for the black teachers how their own perceptions and actions may have actually helped construct the white students' systemic benefits, particularly in terms of perceived ability and discipline.

I should not overstate the benefits that the African American teachers extended to the white students, however. For example, I did not observe much depth in the relationships between them and the white students. In many ways, the black teachers devoted more attention and mentoring to racial/ethnic minority students, especially African American students. Although I frequently observed black students going to black teachers' rooms during off-periods to visit or to ask for help with an academic or emotional problem, I did not see the white students doing so. The black teachers and the white students maintained a relatively high degree of "social distance," but this social distance did not have a negative impact on the black teachers' academic perceptions of these students (see also, Alexander et al. 1987; Oates 2003). Although they did not necessarily forge emotional bonds with the white students, many African American teachers just assumed that these students were good, well-disciplined students and treated them this way. The particular advantages for the white students stemmed from these assumptions and were manifested primarily in classroom interactions, not in the black teachers' conscious efforts to spend more time and energy on the white students. Furthermore, I want to underscore that while the white teachers were more likely than the black teachers to respond negatively to the white students, they still reacted to the black and Latino students (especially those who exhibited a "street persona") even more negatively. The white teachers, along with the African American teachers, directed the majority of their disciplinary concern toward the black and Latino boys while still professing a "color-blind" view of the students. Thus, the white teachers played an equally powerful, if more oblique, role in constructing white advantages.[9]

Teachers' perceptions of students related to race and class have been shown to influence teacher-student relationships, which can affect outcomes, such as grades, ability-group placement, and test scores (Alexander et al. 1987; Ehrenberg et al. 1995; Muller et al. 1999; Oakes 1985, 1995; Oates 2003; Rist 1970). While many scholars have assumed that teachers tend to forge more-productive academic relationships with students of their own race, evidence of same-race productivity, as well as of different-race bias, has been mixed (for recent discussions, see Oates 2003; Tyson 2003). My ethnographic findings suggest that a possible explanation for this inconsistency lies in the *process* through which teachers make sense of the intricate connection among race, class, and neighborhood/school context. Teachers' and students' race matters, but in ways that are complicated by positions and understandings of class and neighborhood. Thus, white teachers may view white students whom they perceive as poor and/or inner city with some disfavor, whereas black teachers may extend certain advantages to these students because they view them as middle class. This dynamic sug-

gests that perceptions of race and class can vary considerably and that these variations can influence teacher-student interactions and particular patterns of advantages and disadvantages.[10]

To conceptualize this point theoretically, I return to Lareau and Horvat's (1999) suggestion that whiteness itself often becomes a form of cultural capital in educational settings. At Matthews, whiteness became an advantage, or capital, not in and of itself, but primarily through the way that the teachers' linked it to social class and status—exemplified in perceptions of white students as "middle class" or "trailer trash." This finding highlights the role of perceptions in how various forms of capital acquire educational value. In particular, the importance of race and class interpretations corresponds to Bourdieu's (1986:255) conception of "symbolic" forms of capital, which Bourdieu defined as "capital—in whatever form—insofar as it is represented, i.e., apprehended symbolically" (see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:119; Lewis 2003). At Matthews, representations and interpretations of race and class as interrelated concepts served as symbolic proxies for the assumed possession (or lack) of capital in the form of academic skills. In addition, for the black teachers, in particular (perhaps influenced by the southern context and white-controlled school district), whiteness symbolized connections to status and power—what may be characterized as a symbolic form of social capital (Bourdieu 1986). Thus, we should consider the importance of capital in terms not just of what students have, but of what teachers assume they have, on the basis of interpretations of race and class.

The process through which the teachers at Matthews developed these assumptions about race and class relied heavily on their interpretations of local history and geographic patterns—a rarely examined factor. Because class, race, and neighborhood tend to be so intertwined, the process of assigning meaning to these concepts is important for the advantages that are associated with whiteness. The distinctive case of the white students in this minority neighborhood and school underscored this process, since the white teachers tended to consider this group unfortunate because of *their* interpretations of the neighborhood, and the black teachers tended to consider this group far less unfortunate because of *their* interpretations of the neighborhood. This unique case study illuminated the role of neighborhood interpretations, but should not suggest that this factor pertains only to white students in minority schools. Future research should consider how perceptions of neighborhood context influence perceptions of race, class, and academic ability more generally.

The complex teacher-student dynamics at Matthews reflect the complexity of race and class in everyday life. Previous studies have suggested that teacher-student bonding tends to occur when teachers share similar social-class backgrounds with their students (Alexander et al. 1987; MacLeod 1995; Rist 1970). In the same way, dissimilar backgrounds tend to produce weaker bonds. In some cases, teachers' racial background may match their students', but their class background and orientation may not. In his classic study, Rist (1970) noted how an African American teacher with a lower-middle-class background and an upwardly mobile, middle-class orientation maintained distance from children who wore shoddy clothing or spoke using nonstandard English, even though these children were also African American. Thus social class—in the combination of teachers' origins and teachers' orientations—seems to have an impact outside race. However, race continues profoundly to shape class-related origins and opportunities—middle-class African Americans are more likely to live near poorer areas and to have fewer financial assets than do their white counterparts, for instance (Massey and Denton 1993; Oliver and Shapiro 1995).

At Matthews, one can see how race shaped class for the teachers through residential location, with black teachers more likely to live closer to the working-class school. Furthermore, in my interviews, the black teachers were more likely to tell me that they came from working-class or impoverished backgrounds.[11] The African American teachers' class-based experiences undoubtedly brought them closer to the students at Matthews, but, perhaps, like the

teacher in Rist's study, they continued to reward students they interpreted as middle class or upwardly mobile, which, in this case, included white students. By contrast, the white teachers, many of whom resided in distant, "racially enabled" suburbs (Lipsitz 1995; Massey and Denton 1993), perhaps held a degree of class-based social distance from all the students, including the white students. It appears that race and class combine to influence not only the immediate activity of interpreting students, but the teachers' very social standpoints and life experiences that give rise to such interpretations.[12]

By highlighting the important process of perception, this study has suggested that whiteness and the particular advantages that are associated with it are not monolithic. Local history, neighborhood composition, and the social background of powerful gatekeepers may all work to diminish or enhance certain white advantages. Many advantages for white students persisted in the mostly racial/ethnic minority and low-income setting I studied, but these advantages depended on interpretations of class and status vis-à-vis race and place. More research is needed on how people interpret whiteness in various contexts and how these interpretations shape their reactions to those who are considered white in these contexts. This research could elaborate on why, exactly, whiteness tends to result in so many institutional advantages. Examining schools in different regions and with different faculty and compositions of students would provide further clarification of these findings. Such research, in educational and other institutions, could advance our understanding of the complex ways in which race and social class combine to structure inequality and privilege.

NOTES

1. I gave each interviewee an information sheet–consent form and explained that I alone would have access to the record of the interview and would protect his or her confidentiality. The first interviewees still seemed uneasy with being tape-recorded, however, occasionally hesitating and rephrasing what they said. I suspect that their apprehension was magnified because my questions dealt with sensitive topics of race and class.

2. I use the names of racial categories as defined by the school records. Throughout this article, I alternate between the terms *African American* and *black, Hispanic* and *Latino,* and *Asian* and *Asian American* for readability and because the teachers and students at the school alternated between these terms.

3. On average, the census tracks in the school's attendance zone had a 20 percent poverty rate, a median income of $29,540, and a 75 percent rental occupancy rate, indicating that the area was working class but not extremely impoverished. The neighborhood had slightly poorer and wealthier areas, but I did not observe that these areas varied systematically according to racial composition (e.g., I knew that several white students lived in low-rent apartments). The school understandably restricted access to its meal-subsidy records and did not disaggregate these statistics by race, so I do not know specifically how race matched with free or reduced-price lunches at the school. However, an administrator who was familiar with these statistics told me that about half the white students received lunch subsidies and half did not.

4. To clarify how I characterized racial background, for the school overall, I used data that were based on school records, whereas for individuals, I characterized race on the basis of a combination of factors. For the students, I based race on how the other students and the teachers referred to these students in terms of race, on how I interpreted their physical features in terms of race, and on how the respondents to the student survey that I distributed characterized themselves. For the teachers, I based race on how they identified themselves in interviews, when they did; how the students and other teachers referred to them in terms of race; and how I interpreted their physical features. In describing the participants in terms of racial background, I do not imply a view of this concept as an inherent essence or trait.

5. I occasionally refer to students as "kids" because that is how the teachers often referred to them and how they often referred to themselves.

6. The TAAS covers a range of academic areas, and the Texas Education Agency publicly reports the results (the percentage of students who pass) from all schools by key student subgroups, such as race, gender, and economic disadvantage. At Matthews, the seventh graders took TAAS tests in reading and math, and the eighth graders took them in reading, math, writing, science, and social studies.

7. It is interesting to note that Ms. Boyd taught the seventh grade. She was also relatively new to the school when I interviewed her and did not teach at the school in 1999–2000, when the 2000–01 eighth graders were in the seventh grade.

8. These perceptions of the white teachers at Matthews should be considered in their historical and cultural contexts. Many people have historically viewed poor whites in a unique way—as "white trash." Beginning in the mid-19th century, white people in the United States attempted to separate themselves discursively from poor whites. At this time, eugenically influenced beliefs were popular, primarily among middle- and upper-class whites, who feared that the proliferation of "inferior" (read: poor) whites threatened to corrupt the white gene pool (Foley 1997; Graves 2001; Rafter 1988, 1992; Zuberi 2001). This history suggests that impoverished whites are often viewed with special repugnance because they threaten the hegemonic status of whiteness (Newitz and Wray 1997).

9. It is conceivable that the white and black teachers were overcompensating not to favor same-race students because they feared charges of racial bias. However, although the white teachers disciplined the white students often, the fact that they directed their main concern toward black and Latino boys indicates that they did not consistently frame racial/ethnic-minority students as better students. In addition, the black teachers did not consistently eschew a fondness for black students, as evidenced by their tendency to forge closer relationships with them. Although a hyperconcern for appearing unbiased remains a possibility, I have chosen to highlight differences in social-class perceptions here; perhaps subsequent research can pursue the possibility of overcompensation further.

10. I do not want to imply that perceptions tell the whole story, however. As Lareau (2002) compellingly demonstrated, social background also works within family life to influence how individuals approach institutions and gain institutional advantages. I merely suggest that perceptions of social background constitute an additional key element in how race and class influence life chances.

11. Ms. Taylor, for example, described her family of origin as "so po' we couldn't even afford an 'r'." Unfortunately, however, I did not gather detailed information on the teachers' class backgrounds, so it is difficult for me to explore the precise role of social class in framing their perceptions. Although several black teachers I interviewed said that they came from poor or working-class backgrounds, so did two white teachers. These white teachers did not appear to approach or interpret the white students at Matthews differently from other white teachers, but it is difficult for me to examine this point on the basis of the data.

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