Teachers' Expectations and Sense of Responsibility for Student Learning: The Importance of Race, Class, and Organizational Habitus

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This article examines how the concentration of low-income African American students in urban elementary schools is deeply coupled with a leveling of teachers' expectations of students and a reduction in their sense of responsibility for student learning. We argue that this process is rooted in school-based organizational habitus through which expectations of students become embedded in schools. We show that this process can be mediated if school leaders engage in practices designed to increase teachers' sense of responsibility for student learning. [organizational habitus, race, class, teacher expectations]

Understanding how race and social class stratification is perpetuated from one generation to the next is an enduring problem in educational research. Prior work has examined how structural forces, school-level institutional practices, and students' responses to these structures and practices contribute to social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Fordham 1996; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; MacLeod 1995; Oakes 1985; Ogbu 1978; Rist 1970; Roscigno 1998; Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; Solomon 1992; Willis 1977). The interplay between these factors contributes to the passing on of privilege to the children of the wealthy and whites and to cementing the disadvantages for students from less affluent families and certain students of color.

One explanation for these patterns focuses on teachers' expectations for student performance (Ferguson 1998; Jussim et al. 1996; Rist 1970; Roscigno 1998; Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968). This work suggests that teachers' perceptions of low-income and African American students' academic capacity are lower than those they hold for middle- and upper-income white students (Farkas 1996; Farkas et al. 1990). This research also emphasizes the role of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" through which teachers' low expectations reduce students' academic self-image, cause students to exert less effort in school, and lead teachers to give certain

students less challenging coursework (Farkas 1996; Farkas et al. 1990; Rist 1970).

While informative, one problem with this research is that it rarely explores teachers' assessments of students in organizational contexts. Although there is substantial work suggesting that school contexts impact school and classroom reproductive processes (Anyon 1981; Bankston and Caldas 1996; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Roscigno 2000, 1998; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999), the literature on teacher expectations typically emphasizes interactions between individual teachers and their students. However, teachers' expectations also can be studied organizationally by examining teachers' sense of responsibility for student learning (Lee and Smith 2001). This broader organizational focus helps illustrate how student composition (school context) conditions how teachers evaluate and behave toward students.

In this article, we argue that the student composition of schools and school micropolitical contexts (teachers' beliefs about students' capabilities and their sense of responsibility for student learning) are deeply coupled. We show that in predominantly low-income and African American schools, teachers emphasize students' deficits and have a reduced sense of responsibility for student learning. In contrast, when a larger proportion of students are middle-income, white, or Asian, students' intellectual assets are emphasized and teachers feel more accountable for what students learn. We argue that teachers' sense of responsibility for student learning is connected with their beliefs about students' academic abilities through a set of organizationally embedded expectations regarding what is possible for students from particular backgrounds—what we discuss as "organizational habitus" (Horvat and Antonio 1999; McDonough 1997). Organizational habitus is defined as "class-based dispositions, perceptions, and appreciations transmitted to individuals in a common organizational culture" (Horvat and Antonio 1999:320). We add race and ethnicity to social class as critical dimensions around which teachers' and administrators' "dispositions, perceptions, and appreciations" are organized.

Given its role in connecting teachers' expectations to teachers' sense of responsibility for student learning, we further theorize organizational habitus as a key aspect of the micropolitical context. We liken that context to a pervasive stream of beliefs, expectations, and practices that flow throughout a school. The organizational habitus is like a current that guides teacher expectations and sense of responsibility in a particular direction. The substance of everyday teacher interaction, those conversations about and evaluations of students that make up the micropolitical context, are the waves of sentiment that accumulate and give direction to the stream of beliefs. Our work suggests that in predominately lower-income and African American schools, the current of belief and practice tends toward lower expectations followed by a decreased sense of responsibility for students.

While we identify this general current, we also show that school leaders can intervene to influence it. We contend that deliberate action can redirect a school's organizational habitus. In one school we studied, teachers felt responsibility for student learning despite recognizing students' academic challenges. We examine how leaders in this school deliberately worked to heighten teachers' expectations and to create organizational structures and occasions designed to increase sense of responsibility among teachers. In this school, leaders provided a countervailing force against the tendency for teacher sense of responsibility to follow teacher expectations. By using easily overlooked forms of power such as everyday conversation and professional development sessions, the leaders steered teachers away from a situation in which acknowledging students' challenges was inevitably coupled with decreased responsibility for student learning.

Race, Class, and Teachers' Expectations

Teachers often view low-income and African American students as less capable of high academic achievement than their white counterparts (Farkas 1996; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999). Typically, these low expectations are influenced by students' prior performance (Jussim et al. 1996) in addition to students' race and social class backgrounds (Alexander et al. 1987). This pattern is particularly troubling because teachers' expectations are a more powerful influence on African American students than they are on whites (Ferguson 1998)

Teachers' expectations and their impact on students are associated with broader social forces. Racial categories carry with them symbolic meaning, providing group members with enhanced legitimacy or reduced social status in the eyes of others (Lewis 2003). For example, stereotypic images suggest that African Americans are not as intelligent as whites (Fordham 1996; Perry et al. 2003). These widely circulating stereotypes may influence teacher expectations of students based on their racial classification. For instance, Lee (1996) argues that teachers expect Asian American students to be high achieving, though achievement levels among Asian Americans vary depending on ethnicity and other factors. On the other end of the spectrum, black West Indian students often face the same low expectations as African American students, although many Afro-Caribbean students have higher achievement levels than their black American counterparts (Perry et al. 2003). Building on these insights, our ethnographic study unearthed findings that challenge additive models that ignore interactions between different aspects of identity and demonstrated how the symbolic value of race, ethnicity, and social class has important implications for students.[1]

Constituted of seemingly unremarkable moments of teacher interaction, the micropolitical context of schooling is inherently difficult to capture. Yet the very ordinariness of these interactions makes them crucial for understanding social reproduction, because they carry racializations

that harm specific students classified in certain "racial" groups. The micropolitical context is the setting for power struggles that are imperceptible within a less fine-grained method of analysis than ethnography. Through the accretive documentation of similar statements, evaluations, and beliefs, ethnography allows us to make the "ordinary strange" (Spindler and Spindler 1987). Thus, ethnography is one of our most powerful tools to extract the overriding themes of innumerable conversations at the heart of the micropolitical context.

Teachers' Expectations and Micropolitical Context

Most prior work on teachers' expectations focuses on teachers at the individual level. We suggest an alternative approach that considers the context in which teachers' evaluations of students occur. Recent studies have emphasized the importance of examining school and classroom micropolitical contexts (the day-to-day interactions through which people value and make sense of difference) and their implications for student outcomes (Lareau and Horvat 1999; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999). Two related features of micropolitical contexts are teachers' evaluations of students' ability (Roscigno et al. 1999) and teachers' individual and collective sense of responsibility for students' learning (Lee and Smith 2001; Lee and Loeb 2000). Roscigno et al. (1999) suggest that the valuation of students' characteristics by teachers "is arguably the most proximate micro-political process with implications for returns to students' cultural-educational resources" (Roscigno et al. 1999:164). They demonstrate that African American students are rewarded less for their cultural capital than their white counterparts because of low teacher expectations and race-based tracking.

Collective responsibility for student learning is an organizational indicator of teachers' expectations (Lee and Smith 2001). In schools with a high degree of collective responsibility, students exhibit greater achievement gains. Lee and Smith use three components to measure collective responsibility: (1) teachers' internalization of responsibility for student learning; (2) their willingness to adapt teaching practices to students' needs; and (3) their sense of efficacy in their teaching practices. Schools exist on a continuum with regard to collective responsibility. On one end are schools where "teachers take personal responsibility for the success or failure of their own teaching" (Lee et al. 2000:8). On the other end are schools where "most teachers see potential impediments between their own teaching and students' learning, namely, students ability (or lack of it), students' family background, or their motivation" (Lee et al. 2000:8).

We argue that both features of the micropolitical context—teachers' expectations of students and their individual and collective sense of responsibility for student performance—may be influenced by the racial and social class composition of schools (school context). In fact, schools with the most socioeconomically advantaged students have the highest levels of collective responsibility among their staff (Lee et al. 2001),

suggesting that the composition of students may impact teachers' attitudes and behaviors. In effect, school micropolitical contexts (teachers' assessments of students and their collective responsibility for student learning) are vulnerable to the race and class composition of students. The concentration of low-income African American students in particular schools is deeply coupled with a leveling of teachers' expectations and a reduction in collective responsibility. We argue that this process reflects the functioning of an organizational habitus through which expectations of students in particular schools are communicated to teachers and students.

Research Methodology

This research was undertaken as part of the Distributed Leadership Project, a longitudinal study of school leadership practices in urban elementary schools. The third author, an Irish-born, middle-class American citizen with a teaching background, was the principal investigator for the study and emphasized the connection between leadership and teaching practice in its overall conceptualization. The first and second authors, both middle-class African Americans with backgrounds as ethnographic researchers who study issues of race, social class, and education, were instrumental in developing the component of the study that focused on how school officials attached meaning to the students, parents, and communities they served. Based on previous research, our initial observations, and our experiences as middle-class African American educators and students, we posited that the race, class, and ethnic distinctions between teachers and administrators on the one hand and students and parents on the other were reflected in school and classroom micropolitical processes. These issues were critical to the study's execution.

The data for this article are drawn from ethnographic research conducted over the first six months of our research in five urban elementary schools. This research included semi-structured interviews and participant observation. We chose ethnographic research because we believed it would help us understand the day-to-day interactions that contribute to the construction of meaning around race and social class, and contribute to our understanding of the broader patterns of educational inequality identified in statistical analyses. Ethnographic research also can help us see patterns of resistance to social reproduction that are often glossed over or washed away in larger-scale investigations. Identifying these processes of reproduction and resistance can highlight important implications for educational research, policy, and practice.

Because we were interested in examining the micropolitical dynamics of schools and classrooms, we selected our research sites with an eye toward maximizing students' race and class diversity. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of each school (all names are pseudonyms) and a set of neighborhood characteristics (e.g., family composition, parents' educational levels, and neighborhood income characteristics) that

have been shown to impact students' educational outcomes and attainment. Each of these schools has at least 60 percent of its students receiving free or reduced priced lunches (a proxy for family economic status). However, three schools had more than 85 percent of their students fitting this category. Among these schools, Erickson and Adams had 90 percent and 98 percent low-income students respectively. These are important distinctions in the composition of the schools' student populations. Likewise, although three of the schools were 100 percent African American, two schools had a more diverse racial composition. One school had 60 percent Asian (Chinese) students and one school had 70 percent white students.

We used our racial diversity as a research team to facilitate our access to the research sites and to support the quality of our data collection. For example, in predominantly African American schools, the African American first author took a leadership role in initiating contact with school leaders and answering principals' questions during our initial meetings with them. In other cases—for example, at Lewis School, located in an Irish American community—the third author took the lead. Whenever possible we also used race/gender matching in selecting interviewers to minimize any potential biases associated with cross-race or cross-gender interactions. Issues related to race and class dynamics in the research process (among other issues) were discussed during biweekly research team meetings for the larger study. Because our team included diversity in terms of race, gender, nationality, and disciplinary background, our meetings provided a check on potential biases in our interpretation of the data.

Previous research downplays the organizational context within which teachers' beliefs are embedded (Jussim et al. 1996). To gain a sense of teachers' and administrators' beliefs at an organizational level, we focused on teachers from one lower elementary grade (second) and one upper elementary grade (fifth) in each school. About half of these teacher interviews were conducted immediately following observations of these teachers' classrooms (post-observation interviews). During teacher interviews, we sought to capture teachers' beliefs about instruction and their beliefs about and expectations for students. The post-observation interviews addressed these same issues but highlighted patterns observed in teachers' classrooms. We also interviewed formal leaders (i.e., positional leaders) and informal leaders (i.e., those nominated as leaders by teachers). This broader focus helped us better understand the implications of organizational context for teachers' beliefs and facilitated comparisons across schools. In total, we interviewed 51 teachers and administrators. Trained interviewers used standard protocols to conduct the 30–60 minute interviews. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Most of our observations were of second and fifth grade classrooms, faculty meetings, and professional development sessions.

Table 1.
Study school student demographics and neighborhood characteristics.

School Demographics	Lewis School	Harris School	Davis School	Erickson School	Adams School
% low income	65	85	60	90	98
% Asian	0	60	0	0	0
% Black	5	5	100	100	100
% Hispanic	25	25	0		
% Caucasian	70	10	0	0	0

Neighborhood Characteristics of School Communities*

	Lewis School Community	Harris School Community	Davis School Community	Erickson School Community	Adams School Community
Median Family Income	$40,687	$30,275	$29,258	$28,192	$17,714
Percent of families living below poverty	4%	13%	12%	23%	32%
Percent of people with more than high school education	33%	26%	48%	32%	35%
Female-headed households	15%	20%	41%	44%	57%

*Source: Chicago Fact Book Consortium 1995

We also spent time in special school events and informal gatherings (e.g., teachers' lunch breaks).

Data Analysis

We analyzed our data using the computer program NU*DIST that is designed for qualitative data analysis and theorizing. We first identified occasions when teachers and administrators expressed beliefs about students and coded these beliefs as assets, deficits, or neutral (descriptive/nonevaluative) statements. Responses were coded as asset-oriented if they contained statements that highlighted students' strengths. Here we borrowed from previous work by emphasizing teachers' *cognitive* and *noncognitive* assessments of students (Farkas et al. 1990). Asset-oriented noncognitive assessments emphasized behavioral qualities such as maturity, responsibility, high work ethic, and the ability to work well with

other students. Asset-oriented cognitive assessments tended to focus on students' ability to read and compute at high levels, successfully engage in higher order thinking, master course material, and do well on standardized tests. Deficit-oriented comments in this category typically suggested that students lacked these qualities and abilities.

Having coded the data from each school using this strategy, we then explored patterns at each school, paying particular attention to the race and class composition of the student population. Having identified the themes for each school, we then determined the nature of responses for each teacher/administrator that fit into each category, and aggregated this to the school level in order to make comparisons across individuals and the schools as a whole.

Finally, we distinguished between teachers' and administrators' perceptions of their students and their enactment of these perceptions (Weick 1979). We were interested in how teachers acted on these beliefs about students. We sought explicit connections between teachers' beliefs and actions both in interviews and observations of their actual practices. In the process of this analysis, we found that teachers' beliefs about students were deeply coupled with their sense of responsibility for student performance. We therefore closely analyzed the data to explore this link. To insure reliability in the data analysis, the first and second authors collaborated on the development of the coding categories, analyzed interview data, and met regularly to reach a "taken as shared" understanding of each node (a data cluster that relates to similar thematic categories). Having developed this common understanding, all of the interviews were coded by the second author in regular consultation with the first author.

Findings

Student Demographics and Beliefs about Students

Our data suggest that the race and social class composition of the schools we studied is associated with teachers' and administrators' general beliefs about students. When we analyzed the data from the schools separately, we found that beliefs about students varied by schools' student composition. Although our data do not allow us to make causal arguments, interesting patterns emerged. In the majority white and majority Chinese schools, 71 percent of teachers' emphasized students' assets over their deficits, compared to only 23 percent of the teachers in the African American schools. The social class composition of schools seems to have been associated with teachers' assessments of students as well. In schools with 90 percent or higher low-income students, only 10 percent of teachers emphasized students' assets while in the 70–90 percent low-income school, 71 percent emphasized assets and in the two 50–70 percent low-income schools, 70 percent emphasized assets. Interestingly, we did not find patterns associated with teachers' race.

In Lewis, a majority-white integrated school with "only" 64 percent low-income students (the district average is 84 percent), the students were characterized as engaging in asset-based behavior. At this school the students were viewed by teachers as "eager to learn," "highly motivated," "mature," "eager to help others," and "hard working." All of the teachers emphasized students' asset behaviors over their deficits. When deficits were identified, they tended to be tied to specific students rather than the general student population. Interestingly, the only cognitive deficits identified were language difficulties that seemed to be associated with the recent rise in the Mexican American student population that the principal identified as a major challenge.

In Harris School, which is majority Asian and 84 percent low-income, most teachers' comments about students emphasized cognitive and noncognitive assets. The cognitive assets included "excellent math, reading, and science skills," and the ability to "catch on quickly." In terms of the noncognitive assets, comments emphasized students' high levels of motivation, the limited number of discipline problems, students' hard work, and the prominence of educational values in Chinese culture. As the white female curriculum coordinator argued, "as a culture, they [Chinese] so value education, that permeates the building to an extent." In this comment, the teacher attributed these values to Chinese culture as a whole, rather than a specific group of students. Here, racial stereotypes about Asian Americans and education seemed to neutralize the low expectations that teachers typically have of low-income students. This suggests the limitations of additive models of identity. Some teachers did raise concerns about the students' capabilities; however, these comments focused on specific students.

At Davis School, which is 100 percent African American and 60 percent low-income, all of the teachers' comments were asset-oriented with the exception of the principal, who was concerned that students occasionally lacked respect for adult authority. Other than this comment, teachers argued that students presented no major behavioral problems, that they were respectful of adults, and generally "good kids." One African American female second grade teacher did discuss the challenges faced by students, which included making too much noise and lacking focus. However, such feelings were expressed in the context of statements such as, "These are really good kids compared to students at other schools." The implicit comparison here was the typical Chicago public school that has far more low-income students than Davis. Here, social class mediated the symbolic devaluing of African American status demonstrated in previous research.

In contrast to these three schools, Erickson School, which is 100 percent African American and 90 percent low-income, was characterized by more deficit-oriented beliefs about students. Of the eight teachers and school leaders we interviewed, six emphasized students' deficits. Most of these comments focused on noncognitive attributes and were only

marginally related to academic performance. Teachers argued that students were "disrespectful," "lacked discipline," and were "too social." Other comments emphasized more performance-oriented noncognitive attributes, such as students having trouble focusing or failing to adequately complete course work.

Even though many comments at Erickson were deficit-oriented, two teachers and one administrator emphasized students' assets. The white male assistant principal argued that the students were adept at using computers and understanding technology and that the students presented no major behavioral problems. Other asset-oriented comments were what can best be described as "qualified" compliments. For example, the school's African American male technology coordinator argued that, "I worked at the jail . . . you can't tell me . . . that [this school] has the worst kids, when I've been to juvenile detention centers and the jails. . . . Matter of fact, there's some pretty good kids." While suggesting that the kids are "pretty good," his comments used young criminal offenders as the reference point—clearly not a ringing endorsement.

Others in this school discussed students whom they viewed as possessing assets as exceptions to broader patterns. A white female second grade teacher discussed two students in her class who possessed strong cognitive skills:

> Well there's a boy who's probably the smartest kid in the class . . . he's so smart. He's got so much outside knowledge that most of the kids don't have. . . . The one's that are brighter . . . seem to come from these really tighter families and [have] more support.

Although the teacher identified these students' assets, they were constructed as an exception to the rule. This is in contrast to the first three schools where students' assets were emphasized and their deficits were more often seen as exceptions. As we will show, this contrast reflects the micropolitical context of teachers' evaluations in which students are constructed as deprived.

Teachers' and administrators' beliefs about students at Adams school were the most deficit-oriented among the five schools. Teachers and administrators believed that the students' family environments and neighborhood contexts contributed to them coming to school unprepared or unable to focus. As one white female second grade teacher stated:

> These kids are hard-core inner city. Out of 30 kids I'd say I have ten living with a grandparent or foster parent and 20 living with their mother. I think I only have one living with both parents. And those numbers are consistent with my class last year. It's really sad.

This teacher saw family composition (and disruption) as an issue for students, and later associated this with students' academic deficits. Along with other teachers, she discussed issues of drugs and crime in local neighborhoods as defining "hard-core inner city." In a similar vein, a

black female counselor argued that, "The students go around thinking that things can't get any better. . . . No one in their family has an education. . . . Sometimes people here are just existing, not living. This limits their ability in school." Implicit in her statement is the belief that because students lacked educational role models, examples of success, and positive visions of the future, they struggled in school.

Like teachers and administrators at other low-income African American schools, those at Adams focused on students' challenges rather than their assets. Of the 11 teachers and administrators in these two African American schools who reported beliefs about students, only two emphasized students' assets. These data suggest an association between the concentration of low-income African American students in a school and teachers' assessments of those students' abilities. For African American students, social class also influenced this association. In the middle-income African American school, teachers assessed students much more favorably. Although it is difficult to disentangle the relationship between race and class here, these patterns were striking and warrant further examination in future work.

Teachers' Expectations of Students and Sense of Responsibility for Student Learning

Simply identifying teachers' and administrators' beliefs tells us little about how these ideas might influence teachers' instructional practices. The basic argument in the teacher expectations literature is that low expectations for students translate into instructional practices that contribute to social reproduction. Although most previous work focuses on individual teachers and classrooms, we argue that these beliefs and practices are deeply coupled with school context. We therefore examined the relationship between teachers' sense of responsibility for student performance and their beliefs about students' ability. Prior work shows that collective responsibility is reduced when teachers view students' backgrounds as barriers to instruction (Lee and Loeb 2000). Given that teachers' expectations of students varied by school, we posited that discernible patterns might exist in collective responsibility across schools. To study collective responsibility we focused on the extent to which teachers encouraged student effort and adjusted their instructional practices to meet students' needs.

Lee and Loeb (2000) argue that schools exist on a continuum, with some schools' teachers possessing a high level of collective responsibility for student performance and others emphasizing how perceived impediments, based on students' backgrounds, limits the impact of their instructional practices. Our data suggest that teachers' responses to perceived student deficits fit into the categories outlined by Lee and her colleagues. As we show in this section, teachers' responses to students at Lewis, Harris, and Davis schools reflected a strong sense of responsibility for student performance. Teachers adjusted their instructional practices

to meet students' needs. At Erickson and Adams, however, we observed very different patterns.

At Erickson School, teachers tended to believe that students' family backgrounds limited teachers' ability to effectively teach them. Some teachers believed that students were incapable of doing challenging work and did not feel responsible for what students learned. In this school, teachers' comments often tied students' ability to family background and placed the "blame" for classroom problems on students. This led four teachers to resist instructional innovation, avoid the use of manipulatives in math and science instruction, and emphasize basic skills to the exclusion of more advanced applications of knowledge. Teachers also presented students with less challenging coursework because they feared that students were not capable of handling harder work.

Finally, at Adams School, teachers and administrators acknowledged student deficits, but followed a pattern that was similar to Lewis, Harris, and Davis Schools with regard to sense of responsibility. Leaders at this school worked to enhance teachers' sense of collective responsibility for student performance. The association between beliefs about students and sense of responsibility for student performance at Adams was mediated by organizational practices. We discuss these patterns in the following section.

Sense of Responsibility at Lewis, Harris, and Davis

At Lewis, Harris, and Davis Schools, teachers demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility for student performance. At each of these schools teachers addressed perceived student challenges directly and creatively, taking responsibility for providing students with learning opportunities. For example, a Hispanic fifth grade teacher at Lewis School discussed using "literature circles" to address students' challenges with reading: "I have been thinking about doing more . . . literature circles where I can pick out books for them to choose from that are more to their level and concentrate on those books with those students [who are having difficulty]." This teacher adjusted her instructional practices to meet the needs of students who were struggling. This is a core characteristic of teachers and schools with a high degree of collective responsibility for student learning. The same teacher sought to reassure the school's growing Mexican American student body that they could do the work, even if they faced language-related challenges. As she stated:

> We meet the challenges as they occur. Mainly it's trying to keep the child positive. We explain to them . . . try and get the child understand that we are trying to help them and that we want them to learn . . . we're going to keep on working until we are successful.

This teacher's comment demonstrated an expectation that encouraging students helps them achieve academically. Linguistic differences were viewed as factors that could be addressed through encouragement and instructional change.

Other teachers sought to enhance student motivation and interest. As an eighth grade white female teacher explained, "I approach everything like 'How would the kids see this?' and try to make it exciting for them," emphasizing meeting students' needs by adapting instruction. A white female intermediate science teacher at Harris School explained how she dealt with students who had difficulty with mathematics concepts:

> You've . . . got kids who have . . . an identity of failure. I'm back-dooring math through science. I love telling them about Einstein. Bad mathematician, learned enough to do brilliant physics. Learn what you need to do what you love. It's all you've got to do. Sometimes if you can remove the difficulty . . . demystify, and . . . enter it through something they find interesting then . . . it doesn't set up those automatic, "I can't do this."

This proactive approach to students' academic challenges was characteristic of teachers at this school.

An African American female second grade teacher at Davis School explained that although her students were good readers and very good at math, some had trouble visualizing science concepts and in reading. Reflecting on a lesson, she offered this response:

> I was doing a science project with the kids and I realized that some of them weren't getting it. . . . So I just stopped and I turned around and I did an overhead so they could actually visualize what was going on and when I did that all the kids got it.

This teacher identified a deficit—problems with visualizing—and addressed it directly.

An African American fifth/sixth grade science teacher at Davis spoke of pacing issues with students who had difficulty keeping up: "You really have to change your teaching style for them. . . . I do give them additional time." She provided an example with one student where adjusting pacing made a significant difference:

> So the one [boy] I had last year only for science, I'm like, "he's not getting this." . . . He's not completing anything. [Now] I've got him this year in my homeroom. I realize he just needs extra time because he's doing really well. He's getting As, Bs, and Cs, where before he had Ds and Fs.

This teacher shared her discovery with the child's other teacher, explaining that "He's going to finish his work but . . . he's going to require additional time." In sharing this insight, the teacher altered the micropolitical context by influencing another teacher's expectations.

At Lewis, Harris, and Davis Schools, teachers' responses to students they perceived as having academic challenges reflected a sense of responsibility for students' educational outcomes. They encouraged students, pushed them to excel, and adjusted their instructional practices to meet students' needs. These teachers also reported sharing strategies with other teachers and appeared to operate in environments in which collective responsibility was high.

In contrast to these schools, teachers and administrators at Erickson School seemed fixated on students' deficits and challenges, and used these to explain the adults' inability to effectively work with certain students. Some teachers reported that they evaluated student work less critically, gave students less challenging work, resisted instructional innovation, and emphasized highly structured classroom work. For example, a white female art teacher stated that she evaluated her students' work less critically than she would "in a suburban school" because Erickson students faced greater challenges and needed to feel a sense of accomplishment. A white male fifth grade teacher demonstrated his low expectations for his students during a classroom observation documented in the fieldwork excerpt below. Not only were the math problems he assigned very simple, emphasizing mathematical procedures, he walked students through math problems, "spoon feeding" them correct answers.

> Throughout the lesson, Mr. ____ guides students to the correct answers. One problem involved adding two numbers together and then subtracting the sum from a third number.
>
> **Teacher:** What operation do we need first?
> **Student:** Multiplication?
> T: No . . . what do we do first? (as he draws plus sign on the board)
> S: Addition?
> T: Right (adding two numbers together himself) . . . now what do we do?
> S: Subtract?
> T: Right. (putting the subtraction on the board)

Here, the teacher failed to challenge students by providing the opportunity for them to reflect on the problem and draw a conclusion, instead quickly giving students the correct answer. Prior observations also suggest that teachers often provided less wait time for students they perceived to be low-achievers.

In addition to uncritical assessment of students' work, Erickson teachers were reluctant to try "new things" because they feared that students would not be able to handle more innovative practices. For example, an African American female first grade teacher explained that she did not use manipulatives in science and math because of "the behavior of the children. . . . When I try and use cubes. . . . They stack them. They're making this with them. They're making that with them. They're not doing what should be . . . done with them." This teacher's beliefs about

students led her to resist using more innovative instructional practices. When asked to speculate about why her students had trouble with this type of work, she tied it to their home environment and family background. In a grade-level meeting on another occasion, she stated that many students were

> simply not ready for school. Some of the children are not socialized for school. . . . If they are walking around all day running around crazy watching TV, or walking up and down the street with their parents eating potato chips they are not going to be ready for school.

This teacher's comments suggest her belief that factors other than her teaching strategies were most critical to student outcomes and that students' deficits were barriers to instructional innovation and learning.

The white fifth grade teacher above emphasized seat work and reading from textbooks rather than science experiments because, he argued, his students could not do more independent work. Like the African American first grade teacher, he also claimed that using manipulatives with these students would not work because "It's beyond them to control materials." These beliefs clearly affected his instructional practices and the rigor of the work to which students were exposed. These comments also suggest that the teacher believed there was little he could do to address students' inability to work with manipulatives.

This teacher also believed that disciplinary problems in the classroom were tied to students' home environments:

> If the parents don't talk about graduating from high school, then the student doesn't see it as significant. If the parents don't talk about a career . . . that type of home influence is what I'm talking about.

His response was to expect less of students and to limit what he taught based on their presumed limited capabilities. Tying those perceived abilities to students' home environments removed the onus of responsibility for addressing students' challenges from both the students and himself, placing it on the parents, whom he claimed had a limited appreciation for the importance of education and passed these beliefs on to their children.

Other teachers in this school also seemed wedded to "traditional" instructional approaches. After a classroom observation, an African American female fifth grade teacher's instructional orientation was characterized as follows: "Her overall teaching style was fairly traditional. She believes in teaching the basics . . . because 'that's what these kids need.' " Teaching the "basics" is not problematic in and of itself; however, in the absence of more advanced instruction, students will not be prepared for the complex thinking required in later grades and the contemporary job market.

Responsive Teachers at Erickson

Although five of the seven teachers who had explicit comments about students and instructional practices matched the patterns we discussed above, two teachers seemed more responsive to students, sought to directly address students' challenges, and took more responsibility for student learning. For example, a white female second grade teacher explained how she worked with students who exhibited reading problems: "There are about three kids who couldn't read at all. . . . So, they were really behind and I really spent time with those kids and they're all reading now." Her extra work with these students included help with journal writing in class and individual work on phonics and reading out loud. Although this teacher and another whom we interviewed took responsibility for student learning, when compared to Lewis, Harris, and Davis Schools, teachers at Erickson were less proactive in addressing perceived student deficits. They seemed resigned to the fact their students had limited ability and that there was little they could do to insure that students learned. The small number of teachers at Erickson who took responsibility for student learning suggests how difficult it is for individual teachers to "go against the grain," without organization-wide discourse and practices to support them.

Adams School

The patterns identified at Lewis, Harris, Davis, and Erickson Schools suggest that teachers' perceptions of students are tied to their sense of responsibility for student learning. In schools with large percentages of white, Chinese, and middle-income students, teachers maintained a higher sense of responsibility for student performance than in Erickson school, where most children were low-income African Americans. The encouragement found at Lewis, Harris, and Davis Schools is more likely to lead to enhanced student performance. However, our analysis of Adams School unearthed a different pattern. Adams school was populated by low-income African American students, and teachers emphasized students' challenges over their assets. Nonetheless, teachers also exhibited a great deal of responsibility for student outcomes. The cause for this, we argue, was that Adams school leaders created an organizational habitus that mediated the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their sense of responsibility.

The high sense of responsibility for student learning among Adams teachers and administrators was reflected throughout the school community. School leaders created an environment in which teachers emphasized high standards, hard work, and meeting students' needs. Children's life circumstances were not used as an "excuse" to reduce standards or alleviate teachers' accountability. The African American assistant principal (a former Adams classroom teacher) argued this very clearly:

> I don't allow anyone to say to me "because he's this, because he's that, because he's the Other he can't do it." . . . you could have been talking about me, when I was that age. I know given time, resources, and proper teaching he can get it.

The principal used ordinary conversation with staff to influence their response to their students. She often used her own childhood experience to convince teachers that students could achieve.

The principal also argued that teachers and administrators must respond to the students' needs regardless of their circumstances:

> It would be ideal if all of our kids came to you ready to move on to the material that you would like to teach them but number one that's not going to happen. *. . . All we can do is tailor our curriculum program to the students we get. . . .* You have to think about how you need to spend your time to reach *these children.*

This theme of high standards regardless of students' circumstances was repeated by administrators as well as teachers. As one teacher indicated, "She [the principal] says that, 'Yes this is an inner city school and the kids do live in poverty,' but she doesn't let you feel sorry for yourself. She gives you a kick in the pants and sometimes you need that." A sense of responsibility was thus instilled in teachers through both the recognition of students' challenges and a push for addressing students' needs. This demonstrated a complex relationship in which the recognition of students' challenges enhanced rather than undermined commitment. As the quote above suggests, teachers picked up on the principal's emphasis on high expectations and returned to this framing of their educational mission when they became discouraged.

In addition to the discourse about students and teachers' accountability for student learning, Adams School artifacts communicated high expectations for students. For example, as the following field note conveys, the walls reflected the general orientation of the schools' employees toward challenging students and providing positive affirmations:

> The first things I noticed were the decorations and signs all over the walls. They said, "Character is who you are and what you hope to be" and "Kids first" and "Honesty and Truthfulness" and "Team-Together Everyone Achieves More." Down one hallway hung banners with a variety of values written on them: honesty, respect, etc. (All of these signs struck me as extremely infused with empowerment values, self-responsibility, perseverance and success).

These school images also were infused with positive affirmations about African American culture and the accomplishments of prominent African Americans. The schools' African American Studies coordinator argued that the intent behind this was to demonstrate respect for the culture of the school's students and encourage high achievement among them.

Teachers and administrators also emphasized hard work. The ethos of hard work was explicitly recognized by school staff and modeled by the school principal and other school leaders. Teachers stated that the administration expected hard work from the staff. As one teacher stated, "This is not a place to work if you don't want to work hard. The principal will not ask you to do anything that she will not do herself. She's the hardest working woman I've ever seen."

It was common for teachers to spend long hours at the school. The guidance counselor reported that, "A lot of teachers stay late and come early here. You'll find that if you come at 8:15 a.m., there are no parking spaces left." Parents also recognized the hard work and commitment to students on the part of the teachers and administrators. As one parent stated, "I know the teachers here work hard."

The beliefs of Adams teachers and administrators emphasized collective responsibility for student performance regardless of students' social class or racial backgrounds. While sense of responsibility was reflected in interviews, artifacts, and teachers' work practices, it also was evident that organizational structures were created by school leaders to help establish and reinforce teachers' sense of responsibility and encourage instructional improvement. One such structure, the Breakfast Club, was begun in 1995 to provide teachers the opportunity to reflect on their practice using educational research as the foundation for their discussions. In these meetings, at which administrators provided breakfast, teachers led discussions drawing on articles related to their classroom practices. The meetings provided the site for connecting professional community, professional development, and the improvement of student learning, and heightened teachers' sense of responsibility (Halverson et al. 2001).

Using similar ideas, the middle school teachers (grades 5–8) developed "Teacher Talk" as another model of professional development. These sessions were structured much like the Breakfast Club but focused on adolescent development and the creation of a supportive social environment for students (Halverson et al. 2001). The meetings were substantive in content. Teachers actively grappled with difficult issues regarding student achievement. After attending one such meeting, a researcher wrote, "I am really impressed by the fact that some teachers . . . read the article. They were . . . engaging in a three-way (at least) discussion about the issues that were brought up by the piece [the article]." The interactions in these meetings and in other contexts reflected a proactive stance toward student learning that demonstrated a high degree of responsibility among teachers for student outcomes.

In sum, teachers' sense of responsibility at Adams was reflected in their talk about classroom practices, organizational structures such as the Breakfast Club and professional development meetings, and organizational artifacts such as banners and wall hangings. Much of the work of school leaders was geared toward increasing collective responsibility

for student outcomes even while acknowledging the challenges students faced. This seemed to be a direct effort at Adams to combat the micropolitical process identified at Erickson School. This suggests the power of organizational context and its mediating effect on the relationship between teachers' beliefs about students and their sense of responsibility for student learning.

Discussion and Conclusion

Research on teacher expectations has focused on individual interactions between teachers and students, paying less attention to the role of school context in conditioning teachers' beliefs and actions. In response to this focus, we examined how school race and class composition may condition teachers' perceptions of students and how these perceptions impact teachers' sense of responsibility for student learning. Drawing on work from Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999), Lee and Smith (2001), and Lamont and Lareau (1988), we argue that school micropolitical contexts are influenced by schools' race and class compositions through school-based organizational habitus.

Consistent with Lee and Smith (2001), our data showed that teachers' beliefs about students were patterned by the race and social class composition of the student population. Because we do not analyze teacher/student interaction across all of our schools, our analysis does not allow us to isolate or disentangle teacher bias from evaluation based on student performance. However, our data do demonstrate that the micropolitical context of teacher evaluation at schools serving low-income African American students is distinct from that found in more affluent black and white schools, and from the low-income majority Chinese school we studied. When students were majority African American and low-income, teachers held more deficit-oriented beliefs about them than when students were majority white or Chinese, or when a higher percentage came from middle-income families. Our data further demonstrate that teachers' sense of responsibility for student learning was higher in contexts where they saw students as possessing greater learning resources. When students' deficits were emphasized, teachers believed that students' lack of motivation, families, and limited skills undermined teachers' ability to effectively teach.

The final school, Adams, did not follow this pattern. Although teachers at this school emphasized students' deficits, school leaders had for several years engaged in practices designed to increase teachers' sense of responsibility for student outcomes. Despite the emphasis on deficits, Adams teachers and administrators expressed a high degree of responsibility for student outcomes. In this case, organizational practices mediated the processes identified at the other four schools. Prior work demonstrates that the micropolitical context of teacher evaluation of students is critical to understanding the implications of family background for student outcomes. The ethnographic analysis here extends

this argument, suggesting that classroom micropolitical processes are influenced by the broader school composition through organizational habitus. The reduction of teachers' expectations and sense of responsibility for student learning in low-income African American schools suggests a process through which de facto segregation contributes to a perpetuation of educational disadvantage. This illustrates an important reason that the continued re-segregation of American public education needs to be challenged by educators, policy makers, and the public.

At the beginning of this article, we sketched the outlines of data showing that teachers have lower expectations for low-income and African American students. Given these data, how do we account for the somewhat unexpected findings at Harris and Davis? We would not have expected teachers to focus on assets at a low-income school such as Harris or a predominately black school such as Davis. Harris and Davis frustrate additive models of race and class, which do not attend to the interaction between particular axes of identity. For instance, one conclusion from our findings is that poor African American students constitute a distinct category in American schools, unlike other low-income minorities (e.g., Chinese students at Harris), and unlike middle-income members similarly classified by race (e.g., middle-class African Americans at Davis). We as researchers must continue to repeat that the complexity of race and class requires sophisticated methods of analysis and interpretation.

In this regard, ethnography has an important role to play in capturing the unexpected ways teachers and administrators respond to the racial and class composition of their schools. Our ethnographic approach allowed us to uncover the key role of ordinary conversation in encouraging teachers to take responsibility for student learning at Adams. We suspect that other types of conversations at Erickson contributed to teachers' lack of responsibility for student learning there. The race and class composition of a given school gains salience, in part, through how teachers and leaders make sense of that composition. Ethnography is uniquely suited for grappling with such complex issues.

In most social reproduction research, schools and their employees are viewed as "agents of the system" with individual actions and organizational processes being determined by the demands of broader structures of domination. However, this research often fails to see how some school personnel exhibit agency and how school organizational structure can challenge the forces of social reproduction (Carlson 1996). Schools can exhibit relative autonomy from the larger systems of domination in which they are embedded (Apple 1995). However, they also

> perform vital functions in the recreation of the conditions for ideological hegemony to be maintained . . . above all, hegemony doesn't simply come about; it must be worked for in particular sites like the family . . . and the school. [Apple 1995:15–16]

Thus, school personnel can engage in actions that facilitate continued relations of domination, or, as the case of Adams demonstrates, in transformative practices that challenge those relations.

The potential for resistance and counterhegemonic practice remains a challenge to teachers and administrators in urban schools. Teachers and administrators need to be cognizant of how their beliefs and practices are influenced by perceptions of student ability tied to race and social class, and work to interrupt the reproductive tendencies these perceptions entail. As other researchers have pointed out, teachers need to become aware and respectful of the cultural backgrounds of their students' families, reflective of their own race and social class biases, and careful not to internalize societal beliefs that connect race, ethnicity, class, and intelligence in complex and detrimental ways (Delpit 1995; Ladson-Billings 1994; Perry et al. 2003). School leaders, too, need to recognize their role in creating conditions under which teachers build on rather than undermine students' academic potential. School leaders must attend to the day-to-day interactions through which racial meaning is constructed, help teachers become cognizant of their critical role in shaping student outcomes, and directly challenge discourses that blame students and families for underachievement. In a very real sense, the everyday choices that teachers and administrators make will either contribute to continued inequality or help promote long overdue social transformation.

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Notes

1. Additive models assume that the effects of identities such as race, class, and gender are linear. For instance, an additive model of identity assumes that being a person of color and working class will always be a double disadvantage rather than looking at the effects of identity as interactive and examining them in context.

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