Aspiration, attainment, and assimilation: a critical ethnography of newcomer youth in an American high school

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Aspiration, Attainment, and Assimilation: A Critical Ethnography of Newcomer Youth in an American High School

By

Aaron Leo

A Dissertation

Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts and Sciences

Department of Anthropology

2018
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments................................................................................................................................. vi

Chapter 1
Aspirations, Attainment, and English Language Learners ................................................................. 1
  Social Reproduction Revisited............................................................................................................. 6
  Social Reproduction and ELLs .......................................................................................................... 24
  Conclusion.......................................................................................................................................... 30

Chapter 2
Doing Research at Parkside High School ............................................................................................... 32
  Researching Social Reproduction in Schools.................................................................................... 32
  Researching at Parkside High School ................................................................................................ 37
    Table 1: Pseudonyms and Countries of Origin for Student Participants........................................... 42
  Conclusion.......................................................................................................................................... 46

Chapter 3
Aspirations and Attainment in the “Land of Opportunities”................................................................. 47
  Attitudes, Optimism, and Social Reproduction.................................................................................. 47
    Educational Aspirations and Attitudes among Immigrants and Refugees ...................................... 53
  Optimism and Achievement at Parkside High School ..................................................................... 59
    “The opportunities are there for you”: Views of Meritocracy at Parkside High......................... 62
    The U.S in Context: Seeing Through a Dual Frame of Reference ................................................ 67
    Student Critiques of Meritocracy ................................................................................................... 71
    “It’s two of us for just one education”: Parental and Student Sacrifice ....................................... 80
  Conclusion.......................................................................................................................................... 85

Chapter 4
Becoming American, Becoming White: Negotiating Class, Race, and Assimilation at Parkside High........................................................................................................................................... 88
  Assimilation, Class Mobility, and Whiteness ..................................................................................... 88
  Schools and Assimilation ................................................................................................................ 96
  Class, Race, and Assimilation at Parkside High ................................................................................ 99
“I’m like a lizard – I can go anywhere”: Adaptation and Accommodation at Parkside High ................................................................. 101
Ethnic Communities in Parkside High ................................................................................................................................. 104
Americanization, Assimilation, and Racialization ..................................................................................................................... 111
Multiculturalism and Americanization at Parkside High ............................................................................................................ 120
“We’re just separate from everybody”: Race and Racialization at Parkside High .............................................................. 123
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................................................. 133

Chapter 5
Aspiration and Attainment in a Climate of High-Stakes Exams .......................................................................................... 135
English Language Learners, High-stakes Exams, and Social Reproduction ........................................................................ 137
  Learning English, Taking Tests .......................................................................................................................................................... 142
High-Stakes Exams at Parkside High: Meritocracy and Critique .......................................................................................... 150
  Student Perspectives on High-Stakes Exams ............................................................................................................................... 150
  Teacher Perspectives on High-Stakes Exams ............................................................................................................................... 155
  Power and Presence of High-Stakes Exams in Classrooms ...................................................................................................... 157
Fighting the Odds: Student Persistence and Leveled Aspirations .......................................................................................... 163
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................................................. 169

Chapter 6
High School to Higher Education: College and Social Mobility Among English Language Learners ........................................... 172
  Social Reproduction and Higher Education ............................................................................................................................... 172
  Parkside High and the Pathway to Higher Education ............................................................................................................... 180
    Anxiety, Uncertainty, and Pride: Going to (Community) College .......................................................................................... 186
    Bumpy Transitions: Perspectives of Current and Former College Students ........................................................................ 193
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................................................. 204

Chapter 7
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................................................. 206
  Significance .................................................................................................................................................................................. 212
  Limitations .................................................................................................................................................................................. 214
  Future Directions ........................................................................................................................................................................ 216
Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................................................... 220
Abstract

As immigrants and refugees constitute an increasingly large proportion of public school students across the United States, much scholarly attention has focused on the variables which promote and hamper academic success of these students. Specifically, the high aspirations and optimistic attitudes towards schooling and the effects of assimilation pressures have been identified as two important features contributing to the academic performance of newcomers.

This dissertation investigates these factors through an ethnographic study of newcomer immigrant and refugee students, identified as English Language Learners, in a public school in Upstate New York. Through the lens of Social Reproduction which view schools as institutions which preserve class hierarchy, this study explored the ways in which social class informed aspirations and academic performance among new arrivals. While class background remained a crucial piece of student performance, the impact of cultural assimilation was evident among participants who struggled to find their place in American society. This study endeavored to situate the attitudes and experiences of participants in the sociopolitical and economic context characterized by an hourglass-shaped job market, high-stakes exams, and rising levels of nativism.

Chapter One explores the theoretical framework of Social Reproduction and its relevance to immigrant and refugee populations. Specifically, this study calls for the importance of race and language to be added to the study of class reproduction. Chapter Two provides a brief introduction to the fieldsite and elaborates on the methodologies used in this research study. Chapter Three discusses the attitudes and aspirations held by participants towards schooling and explores the significance of social class in informing these positions. Experiences of cultural
assimilation and attitudes towards integration are discussed in Chapter Four with a focus on the intersections of race and class. Chapter Five sheds light on the challenges of high-stakes exams from the point of view of students and teachers and highlights the strategies which both groups take in mitigating the power of these tests. Chapter Six describes the transitions of students to college as well as interview data elicited from newcomers already in college. The final Chapter provides concluding remarks regarding the findings and limitations of the study with suggestions for future research.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation was made possible only with the help of many others. I am first and foremost grateful to the students at Parkside High School for welcoming me into their lives and taking time from their busy schedules to spend time with me. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the teachers, administrators, and staff of Parkside High School for their willingness to accommodate me and participate in this study. Many of these individuals not only allowed me in their classrooms and workspaces but were always willing to offer their help. This research would not have been possible without them.

I also acknowledge the assistance of my committee advisor, James Collins, whose feedback has helped guide this study in its entirety. I am also grateful for the time and assistance of my committee members Jennifer Burrell, Margi Sheehy, and Kristen Wilcox who devoted precious time to this dissertation despite hectic their schedules.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their explicit and implicit help in completing my PhD. It has taken a long time and a lot of effort to complete, and without their support I am not sure I would have made it through.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father whose support and guidance helped shape this study in ways he will never know.
Mrs. Dykstra asks me to help Maria, a young Puerto Rican girl, with a short Global History assignment. She has to answer a few questions about the effects of colonial boundaries on newly independent African countries. I help her find the passage in the book which contains the answer she’s looking for, but it is several paragraphs long and written in a complicated register of English. I try to explain to her that the new borders put groups together that didn’t like each other, but I’m not sure if she understands or if I’m explaining it well. I wonder if I could explain it to her in Spanish perhaps, but I am insecure about my Spanish abilities so I decide continue speaking English. Maria decides she wants to move on, so she takes a photo of the paragraph with her phone. She tells me that she’ll use a translator later to help her understand the passage. I then notice that she has been writing her answers out in Spanish and then translating them to English before handing them in. This is so much labor to answer a question that she would likely have little problem answer if she was answering in her first language. I ask her “Do you like history?” “Yes,” she says, “in my language.”

Field Notes, ENL Class, 4/18/2017

The excerpt above sheds light on the monumental academic challenges which students English Language Learners (ELLs) face in acquiring the academic register of English necessary to pass the Regents exams needed to graduate. Maria, like many of the immigrants and refugees participating in this study, grappled with the demands of passing the Regents Exam and struggled to find ways to attain a high school diploma. Comprising nearly 10 percent of the school-aged population (NCES 2016), ELLs face a host of difficulties upon entering the United States school system including learning a new language, culture, and school system. Since education is a prime avenue of social mobility for these students, excelling in school is imperative for newcomers who often have little time to adapt to their new surroundings before facing high-stakes exams which could determine their academic and social trajectories in the
As this study makes clear, the academic attainment of ELLs has also been harmed by the weight of the New York State Regents Exam which in 2000 was made a graduate requirement for all students in the state. For ELLs, the change led to a precipitous decline in graduation rates – from about fifty percent to under one-third (NYSED 2016). Among the nearly 250,000 ELLs in New York State, failing the Regents and entering the workforce without a high school diploma could mean a significant disadvantage in wage-earning and permanent entry into the segment of working-poor in the U.S. (Mishel et al. 2012, Stiglitz 2012). Gándara and Hopkins thoroughly describe the challenges faced by the English Learner population in U.S. schools:

To excel, or even survive academically in school, students must be able to understand a specialized vocabulary (e.g. words such as summarize or analyze are not generally used on the playground), comprehend complex written text, write essays that are well structured and coherent, make oral presentations on academic topics, and especially pass examinations that are written in a form of English that is often meant to challenge the language skills of native English speakers. If they cannot do these things, they will fail. Moreover, if they have missed out on lessons in history, social studies, science, and math, because they could not understand the min English, they are far behind their peers in knowing the material that is tested and cannot hope to pass grade-level exams. Without significant academic intervention, and more time to acquire all that has been missed, these children then fall farther and farther behind as the years go by (2010,14).

However, while many studies have examined the struggles of ELLs as a homogenous group, less research has focused on class stratification within the ELL population itself. As McLaren writes, “Why do some immigrants end up heading multinational corporations and others end up in the
sweatshops of East Los Angeles?” (2000, 7) Indeed, while a copious literature exists on the ways schools reproduce class position (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Ravitch 2010; Jencks et al. 1972), few studies have applied such a perspective to immigrant and refugee populations who arrive to the U.S. with widely varying class backgrounds (exceptions include Bettie 2003; Feliciano 2005; Shankar 2008). This study seeks to address this gap in the understanding of the English Language Learner population drawing on data from a 10-month ethnographic study of the immigrant and refugee population in an urban high school located in upstate New York. While much-needed attention has focused on those who do not graduate high school (Louie 2007; Kim and Diaz 2013; Menken 2008; Yip 2013), this dissertation focuses primarily on ELLs who soon expected to graduate and former students who recently left high school. By focusing on the challenges that current students faced in graduating and the strategies former students used to graduate high school, this study demonstrates the impact of class-based disparities on the academic success of English Language Learners.

Despite the immense challenges faced by immigrant and refugee students, there has been scholarly attention devoted to the higher-than-expected levels of achievement by English Language Learners and the children of immigrants (Louie 2004; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2000; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez Orozco, and Todorova 2008). Much of the theoretical debate has focused on the high aspirations of immigrant students, their scholastic persistence, and optimism towards their own potential for social mobility (Feliciano and Lanuza 2016; Raleigh and Kao 2010; Kao and Tienda 1995). Others have focused on the role of parents who push their children towards high levels of achievement, provide their children with cultural capital, and make sacrifices for their children who seek to repay their
parents through academic pursuits (Feliciano 2005; Hsin and Xie 2013; Li 2008; Suárez-Orozco 1987; Zhou and Bankston 1999).

Although this study finds support for researchers that have explained the positive academic outcomes of immigrants in terms of aspirations and parental influence (Chapter Three), the pressures of high-stakes exams (Chapter Five), cultural assimilation, and racialization (Chapter Four) were implicated in the declining aspirations of students and could lead to negative outcomes. As other scholars have argued, the impact of racialization and assimilation can foster oppositional identities in students and create barriers to academic attainment (Lee 2005; Ogbu 1987; Valenzuela 1999). As Chapter Six shows, even students who are able to obtain postsecondary education are still confronted with a lack of preparedness for the college process and the demands of college-level classes. The concentration of ELLs in community colleges which often have high attrition rates may lead to further stratification along class lines (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2011). In sum, the critical influence of social class position on academic performance demonstrated in this research study lends support to those who have criticized schools for reproducing social hierarchy (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Ravitch 2010).

However, the data presented here also challenges the theoretical position of Social Reproduction which claims that schools, rather than providing equal opportunities for social mobility, actually reinforce the prevailing social hierarchy (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Willis 1977). While the former class positions of many participants – often obscured by the downward mobility incurred upon arrival to the U.S. – was highly related to academic success and failure, there were frequent exceptions. Students whose parents were of members of an educated middle-class in their former countries were well-positioned to replicate
their class status in the U.S., though others from more humble backgrounds often strove beyond their family’s former class position with hopes that education would provide them with social mobility. Yet, as students from lower-class backgrounds moved into postsecondary education, their aspirations proved to be harder to realize, whereas middle-class students could draw on class-specific resources to navigate the college process and struggle through the academic rigor of college in order to attain a Bachelor’s Degree. These differing class trajectories are complicated by the processes of assimilation and racialization discussed in Chapter Four and the barriers of high-stakes exams discussed in Chapter Five. The data presented here do not purport to represent the entire ELL population of the U.S. or New York State, but can be instructive as an in-depth study of the academic trajectory of particular students over time. The variables of selectivity, age at arrival, years of uninterrupted schooling, and ethno-racial background all impacted the success of immigrant students (Feliciano 2005; Feliciano and Lanuza 2016; Fry 2005). The impact of selective migration and class position before arrival can also help to explain the high performances of some immigrant groups (Feliciano and Lanuza 2017; Fry 2007; North 2009). Lastly, the wider sociopolitical context of nativism and xenophobia, pressures to assimilate, an hourglass-shaped economy, and the power of high-stakes testing powerfully shaped the experiences and opportunities of participants in this study (Lipman 2004; Menken 2008; Portes and Zhou 1993; Stiglitz 2012).

This dissertation, therefore, focuses broadly on the following research questions:

1) In terms of educational attainment, how does social class serve to stratify the population of English Language Learners?
2) Do the factors implicated in the educational success of immigrants and refugees (such as a dual frame of reference and high aspirations) mitigate the impact of class reproduction on this population?
3) Third, how might sociopolitical and economic factors such as the hourglass-shaped job market, climate of high-stakes testing, and assimilation pressures affect the aspirations and attainment of ELLs?
4) Lastly, in what ways are immigrants and refugees incorporated into the racial hierarchy of the U.S., and how does social class intersect with this process of racialization?

Social Reproduction Revisited

This study draws from the theoretical framework known as Social Reproduction which understands schools as institutions which serve to perpetuate, not alter, the status quo (Anyon 1980; Althusser 1977; Apple 1979; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Willis 1977). According to the theory of Social Reproduction, schools serve the primary purpose of preparing workers for their respective positions in the capitalist order. This process is accomplished by differential treatment of students, rewarding obedience and passivity and discouraging independent thought (Anyon 1980; Bowles and Gintis 1976). These theorists noted that, despite schools being historically portrayed by reformers like Horace Mann as the great “equalizers” of society, the school has often served the interests of the elites in society. By fostering a belief in the capacity for all individuals to succeed in school regardless of their social backgrounds, schools often maintain inequality invisibly. In this sense, schools function to “legitimate economic inequality by providing an open, objective, and ostensibly meritocratic mechanism for assigning individuals to unequal economic positions” (Bowles and Gintis 1976, 103). Additionally, the perspective of Social Reproduction claimed that the original function of schools was not to prepare critically-minded citizens, but instead served to assimilate new groups of racialized immigrants such as Italians and Irish, thus preparing a docile workforce for the rapidly industrializing U.S. (Apple 1977). From 1840 to 1930, during the establishment of the compulsory, publicly-funded education system of the U.S., the proportion of farmers in the workforce declined from 69
percent to 21 percent, and the school and state took over the responsibility of socializing youth, in part, to prepare them for positions in industry (Nasaw 1979, 37; Katz 1987).

These early theories of reproduction claim that schools uphold class hierarchy in various ways, but are generally derived from a Marxist critique which suggests that dominance is material in nature and that schools serve to maintain the antagonistic class relationships that are generated by an individual’s location in the capitalist mode of production (Marx 1970[1859], Marx and Engels 1967 [1848]). This argument follows the Marxian principle which separates the “relations of production” from the “legal and political superstructure”; the former largely determining the latter. Marx, who claimed notoriously that the consciousness of men did not determine their being, but in fact, it is “their social being that determines their consciousness,” believed that societal transformation could only be achieved by revolutionizing the base: “With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed” (Marx 1970[1859], 5).

Yet by the 1970s, influential Marxist scholars such as Althusser (1971) and Gramsci (1971), while not rejecting the base-superstructure hierarchy, began to focus more on the role of ideology in maintaining social stratification. Althusser, for example, described schools as an “Ideological State Apparatus” which served to indoctrinate youth with bourgeois ideology, thereby reinforcing the economic dominance of the bourgeoisie and legitimizing class hierarchy as natural (1971). Bourdieu’s (1984, Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) view of class struggle, for example, is a significant departure from more the traditional Marxist position exemplified by Bowles and Gintis (1976) because he positions culture as a crucial mediating factor of reproduction as opposed to the materialist views of hardline Marxists. For Bourdieu, schools serve to legitimize the values, dispositions and knowledge, or “cultural capital,” of the middle
class, while devaluing working-class and minority culture. This process of “symbolic violence” ensures that those who possess more cultural capital will be able to attain diplomas capable of being traded for economic capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Because rewards for cultural capital are seen as resulting from effort, not privilege, “the transmission of cultural capital is no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital” (Bourdieu 1986, 246).

Bourdieu conceptualizes agency and structure through the tension between individual habitus and “fields,” or systems of power relations which assigns value to cultural forms which can be converted to economic capital. Paying particular attention to structures such as schools which institutionalize these values, Bourdieu notes that cultural capital is more likely than economic capital to be “unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence, as authority exerting an effect of (mis)recognition” (1986, 245). Cultural capital does not guarantee class privilege, however, as the transmission or activation of these skills and dispositions do not always occur flawlessly. As Lareau (2003) notes, middle-class children – though well-adapted to navigate institutional authority – can have more familial conflicts, hectic schedules, and weaker kin networks. Bourdieu’s theorization of cultural capital remains an important and influential lens for examining the reproduction of social inequality, yet the broad use of the term has, at times, drifted from Bourdieu’s original usage, with some analyses reducing the notion of cultural capital to one’s knowledge of “high culture” (Lareau and Weininger 2003). Analysts must therefore pay attention not only to the cultural practices of individuals but also to the educational field which assigns value to those practices. As Greenfell explains, “What is most important is that such cultural forms are unevenly distributed across the social hierarchy and then established as core values for scholastic success” (2012, 55). Empirical work on the significance of cultural capital has reaffirmed its importance in school success (Dimaggio 1982; Kalmijin and
Kraaykamp 1996; Lareau 2003) as well as the ways in which such capital can be “cultivated” in schools and communities (Bartolomé 2008; Hopkins et al. 2015).

Other work in the paradigm of Social Reproduction continued focus on the cultural dimensions of class domination. Apple’s (1979, 1982) work drew on Gramsci’s theory of hegemony by paying close attention to the way in which curricula often validates the knowledge and values of dominant groups while diminishing those of other student groups. This process of ideological domination is accomplished through the sanctioning of “official knowledge” through formal curricula as well as through the “hidden curriculum” of schools which reward the behaviors of students according to their positions in society: docility and compliance for working-class students, and leadership and managerial skills for students of middle-class families (Anyon 1980; Apple 2000). In contrast to the more deterministic, structural accounts such as Bowles and Gintis (1976), Apple’s account of dominance is closely tied to a Foucauldian notion of power which implicates school curriculum as “particular constructions of reality, particular ways of selecting and organizing that vast universe of possible knowledge” (Apple 2000, 182; Foucault 1980). Apple and others also searched for ways in which hegemony could be contested and rearticulated, adding the notion of agency to deterministic accounts of class domination (Apple 2001; Levinson and Holland 1996).

The early Reproductionist paradigm successfully brought to light the failure of liberal school reform, and called into question the meritocratic doctrine of schooling as the “great equalizer”. Furthermore, Social Reproduction offered an alternative to theories of cultural “poverty” popularized by Oscar Lewis (1966) which gained in popularity during the 20th century and still persist in part because they conveniently place responsibility for school-based inequality outside of the school, and thus the purview of the state (Erikson 1987; McDermott and Varenne
2006). Whereas the dominant reading of educational inequality had been a lack of access to schooling or theories of cultural deprivation, Social Reproduction explained that schools institutionalized the interests of the powerful by sorting students into their respective positions in society often through the unequal distribution of knowledge (Dimitriadis et al. 2006).

Despite the merits of Social Reproduction, the paradigm has been rightly criticized for their overly deterministic theories of dominance which preclude notions of agency. Theories of social reproduction also failed to elucidate the actual classroom practices and interactions which served to reproduce the capitalist order, or for example why two children of similar class backgrounds might have entirely different educational experiences. Much of data used in early theories of social reproduction was macro-data, surveys, and second-hand observations which did little to show how political-economic structures are experienced by individuals in specific contexts. Lastly, the framework of reproduction often privileged the analysis of class while generally neglecting the dimensions of gender, race and ethnicity (Collins 2009; Giroux 1983; Levinson Holland 1996).

As a result, agency has come to the fore as an important concept for the analysis of education. Although Marx generally conceived of resistance in terms of acquiring a class consciousness which would lead to social revolution, many other theorists of resistance have pointed to more the more subtle, everyday forms of resistance which may not be overt or directly oppositional (Ortner 2006; Scott 1990). In contrast to a strict Marxist position, Ortner removes resistance from the notion of class consciousness and instead locates it in a “variety of transformative process, in which things do get changed, regardless of the intentions of the actors of the presence of very mixed intentions” (2006, 44). Giroux differs slightly in this regard because of his claim that resistance must include some level of intention. For him, any analysis
of resistance must include “a concern with uncovering the degree to which it highlights, implicitly or explicitly, the need to struggle against domination and submission” (1983, 285). Even the most oppressive social structures can produce subtle and overt forms of resistance which ethnographers are well-positioned to analyze as they unfold over time (Ortner 2006; Scott 1990; Willis 1977).

Researchers added empirical studies to the study of agency in education, utilizing on qualitative research and ethnography to help unlock the “black box” of schools by showing how students and teachers work in both subtle and overt ways to transform or interrupt the reproductive process (Apple 1982; Foley 1990; MacLeod 1987; Weis 1990). Paul Willis’ seminal work, _Learning to Labor_ (1977), famously depicted the ways in which working-class boys clash with what they see as oppressive schooling practices and instead embrace the masculine shop-floor culture of their fathers. This early description of working-class resistance skillfully described the subversive behaviors and style of students, yet because their opposition to schooling landed them squarely in the same factory positions as their fathers, the class order remained neatly preserved. Despite the cycle of class reproduction, Willis’ analysis broadened the paradigm of reproduction, referring the boys’ rejection of the school contract as ideological “penetrations”, and their often sexist and bigoted attitudes as “limitations” to overcoming their working-class position. In this sense, oppressive school practices not only reproduce class structure, but produce oppositional behavior as well (Willis 1977). By “having a laff”, Willis’ lads interrupted and re-routed school lessons and also differentiated themselves from the more docile and attentive students they labeled as “ear’oles”. Foley (1990), following the work of Willis, describes similar behavior of working-class students living in a town in South Texas. Foley referred to the tactics by which students would disrupt and redirect lessons as “making out
games.” These disruptive techniques often formed uneasy alliances between working-class students from different racial backgrounds, both groups having the intent of doing the least amount of work for the highest grades, yet it was the “Anglo” students from middle-class backgrounds who were often likeliest to succeed in this endeavor. Nonetheless, students in Foley’s analysis reject the school’s definition of who is and who is not considered educated or intelligent, however their success in doing so is often dependent on their reserves of cultural and linguistic capital (Foley 1990, 120; Ogbu 1987).

Later work broadened the reproduction paradigm by demonstrating the ways in which gender and race intersect with class divisions. Bettie (2003), for example, notes how working-class Latinas fail to understand their marginalization in class terms, instead emphasizing on the dimensions of gender and race. Coinciding with McRobbie’s (1978) findings, Bettie demonstrates how “las chicas” view their femininity as their real source of power and resistance. Weis (1990; 2004) builds on these studies through her study of working-class White students in a de-industrializing Rustbelt city. The girls of “Freeway,” witnessing the deterioration of family life alongside the evaporation of stable industrial work, increasingly view education as the only escape of working-class life and patriarchal relations. The boys, on the other hand, while trying to cope with job loss and the increasing value of education, begin to view the erosion of their household dominance and define themselves in opposition against African-American men, Arab-Americans and White women (1990; 2004). Across Weis’ 14 year study with working-class Whites, she notes that both men and women are more accepting of the educational contract and recognize, often begrudgingly, that the route to social mobility is increasingly dependent on one’s education (2004).
This study follows the tradition of Social Reproduction laid out in the preceding pages by focusing on the role of schools in perpetuating class stratification. Yet by applying this framework to a population of immigrants and refugees, this study complicates the traditional study of Social Reproduction with a focus on the intersections of class, race, and language. While Chapter Three demonstrates how high aspirations and optimism across class groups can help bolster the attainment of ELLs even as they learn a new language and culture, the following chapters argue that even highly-aspiring ELLs are constrained by sociopolitical and economic factors such as assimilation pressures, racialization, high-stakes exams and a two-tier labor market. Social class underlies these struggles as the different class-based resources brought by students before arriving to the U.S. play a crucial role in realizing their academic goals and as well as negotiating their racial identities. Lastly, applying the paradigm of Social Reproduction can also help add validate the utility of a class analysis as opposed to those which privilege cultural values as the source of school success and failure among immigrant groups. Such theories often neglect class and racial inequality and instead make use well-worn tropes of cultural “deprivation” and “model minorities” (Chua 2011; Huntington 1996; Lewis 1966). Lastly, an ethnographic view of agency can help show how even the most seemingly disadvantaged participants of this study, such as those who endured years in refugee camps or repeated interruptions to their schooling, were nonetheless able to propel themselves towards college and class mobility. Even with such effort, the recognition of agency should not discount the barriers which face ELLs and other marginalized students in schools and society (Giroux 1983).

Because social reproduction does not occur in a vacuum, it is also necessary to situate this study in the current social and political-economic milieu. As Levinson and Holland write, the changing focus of educational research is “now one of how historical persons are formed in practice, within and against larger societal forces and structures which instantiate themselves in schools and other institutions” (1996, 14). This study takes up the call for contemporary educational researchers to describe the effects of a changing economic and ideological landscape which are both reproduced and struggled against by teachers, students, and communities. This analysis, therefore, must also address the current socio-economic climate characterized by post-industrialization, neoliberalism, and high-stakes testing.

Several strands of contemporary educational research have followed these early qualitative studies of Social Reproduction by blending ethnographic inquiry with a political-economic analysis that emphasizes the ways structural changes in the urban landscape such as de-industrialization, structural racism, gentrification and public policy shape the schooling experience of teachers and students (Anyon 1997; Lipman 2004; 2011; McNeil 2000). These researchers have also paid attention to forms of resistance as well as methods of developing counter-hegemonies (Anyon 2006; Apple 2001). This study follows such efforts with an attention to the ways in which sociopolitical and economic formations such as the transition to a service-based economy, use of high-stakes exams as graduation requirements, and rising nativism all bear on the aspirations, attainment, and attitudes of participants in this study.

In the last several decades, neoliberal ideology has influenced the sociopolitical configurations of the global economy as well as the relationship between individuals and the
In short, neoliberals have sought to dismantle the Keynesian compact which called for state intervention in order to stabilize the economy combined with a strong public sector which, in theory, provides services to citizenry (Harvey 2005). In its place, neoliberalism has ushered in forms of economic restructuring which include “labor deregulation, capital mobility, privatization, a monetarist agenda of deflation and financial autonomy, trade liberalization and the reduction of taxation and public expenditures” (Wacquant 2009: 206). These changes have coincided with the loss of unionized, industrial jobs and the rollback of the meager U.S. welfare state. In its place, a harsh penal state has been rolled out and used as a tool to control jobless, urban populations largely of color (Wacquant 2009, Peck and Tickell 2002). Neoliberalism has not only altered political-economic arrangements but also “developed a new common sense about how we think about society and our place in it” (Lipman 2011:6, Gledhill 2009). In this sense, neoliberalism may be thought of “as an economic model, a political philosophy and a mode of personal conduct” (Zilberg 2011:4) where the values of individuality, self-sufficiency and competition are privileged against the overgrown and intrusive Keynesian welfare state (Harvey 2005, Wacquant 2009).

The growth of neoliberal ideology has had significant ramifications for educational researchers, as well, who have called attention to its effects on teaching and learning (Hursh 2008; Ravitch 2013) Analyses of the effects of neoliberalism on schools have paid particular attention to the language of education reform noting that privatization and labor discipline have been obscured through words like “accountability”, “standards”, and “choice” (Apple 2001 Hursh 2008; Ravitch 2010). This strand of research, while not typically grounded in firsthand fieldwork nonetheless provides a useful historical frame to understand the influence of neoliberalism on education. The ideological critique of neoliberalism issued by these writers is
buttressed by the use of macro-data on student achievement which demonstrates that minority students have been most harmed by recent policy reforms which are alleged by politicians to be uplifting these very groups (Fine et al. 2007; Ravitch 2010). Many of these researchers have also described the resistance of educators and students across the country and discuss educational alternatives currently being implemented and many others which they believe ought to be realized. These authors often ground their critiques of neoliberalization in their personal experiences as lifelong educators and write in a way that is accessible to a wide audience (Apple 2001; Fine 2006; Fine et al. 2007; Hursh 2008; Kozol 2005). Several of these studies have also demonstrated the detrimental effects of high stakes testing in terms of pedagogical and curricular alignment and the pressure on students and teachers to meet standards of achievement (Menken 2008; Shohamy 2001).

Pauline Lipman, for example, has chronicled the relationship between Chicago’s changing urban landscape and educational reform (2004; 2011) noting how school-based inequality is intricately linked to urban inequalities outside of the classroom such as rapid gentrification and deindustrialization. Furthermore, Lipman’s work calls attention to the need to analyze educational policy as part of a wide-scale effort to remake the city under neoliberal dogma. For Lipman and others, visions of democratic schooling must be accompanied by an account of urban marginalization and the “right to the city” (Beane and Apple 2007; Harvey 2012). Linda McNeil’s (2000) analysis of neoliberal policy in Texas schools argues that successful and dedicated teachers working with minority students became disheartened as high-stakes testing and accountability regimes weakened their control over the labor process and the curriculum. No longer able to delve deeply into critical issues, teachers became defensive, taught
to the test and simplified complex ideas to make sure their students knew the right answer even if
they did not understood what that answer meant.

High-stakes exams have been detrimental for many non-mainstream students such as
ELLs who may lack the kinds of language competencies demanded by exams such as the New
York State Regents. Menken (2008), for example, concludes after a linguistic analysis of the
New York State Regents Exam that even content areas not designed to measure English ability
such as math and science portions still require a high level of English which may take five to
seven years to develop (Cummins 1999). These factors have contributed to higher rates of
dropout and a widening achievement gap between ELLs and their mainstream cohort. In order to
help students pass exams, ESL curricula has moved from teaching critical forms of language
which can be used for empowerment to the language needed to pass exams (Ravitch 2010).

For ELLs, high-stakes testing has not only served to stratify graduation rates and
attainment, but also has been used as a tool for standardizing languages (Gándara and
Rumberger 2009). Though the Civil Rights era saw the growth of bilingual schooling and more
acceptance of using non-standard dialects in schools, No Child Left Behind has effectively
curtailed these practices by acting as “de facto language policy” which has established English
proficiency as a requirement for academic success (Menken 2008). In addition, as Fine et al.
(2007) note, the highest stakes exams have been implemented in regions with the largest
numbers of ELLs. The authors claim states which institute exams needed to graduate high
school, such as the Regents in New York, prevent ELLs from obtaining diplomas and are, in
essence, acting as tools of border control (Fine et al. 2007).

As the following chapters demonstrate, the demands of the Regents Exam weighed
heavily on the aspirations held by student participants and served as a powerful barrier to
postsecondary education. The challenge of the Regents Exam also challenged student perceptions of meritocracy which were embedded in their optimistic estimation of their opportunities in the U.S. As Chapter Five shows, teachers, too, were affected by the Regents requirements as they described the pressure to craft curricula to match the needs of the test often at the expense of more abstract learning goals. Furthermore, as discussed below, the limited options in a postindustrial job market could mean permanent incorporation into the underclass for those unable to meet the demands of the Regents Exam.

The contemporary economic context of the United States bore heavily on the lives of participants in this study who not only struggled to avoid the low-wage service economy, but also encountered major challenges in adjusting to postsecondary education and the debt which it entailed. The consequences of undereducation were tangible for many students who already held down part-time jobs in the service economy and had older friends and family who were stuck in similar positions. For students formerly of the middle- or upper-middle class, the specter of permanent downward mobility and the sacrifices made by parents toiling in low-wage positions served as a powerful motivator to continue their education.

The experiences of these newcomers can be seen as linked to the past several decades of laissez-faire neoliberal capitalism which have helped to erode the U.S. industrial job base that undereducated youth had formerly filled regardless of their level of educational attainment. (Harvey 2005; Soss, Fording and Schram 2011; Stiglitz 2012). The growth of non-unionized, low-wage, service work has been accompanied by high-wage skilled work requiring college and postgraduate degrees with little growth to replace the well-paying manufacturing jobs lost throughout the recent decades. In 1979, for instance, 21.6% of the workforce was employed in the manufacturing center, while 33 years later this fact had declined to 8.9% (Mishel et al. 2012).
Minority populations in urban areas reliant on industrial jobs have been especially hit hard by the transition to a service economy; Chicago lost 230,000 manufacturing jobs between 1967 and 1990 and New York lost nearly 500,000 in a similar span of time (Bourgois 1996; Lipman 2004). During the same period of time, wages for males with high school diplomas declined from over 15 dollars to below 12 dollars per hour (in 2011 dollars) (Mishel et al. 2012).

It is in this context in which Lipman writes that “knowledge has become far more definitive in shaping one’s life chances than in the past, when a high school diploma was sufficient to gain entry to a well-paying, stable job and sense of future. (Lipman 2004, 10). Even during the recent period of job growth in the U.S. economy, most of these jobs will be low-paying, insecure work in the service sector. As Robert Reich concisely states, “The problem is pay, not jobs… the good news is that more jobs will become available, eventually. The bad news is that many Americans who obtain these jobs will have to accept lower pay than they received before” (2010, 54). These so-called McJobs will do little to improve the social standing of working-class, urban youth despite evidence which demonstrates the positive effects that holding jobs has for students, both in terms of their pursuit of education and measures of self-worth (Newman 1999).

The lack of well-paying, secure, unionized industrial work has had drastic effects on the attitudes towards education held by working-class and students of color (Weis 2004, Weis and Fine 2004). When the limited options for those without diplomas are taken into account, many students who feel marginalized by the schooling process still attempt to continue, or pursue alternative means to obtain diplomas (Fine 1991; MacLeod 1987; Weis 1990). Economic data shows that the value of high school diploma has been shrinking since the 1970s, but the gap between dropouts and graduates is still significant (Mishel et al 2012). For New York State, in
which this study takes place, the 2000s has been referred to as a “lost decade” for New York State’s workers whose median wages have declined by 7% (men) and 1% (women) (Fiscal Policy Institute 2013). Across the U.S., students entering the labor force without a high school diploma can expect, on average, to earn five dollars less per hour than those with a diploma (Mishel et al. 2012). To add to the matter, poorer students have less chances of graduating college than wealthy students, even when succeeding academically. Even when they do graduate, poorer students are much less likely to graduate from prestigious, private colleges which often bring the reward of social capital (Stiglitz 2012).

While the crisis of accumulation in the 1970s precipitated the onset of neoliberal dogma in the first place, recent analyses of the Great Recession bring to light the role that economic inequality plays in the lagging recovery (Stiglitz 2012). The current period of economic stagnation contrasts with recent eras where, to offset their lack of purchasing power, middle- and working-class Americans sunk deeper into debt, worked longer hours, and sacrificed their savings in order to maintain a level of consumption consistent with the surplus produced by capital (Reich 2010). The desire to uphold this level of consumption by Americans during a long period of wage stagnation and decline helps to explain why so many Americans describe themselves as “middle-class” and points to the need to conceive of class through symbolic displays of status as well as socioeconomic indicators (Bourdieu 1984; Ortner 2006). On the other hand, one’s identity in the U.S. is still crucially linked with one’s career. As Newman contends, “Here in America, there is no other metric that matters as much as the kind of job you hold” (1999, 87). Taking Newman’s quote seriously means that the significance of one’s career and its implication for class identity is critically linked to education and its capacity for social movement.
Such changes have thus destabilized and fragmented the U.S. working-class and called into question the potential for solidarity among newly incorporated immigrant groups and established labor movements (Dhingra 2003; Lamont 2000). Indeed, since the postmodern turn beginning in 1968, class consciousness has been subsumed by more fragmented forms of identity in the U.S and U.K. (Harvey 2005, 50). Nancy Fraser (1995) refers to this process as a “politics of representation” overtaking a “politics of redistribution,” with the former targeting cultural and legal evaluation structures, stigma and discrimination based on ethnicity, gender and sexuality rather than economic inequality and poverty. These developments also coincide with a general repression of class solidarity in the United States and the fomentation of a sentiment which plays on the belief that the state is a pesky obstruction to the freedoms offered in an unregulated market. In contemporary contexts, linking class simply to one’s position in the productive process may be inadequate since the factory-floor antagonism between capital and labor has effectively been “off-shored” (Weis 2004). Anti-communist sentiment also helped pave the way for a sharp decline of unions throughout the 20th century. Indeed, as of 2012 less than 13% of U.S. workers belong to unions (Mishel et al. 2012) and 25 states have now passed “Right to Work” legislation which prevents labor unions from forcing workers to contribute dues (Davey 2015). Union membership is not only highly correlated with wages (Mishel et al. 2012) but also served as one of the few collectivist organizations to which members of the working- and middle-classes belonged (Lamont 2000; Lamont 2000).

Such macro-structural changes in the economy must be taken into account as they can powerfully influence the lives of immigrant youth who must balance their positions in a new class-racial hierarchy with their identities as new Americans (Ngo 2010; Sirin and Fine 2008). Indeed as Kincheloe and McLaren write, “new ethnographic research approaches must take
global capitalism not as an end point of analysis, but as a starting point” (2005, 125). However, the return to structural analyses of education also must remain sensitive to the ways individuals and groups contest dominance, and remain attentive to the effects of racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. Reconciling the effects of globalization and neoliberalism with on-the-ground analyses have prompted researchers to rethink the traditional definitions of class, race and gender as well as the new forms of identity which have sprung up as a result of increasing cultural contact, hybridization and syncretism (Rampton 2006; Volk 2013).

The changes economic changes brought about through deindustrialization and neoliberalism have racialized effects as well. For example, students of color, though motivated to stay in school due to the two-tiered economy, may nonetheless feel ambivalent about the potential opportunities which diplomas create for them since they, on average, reap less financial reward than Whites with the same credentials (Fine and Weis 1998; Mishel et al. 2012). For example, disaggregated data shows that while high school diplomas make a large difference within gender and race groupings, white men, on average, are paid higher and more likely to become employed than woman or minority groups (Mishel et al. 2012). And despite the unequal rewards for education across race, many students of color find themselves with contradictory feelings towards schooling – accepting the necessity of education for social mobility but still justifiably critical of the meritocratic narrative (Fine and Weis 1998; Ogbru 1987; Weis 2004; Weis and Fine 2004). The skepticism of African-American students over the potential for schools to facilitate social mobility, for example, must also be placed in context of the re-segregation of many urban school districts where 99% of students are African-Americans (Fine and Weis 1998; Kozol 2005). The rollback of social services and rollout of the police state has also increased the potential for men and women of color to be unemployed and a target of police
in the last several decades. According to recent studies, the increased penalization of U.S. society has seeped into schools. Recently, more attention has been paid to the ways in which minority students are subjected to harsher levels of discipline and the channeling of these students towards incarceration via the “school to prison pipeline” (American Civil Liberties Union 2014).

As Chapter Four shows, for the youth in this study, racialization and pressures to assimilate challenged the high aspirations which had been crucial to their pursuit of class mobility. Many youth struggled with their newly racialized status and worked to distance themselves from African Americans whom they viewed as at the bottom of the class-racial hierarchy. The concerns over assimilation into the American mainstream were not only raced, but powerfully intersected with anxieties over speaking “good English,” thus demonstrating the connections between the normative American who is middle-class, White and English-speaking (Urciuoli 1996). Class-derived resources again played a role as those who arrived to the U.S. with higher levels of English and college degrees described less difficulties integrating in society and fewer concerns about racial prejudice. However, even for so-called “model minorities,” class mobility and white-collar work cannot does not guarantee full inclusion or acceptance in U.S. society (Bonilla-Silva 2004). As Bashi Treitler (2013, 131) writes, “The U.S. has no means by which money whitens.” The following section elaborates on the ways in which Social Reproduction theory can provide insight to the connections between class, race, and language as through an analysis of English Language Learners.

In conclusion, the polarized labor market and wage inequality have raised critical concerns over school meritocracy and opportunity in the U.S. and reasserted the connections between political-economy and schooling. The receding welfare system and meager unemployment benefits offer little support to families struggling to escape poverty, and those
who have worked towards obtaining college degrees have been increasingly saddled with debt, rising tuition costs and lower returns on their diplomas. The disproportionate impact of poverty and class disadvantage on immigrant and refugees also call into question the ability of high-aspiring ELLs to utilize education as a means of social uplift. The majority of the nearly five million English Language Learners across the United States go to school in low-income, urban neighborhoods (Fry 2007), and those who exit high school without diplomas are at a significant wage disadvantage compared to those who possess diplomas (Mishel et al. 2012). It is in this context that the youth of this study construct class and racial identities, aspire for social mobility, and negotiate their status as newcomers in the U.S.

**Social Reproduction and ELLs**

Although the framework of Social Reproduction has been applied fruitfully to demonstrate how class-based orientations to schooling confer advantages on the middle and upper class (Anyon 1980; Demerath 2009; Lareau 2003; Willis 1977), analyses of Social Reproduction have rarely applied this paradigm to newly-arrived immigrant and refugee populations. In this section, I argue that the use of the Social Reproduction framework to analyze newly-arrived refugee and immigrant populations can elucidate the connections between language, race, and class stratification, and provide insight into the ways in which newcomers both understand and negotiate their positions in the class and racial structure of the U.S. (Li 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

As demonstrated by the opening excerpt involving Maria, the primacy of language to the process of Social Reproduction makes it an especially useful lens to understand the experiences of ELLs. Ethnographic work drawing on theories of Reproduction has noted the differences in
class-derived forms of language and literacy (Heath 1983; Lareau 2003). When students enter school settings, linguistic differences may be misrecognized as deficits and can create miscommunication between teachers and students (Michaels 1981; Phillips 2009). From this perspective, differences in language and literacy are understood as intimately connected to issues of social power and inequality (Gee 2012; Delpit 1995). Street notes that “particular versions of literacy are always ideological, in the sense that they are always rooted in a particular world-view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and marginalize others” (2012, 29). In another sense, literacy practices are also tied to their potential to generate value on the “linguistic market.” For Bourdieu, each “linguistic exchange … is also an exchange which is established within a particular symbolic relation of power.” It follows that those endowed with less linguistic capital are likely to reap a lower “material or symbolic profit” (2006, 480). In other words, notes Greenfell, “the economic could be expressed just as clearly in symbolic exchanges which might have just as significant consequences in terms of social positioning as any exchange of economic capital” (2012, 56).

In school settings, researchers have noted the way in which class-based forms of literacy can influence academic and occupational outcomes (Heath 1983; Lareau 2003). Those students whose home literacies do not align with those expected in a school setting are more likely to fail or be seen as “at risk” (Gee 2012; McDermott, Raley, and Seyer-Ochi 2009). The connections between class and language are visible in the ELL population who often come to school with vastly different levels of linguistic capital which can translate into varied levels of academic success. Furthermore, the high-stakes exams as a form of assessment have had negative influences on English Language Learners who often perform poorly on such exams (Menken 2008; Ravitch 2010). Since the academic registers of English required to pass graduation exams
such as the Regents require at least five to seven years to develop, newcomers are at a severe
disadvantage on exams compared with their native-speaking counterparts (Ravitch 2010,
Cummins 1999; Menken 2008). These barriers to graduation can have severe repercussions for
students’ potential for social mobility in the U.S.

Despite these linguistic challenges, ELLs’ high aspirations and optimistic attitudes have
been cited as a factor in their relatively high levels of academic achievement thereby challenging
the reproductive model (Hsin and Xie 2013; Kao and Tienda 1995; Ogbu 1987; Portes and
Rumbaut 2001; Raleigh and Kao 2010). The so-called “immigrant optimism” hypothesis (Kao
and Tienda 1995), for example, claims that high aspirations of newly arrived immigrant families
helps propel student success. According to this theory, it is “native-born children of immigrant
parents [who] are best situated to perform academically due to both their mothers’ higher
aspirations for children and the children’s English skills” (Kao and Tienda 1995, 16).
Furthermore, children are often motivated to excel in school as a way to repay their parents for
sacrifices they made in migrating to the U.S. (Suárez-Orozco 1987; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-
Orozco, and Todorova 2008). Lastly, since newly-arrived immigrants are likely to compare their
experiences in the U.S. favorably to those in their previous countries, newcomers may be more
willing to accommodate mistreatment and discrimination. Such a “dual-frame of reference”
contrasts with native-born minority groups who compare their status with the dominant groups in
the U.S. and find such barriers to be damaging to their potential for social mobility (Ogbu 1987;
Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi 1986; Suárez-Orozco 1987).

Yet, while high aspirations are influential in the ability for immigrants to succeed
academically, the significance of class plays a mitigating role in the potential for aspirations to
be realized. As Jaffe-Walter and Lee write, “Although working-class and poor immigrants have
been found to have high educational aspirations for their children, they often lack the cultural and social capital necessary to navigate U.S. schools and universities” (2011, 282). Indeed, heightening of aspirations among all high school-aged students has been a notable feature of the last several decades. Although only 55 percent of high school seniors expected to attend college in 1950, by 1990 this number was up to 90 percent (Schneider and Stevenson 1999, 5). Yet, as Schneider and Stevenson explain, those who have “limited knowledge about their chosen occupations, about educational requirements, or about future demand for these occupations” are unlikely to manifest their ambitions for upward mobility (1999, 7). Such divisions were evident among students at Parkside High as well who possessed high aspirations across all social classes, yet differed greatly in the class-based resources they drew on to realize their academic goals.

Additionally, as Chapter Four discusses, the impact of assimilation pressures and racialization can weigh heavily on the once high aspirations of immigrant and refugees. As Suárez-Orozco reports, the “length of residence in the U.S. seems associated with declining health, school achievement, and aspirations” (2001, 354; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2015). Longitudinal ethnographic studies have confirmed this claim, as the high aspirations of marginalized youth becomes “cooled out” over several years in which education does not seem to be paying off financially (MacLeod 1987; Sarroub 2005; Weis 2004). These findings point to the notion that, in contrast to newcomers, well-established minority groups in the United States are more likely to develop oppositional identities towards schooling, as both a reaction to cultural marginalization and as a rejection of the potential for education to facilitate class mobility (Ogbu 1987; Erikson 1987).

According to Ogbu, because of their supposed willingness to accommodate, immigrants and refugees may outperform other minority groups who, in contrast, develop oppositional
identities to schools which they associate with Whiteness (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). In discussing the high performance of immigrants relative to African Americans, Ogbu argues that the “primary cultural differences” developed before coming to the U.S. are seen as “barriers to be overcome” rather than the “secondary cultural differences” which “involuntary minorities” develop and maintain as a response to oppression (1987, 327). However, by ignoring the significance of class on school success, these analyses can run the risk of reviving deprivation models which played the blame of academically unsuccessful students on their families’ culture (Lewis 1966; Moynihan 1965). In this sense, the culture of successful students is seen as the source of their success and a “model” to be emulated rather (Lee 2005; Louie 2004). Such discussions of “Asian Tiger Moms” (Chua 2011) conveniently ignore issues of selectivity, the differences in class resources brought by various groups of immigrants, and the political, economic, and racial context in which immigrant groups arrive (Feliciano 2005; Portes and Zhou 1993).

English Language Learners are at risk of being marginalized in schools not only from language differences, but also because of their ethno-racial identities. While research on class disparities is useful for understanding how cultural capital is transferred and institutionalized, Social Reproduction must take into account the fact that immigrants and refugees may find themselves viewed as racial “others” in the U.S. (Lee 2005; Urciuoli 1996). As Apple notes, schools do not only reproduce class privileges, but also function so that “the community life, values, and norms … of the powerful were to be protected” (1979, 63). Similarly, Urciuoli argues that racial and ethnic groups are conceived in reference to the imagined normative American: white, middle-class and English-speaking (1996, 16). Therefore, immigrant and refugees who are seen as lacking the capacity for social mobility and whose differences in
language and culture appear threatening to those of the dominant groups may be subjected to both class and racial marginalization.

Schools, in particular, serve as a unique site for the construction, ascription and negotiation of racial subjectivities as they offer “one of the rare social spaces in which adolescents from different social-cultural experiences and backgrounds come together on a daily basis for an extended period of time” (Moss 2003, 23). In addition, since race and school performance are intimately linked, students at multiracial high schools must manage their racial identities in an institutional context where Whiteness is ideologically associated with school success (Lee 2005; Fordham 1996; Ogbu 1987). Racialized immigrant and refugee youth identity may carry stigmas in schools which can produce oppositional attitudes towards education (Lee 2005). In this sense, the process of learning English for immigrant and refugee youth is tied not only to educational success, but also to class and racial marginalization. Linguistic and cultural differences can further create a precarious class and race position for immigrants and refugees especially when combined with high rates of poverty (Fry 2007) and an eroding urban, industrial job base which previous generations of immigrants and refugee groups had relied on for class mobility (Bourgois 1996; Lipman 2004).

In conclusion, application of the Social Reproduction paradigm to English Language Learners can provide fruitful insights into the intersections between class, race, and language. While the high aspirations and optimistic attitudes of ELLs may challenge the social reproductive process, the threat of racialization, assimilation, and gatekeepers such as high-stakes exams provide a counterweight to scholarship which proclaims the exceptionalism of new arrivals.
Conclusion

As the research literature suggests, and which teachers were quick to point out, class factors such as the levels of education of students’ parents and their age upon arrival played a significant role in the academic achievement of Parkside’s immigrant and refugee youth. Yet, by focusing on the ways in which these variables play out over time and are articulated through the narratives of students, this study can portray a more detailed portrait of school success and failure. Furthermore, this study adds to macro-analyses of education by situating the study of attainment in a political, economic, ideological context which has bearing on the aspirations, experiences, and potential for success for newcomers. While ethnographic research typically has small sample sizes (in this case, forty) which make it hard to generalize about any group writ large, the in-depth study of specific individuals over time can allow for a more detailed understanding of how abstract categories like class and race are reproduced, experienced, and contested (Ortner 2006).

The following chapter introduces the reader to the fieldsite, hereafter referred to as “Parkside High School” as well as the methodologies used to examine the research questions described above. Chapter Three discusses the significance of aspirations of ELLs on their academic attainment, focusing specifically on the role of social class in students’ abilities to realize such aspirations. Chapter Four discusses whether the impact of cultural assimilation and racialization impacts the aspirations of ELLs, as well as the ways which these students negotiate their position in the class and racial hierarchies of the U.S. Chapter Five calls attention to the influence of high stakes examinations on the academic trajectories and educational aspirations of ELLs. This chapter also discusses the connection of such exams to the increasingly prevalent political philosophy of neoliberalism as it relates to the wider context in which ELLs go to
school. Chapter Six examines future and current college students’ perspectives on higher education and the growing class divisions between students at community colleges and those who attend four-year universities. Chapter Seven reiterates the findings of this research study and offers a final analysis and discussion of the issues presented.
Chapter 2
Doing Research at Parkside High School

The study of education and inequality has been approached using various sociological and anthropological methods. This chapter briefly reviews the various approaches used to study educational inequality and argues that ethnography, the primary methodology used in this research study, is an effective tool for describing the process of Social Reproduction as it relates to English Language Learners. The chapter then provides an introduction to the fieldsite, “Parkside High School,” and concludes with some reflections on the challenges and drawbacks to the use of ethnography in this study.

Researching Social Reproduction in Schools

Beginning in the early 20th-century, Anthropologists of Education primarily utilized ethnography to analyze schools as sites of cultural transmission and enculturation though not without the creation of cross-cultural conflict (Henry 1963; Spindler 1974; Yon 2003). While the anthropological analysis of schooling utilized qualitative approaches and initially drew from psychology-oriented theories of culture and personality, Sociologists of Education largely utilized quantitative methods and large samples to conduct “process-product” studies in which an input factor was quantified and then measured against a statistical outcome (Bloome 2012; e.g. Coleman et al. 1966). This style of research in sociology remains popular and influential especially when it comes to the issue of school expenditures and student achievement (Elliot 1998; Hanushek 1997).
Though recognizing the importance of quantitative methodologies, this dissertation study primarily utilizes ethnography and follows previous work which has analyzed Social Reproduction in a variety of school settings (Bettie 2003; Foley 1990; MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977; Weis 1990). These studies, though varying in their approach, have generally utilized ethnographic research to provide a view into the process of Social Reproduction as it unfolds in everyday practice. While interviews and surveys have been shown to yield useful data on students’ academic attainment and aspirations, ethnographic observations are crucial in providing insights about students’ relationships to schooling which are only made apparent in the ongoing discourse inside classrooms and schools (Lather 1986). Furthermore, though quantitative data on ELL attainment is useful to understand educational inequality and its effects on Social Reproduction writ large, ethnographic research has been useful in showing how teachers and students understand and respond to their position in the reproductive process (Levinson and Holland 1996; Ortner 2006).

With attention to the quotidian experiences of participants, ethnographers are well-suited to capture a full portrait of Social Reproduction in the way in which test scores and graduation rates cannot. Ethnographers have also endeavored to utilize participants’ own voices in the analysis, thus allowing individuals to provide their own understandings and perspectives to the research (Ortner 2006; Scott 1990). Through a focus on “local knowledge” (Geertz 1983) and emic meanings, ethnography provides a valuable tool to researchers for understanding the experiences of students, teachers, and families as well as understanding the ways macro-structural forces are experienced “on the ground.” Thus, ethnography can examine Social Reproduction at different scales by connecting micro-analyses of classrooms to larger social processes such as the changing face of the U.S. job market and the alignment of educational
policy to neoliberal ideology (Wortham 2012). Weis and Fine refer to such studies as “compositional designs” which are “ethnographic inquires designed to understand how global and national formations, and relational interactions, seep through the lives, identities, relations, and communities of youth and adults, ultimately refracting back on the larger formations that give rise to them” (2004, xx). Furthermore, longitudinal ethnography can help to elucidate the more long-term structural changes which may limit some forms of resistance while opening up spaces for new forms of agency (Greenhouse 2010).

Ethnographers, in analyzing the tension between structure and agency, have argued that structures and ideologies are made and re-made through social practices rather than simply reproduced from above (Anyon 2006; Ortner 2006). In school settings, ethnography can aid in the analysis of Social Reproduction by describing the differing class and cultural resources brought to the classroom by students as well as the social fields which regulate the value of these resources (Bloome 2012). Such work can help demonstrate the ways in which the culturally-based knowledge of working-class and students of color are often neglected or undervalued (González, Moll and Amanti 2005)

Ethnographers have furthered the analysis of Social Reproduction by focusing on the ways in which schools provide strategic locations for individuals to construct class, gender and racial identities (Eckert 1989; Foley 1990; Pascoe 2007; Shankar 2008; Sarroub 2005; Weis 1990). Like educational aspirations, these identities, are constructed not only in relation to family, community and peer group influences, but also to economic structures and ideologies which affect how individuals understand both their position in society and the potential for education to alter that position.
Ethnographic analyses have also expanded the theory of Social Reproduction which initially focused primarily on social class divisions and gave little attention to individual agency (Collins 2009; Levinson and Holland 1996). Following these critiques, many researchers have revised the original reproductive theory by arguing that schools are not just sites of resistance but can also facilitate authentic social transformation. These researchers have used ethnographic and qualitative approaches to demonstrated the ways teachers and students can interrupt the reproduction of hierarchy through counterhegemonic discourses and emancipatory pedagogies (hooks 1994; McLaren 1998; Moll and Diaz 1987). The work of Paulo Freire has been influential in developing pedagogical methods aimed at liberating students from “banking style” forms of education which prepare students for subservient positions in society (Freire 1970; Shor 1987; Wallerstein 1983). These works represent a departure from the more deterministic theories of Reproduction which see oppression as rooted in the capitalist system of production and schools as merely a tool of the bourgeoisie, and instead “analyze schools in a twofold way: as sorting mechanisms in which select groups of students are favored on the basis of race, class, and gender; and as agencies for self and social empowerment” (McLaren 1998, 164). By expanding the possibilities for schools to positively change society, these researchers have added a new dimension to the paradigm of Social Reproduction.

Critical Ethnographers, in particular, have utilized applied anthropological methods to effect change in the lives of students and embraced positions of advocacy and activism as opposed to impartiality (Carspecken and Apple 1992; Kincheloe and McLaren 2005). Research described as Critical Ethnography often blends diverse theoretical perspectives of postmodernism, Critical Theory and poststructuralism. Critical Ethnographies have been defined as “focused, theorized studies of specific social institutions or practices that aim to change
awareness and/or life itself” (Schwandt 2007, 50) and elsewhere as “well-theorized empirical studies with a serious political intent to change people’s consciousness, if not their daily lives” (Foley 2002, 140). Indeed the breadth of this approach is, in part, a defining feature of Critical Ethnography. In other words, part of what makes Critical Ethnography “critical” is the “participation in the larger ‘critical’ dialogue rather than follow[ing] any particular set of methods or research techniques” (Quantz 1992, 449). Methodologically, Critical Ethnography moves the researcher from the “fly on the wall” ethnographer seeking to minimize his or her influence on the project to an emphasis on affecting the research context (Carspecken and Apple 1992; Foley 2002; Kincheloe and McLaren 2005). Thus, Critical Ethnographers take the ontological step of moving from “what is” to “what could be” by embracing an advocacy stance which seeks not to minimize bias but clarify it (Madison 2005, 5). The purpose of Critical Ethnography, therefore, includes not only the characteristic goals of ethnography such as “thick description” (Geertz 1973) and cultural critique (Marcus and Fisher 1999), but also working towards social change.

As described below, this research study makes use of traditional ethnographic approaches as well as applied methods which position researchers in a more active role in the lives of participants (Van Willigan 2002). Since anthropologists of education have long been associated with applied approaches, a strong focus on improving the lives of participants through ethnographic research has been a goal for many in the field. Indeed, as several commentators have noted, anthropologists of education throughout history have often seen their work has inherently having an applied component (Greenman 2003; Trueba 1988).

In my work, I found that a more applied approach allowed for a firsthand understanding of the academic challenges faced by students. Directly working with participants provided
insights into the difficulties presented by the Regents Exams as well as the aptitudes and academic gaps brought to school by students. Furthermore, an active role as tutor and teaching assistant provided me with an opportunity to help participants with their schoolwork just as they were helping me with mine. While I did not explicitly utilize a model of “problem posing” in my role as tutor, I tried to follow Freire’s axiom that school knowledge was taught most effectively when connected to students’ lives (1974; 1977). In the end, and as several teachers complained, the needs of tests often outweighed more abstract goals of learning for empowerment and civic participation. Despite the benefits of a more applied orientation to this research study, several drawbacks became evident as my position as researcher took on additional meaning in classrooms creating the potential for conflict with the authority of the teacher. In the following section, I explore these methodological issues further along with an ethnographic introduction to the fieldsite.

**Researching at Parkside High School**

Upon entering “Parkside High School,” (a pseudonym, as are all names which follow) one is immediately greeted with symbols of its diverse population. Student projects about police violence and constitutional rights are posted on a wall outside a classroom, and a “Black Lives Matter” sign hangs prominently on another. Flags from different countries hang along the ceiling adjacent to the main office. Once the bell rings to change classes, the temporarily quiet hallways become flooded with students who boisterously chat with one another. The hall monitors, burly men posted at each corner of the hall, call for students to make their way to classes and once again the halls become quiet. ENL classrooms are decorated with flags and photos from
throughout the world. As students enter their respective classes, teachers warmly greet them by name.

Parkside High is a diverse, urban high school located in the Capital Region of New York State. Its school population is predominantly African-American (53%) with the next largest subgroups identified by the state being White (21%), Latino/a (15%), and Asian (8%). Ten percent of Parkside High is classified as English Language Learners, a number which is nearly identical to the ratio of ELLs nationwide (NYSED 2016; Ruiz Soto, Hooker, and Batalova 2015). The county in which Parkside High resides is 78% White with the vast majority of its minority population concentrated in the city which also houses the high school (U.S. Census Bureau 2014).

The city of “Parkside” can be described as a mid-sized, urban city located on the Eastern edge of New York’s Rust Belt. While the Parkside Metro area as a whole has witnessed a 15 percent decline in White student enrollment, the proportion of White students in urban schools dropped from 72.8 per cent in 1989 to 32.5 per cent in 2010. During the same period of time, Black student enrollment in urban Parkside Metro area schools more than doubled from 22.5 per cent to 45.7 per cent (Kuscera and Orfield 2014). During this same period of time, the number of ELLs in Parkside schools increased from approximately 300 students to over 1,300 (Parkside Herald 2017). These trends mark White flight to suburban areas as well as the increasing numbers of refugees and immigrants arriving to Parkside. As demonstrated by data in Chapter Four, the racial geography of Parkside City serves as an important context for the youth of this study who must negotiate their racial ascription in both schools and neighborhoods where they often have close proximity to African Americans.
The socio-economic background of Parkside is also an important part of the context in which this study will take place. In the last decade, the vast majority of job growth in Parkside has been in low-wage industries and the service sector buttressed by the growth of Parkside Medical Center, a location which employs many of the participants in this study (Fiscal Policy Institute 2013). In contrast, most of the higher-paying job opportunities in Parkside require educational credentials which are unevenly distributed throughout the populace and are heavily concentrated in State and Federal Government facilities, as well as the growing sectors of Education and Healthcare (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). These disparities in credentials create wide differences in unemployment: the citywide unemployment rate sits below 8% although for high school dropouts this number is nearly doubled. Racial disparities are significant, too, as the unemployment rate of Blacks (10.3%) and Hispanics (13.4%) dwarfs that of Whites (6.6%) in Parkside (Fiscal Policy Institute 2013).

Parkside High School’s rates of attainment are highly uneven as White students graduate at about the national average (75%) while the graduation rate of African-American students is closer to one half (54%) (NYSED 2016). For ELLs, the four-year graduation rate of English Language Learners for the 2009 cohort was measured at (34%), the lowest for any accountability group. This dismal rate of graduation is almost identical to the average attainment of ELLs in New York State (33%). When compared to surrounding suburban schools, Parkside High School lags in rates of achievement (Parkside Herald 2013). Furthermore, over two-thirds of the student population at Parkside High qualify for free or reduced lunch while the national average for high schools is just over half (NYSED 2016; Southern Education Foundation 2015). These poor levels of attainment should not be surprising given the correlation between low school achievement and poverty which has been noted for decades (Coleman et al. 1966; Ravitch 2010). The
concentration of marginalized students in lower income, segregated urban communities points to the inseparability between class and race distinctions and the ways that these social disparities translate to gaps in educational achievement. Collins, for example, asks if the question is “whether there is an ‘ELL Achievement gap’ or instead a ‘Poor and Minority Kids in City Schools Achievement Gap’” (2014, 13).

The diversity of Parkside High School’s ELL population makes it an interesting comparative case study in the education of immigrants and refugees. Indeed such unequal outcomes among class and race groupings at Parkside High suggest that the process of Social Reproduction is at work. The wide range of class and cultural backgrounds in ENL classrooms at Parkside can present a valuable opportunity to generate insights into how various subgroups of immigrants and refugees respond differently to the process of acculturation and schooling. On the other hand, Parkside High also presents a study which may be generalizable considering the socioeconomic makeup of Parkside City and the ratio of ELLs to non-ELLs are similar to many other urban schools of similar size in the U.S. (Ruiz Soto, Hooker, and Batalova 2015; NYSED 2016).

I quickly learned that Parkside High had a negative reputation among many city dwellers. On more than one occasion, when mentioning that I was doing fieldwork at Parkside High, acquaintances told me unabashedly that their family moved out of Parkside specifically to avoid the high school. Ana, a Dominican college student whose experiences are discussed in following chapters, told me that when her college classmates looked at her with awe and suspicion when she told them she graduated from Parkside High School. “They couldn’t believe that I made it out of that place,” she recalled. While Parkside High was not, by any means, the dangerous, chaotic type of inner-city portrayed in television and movie dramas as The Wire, Stand and
Deliver, or Dangerous Minds, there were moments during my fieldwork when such concerns were momentarily validated. Outside of the cafeteria, metal detectors which were used each morning lined the wall. In addition to the bouncer-like “hall monitors,” police were a constant presence outside of Parkside High, although they rarely were required to intervene. However, I did witness several fistfights outside of Parkside High School, although thankfully none escalated very much beyond a few punches being thrown before being broken up. In another instance, a young man was overheard grappling with one of the hall monitors. As the yelling became louder and more fervent, Mr. Anderson closed the door to draw attention away from scene. Abbas, an outspoken Afghani student, turned to me and quipped, “Welcome to Parkside High!”

These types of incidents were few and far between, and my time at Parkside High was typically pleasant and welcoming. Teachers, students, and staff were always friendly to me, and I felt like my position as an outsider quickly lessened over time. I was always included in class lessons and welcomed by students on the days I attended classes. It should be noted, however, that I spent the vast majority of time in one wing of the high school and only among English Language Learners who were taught separately from mainstream students in ENL classes or sheltered content area courses. Thus my experiences at Parkside High generally excluded the large segment of mainstream students and teachers.

Before the data was collected for this dissertation study, I spent six months conducting a preliminary study in which I observed ENL classes and created and after-school study group designed to work on the Regents Exams. As a more distanced observer in classrooms, I gained a better sense of the interactions between teachers and students as well as the influence of high stakes exams on pedagogy and curriculum. Working with students directly after school provided
me with the firsthand knowledge about the challenges faced by ELLs and the barriers they face to graduate high school and established the rapport needed for the dissertation study which followed. During the 10 months of fieldwork spent at Parkside High School, I engaged in similar methodologies as the preliminary study. I observed several ESL classes and also attended sheltered U.S. History and English Regents Preparatory courses. My position in each class varied depending on the teacher and type of class. In some classes I played an active role working with students in small-group activities or walking around the room to assist individuals on classwork. In these moments, my methodologies drew more from Applied Anthropologists and Critical Ethnographers who seek not to minimize their influence but embrace it (Foley 2002). As Madison writes, such a move requires researchers to move from “ethnographic present” to “ethnographic presence” (2005, 10). In other classes, my role was more of a detached observer or what Geertz called, “deep hanging out” (2000, 107). I also made efforts to move outside the classroom and attended afterschool activities such as plays, potlucks, and meetings. During all observations, I took detailed field notes which I expanded after leaving the field site. In-depth interviews were conducted with thirty-five students and six teachers/administrators at Parkside High School. All audio data were transcribed and then coded using HyperResearch software during the final analysis and writing of this manuscript (Anfara and Mertz 2006). The pseudonyms and countries of origin for each student participant are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Pseudonyms and Countries of Origin for Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Native Country</th>
<th>Years in Parkside</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Dem. Republic of Congo</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leila</td>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akash</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>Puerto Rico</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandeep</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soe Rah</td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo</td>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mehdi</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khadijah</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>Dominican Rep.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuu</td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariel</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuu Reh</td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shi Reh</td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadiq</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karim</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tariq</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aziz</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyaw Reh</td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bashir</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muu Reh</td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noora</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbas</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharif</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahmoud</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibrahim</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdul</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmad</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While I initially set out to play an active role in the lives of students at Parkside High School, I quickly learned that there are pitfalls to such approaches (Lather 1998). Though the presence of a researcher in a classroom necessarily has an effect, I felt at times that, despite how welcoming teachers and students were, my influence was an unneeded distraction. Students would often talk to me while teachers explained lessons or look to me for reactions when they made jokes or comments. In one case, I sat on a desk next to where a teacher and student talked about an upcoming test. Suddenly, I remembered something that occurred last period, and I hurriedly scribbled it on a piece of paper. As I looked up, the teacher smiling said, “This isn’t a good lesson today so don’t take any notes.” Even though this was a clear joke, I was embarrassed by my lack of self-awareness and made more of a habit to take notes discretely or after the period was over.

There were also several instances where I felt like my position and identity potentially affected the behavior of respondents. It is likely, for example, that my respondents would not have made the frank comments about African Americans described in Chapter Four if I were not White. My male identity also came into play when, on several occasions, a student from Mrs. Dykstra’s sophomore class turned to me and asked me what I thought the correct answer to a question was directly after Mrs. Dykstra had answered him. I simply told him to listen to his teacher, but I felt uncomfortable that my presence could have potentially challenged the teacher’s authority. Mrs. Dykstra suggested that the young man, a new arrival from Iraq, may have been unaccustomed to a female teacher and looked to me as the source of knowledge. Indeed my
gender was certainly a factor in establishing rapport with the young men and women of this study, however, I cannot recall any additional instances where this factor was made explicit aside from the anecdote above.

The most challenging aspect of my position as a researcher was the constant questions I received by students about college. Even though I explained my research study several times, I felt that many students may have thought I was an undergraduate student whose experience could provide them with some firsthand answers about applying and attending college. Through these conversations, I realized how my own experiences colored my interpretations and actions in the field. Although the realization of scholarly biases has been well-addressed in the academic literature (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Lather 1998), I did not contemplate how my own attitudes about education may have influenced my responses to student questions. This issue will be addressed more fully in Chapter Five, however, it is worth mentioning that many of these questions revolved around community college since many students had planned to begin their postsecondary education there. As a community college graduate, I felt confident advising students that a two-year college was a great place to start their post-secondary career. I later worried that I was projecting my own positive feelings about community colleges, such as their low economic burden and proximity to home, on students who may or may not find success at those institutions. Indeed, the low transfer rate of community colleges calls into question their utility as an alternative to four-year institutions (Kim and Diaz 2013; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2011).

In sum, the methodologies utilized throughout this fieldwork study combined both observational forms of ethnography with those of applied anthropologists. Even though I encountered significant pitfalls in enacting a Critical Ethnographic stance, the benefits of
establishing rapport and contributing positively to students’ education were well worth the drawbacks. Since all ethnographies are necessarily fictions insofar as researchers are limited in their ability to capture the entire truth of any situation (Clifford 1988), I chose to embrace my subjective position as advocate and sought to use ethnography not only as a descriptive method but one which can effect positive change in society (Foley 2002).

Conclusion

In conclusion, ethnographic research is well-suited to the study of Social Reproduction as it can account both for the day-to-day processes which produce social stratification as well as the ways in which individuals act as competent agents to resist and negotiate their social positions. In addition, because ethnographers embed themselves in fieldsites for long periods, they are able to observe an abstract process such as Social Reproduction as it unfolds over time. The work of Critical Ethnographers has added to the theory of Social Reproduction by arguing that schools can also serve as sites of empowerment and uplift. To this end, researchers can embrace their subjective position as advocates and effect positive changes in the lives of their participants through social activism and empowering forms of education. While this study did not explicitly adopt an activist perspective, I did blend traditional and applied ethnographic approaches to assist student participants in their schoolwork and advocate for their wellbeing. These active positions helped build rapport with participants and provided a firsthand understanding of the challenges they faced in school.
Chapter 3
Aspirations and Attainment in the “Land of Opportunities”

Attitudes, Optimism, and Social Reproduction

The aspirations and attitudes held by students towards education and the ways they envision their futures have a direct relationship with their ability to attain social mobility. Attitudes towards schooling, meritocracy, and the potential for social mobility in the United States can thus powerfully shape the actions and motivations of students. This chapter examines the attitudes and aspirations of the immigrants and refugees participating in this study, specifically focusing on the conceptions students have of opportunity and equality in the United States. These attitudes point to a strong belief in meritocracy and utilization of dual frame of reference for evaluating the United States. The significance of social class in mitigating the ability for students to realize their high aspirations is also discussed (Feliciano and Lanuza 2016).

As previous studies have demonstrated, students from different social class backgrounds often develop varying attitudes towards schooling. Work in the Reproductionist paradigm has specifically highlighted the oppositional identities towards schooling that working-class students develop as a way to protect their dignity and reject the stigma carried by school failure. Willis’ (1977) study of working-class youth in England, whom he termed “the lads,” offers a window into the logic which drives school opposition. Drawing from their father’s shop-floor culture, the lads associate manual labor with masculinity and reject schooling and all mental labor as a threat to their male, working-class identities. The lads’ negative attitudes towards schooling are most visibly demonstrated through what Willis calls, “having a laff”: constant disruptions of school
lessons, joking around, and mockery at the expense of teachers and other students. The lads themselves contrast their counter-school attitudes with the “ear’holes,” whom they see as school “conformists” that buy into the promise of schooling as a lever of social mobility. Despite the ideological “penetrations” made by the lads, their anti-school attitudes and aspirations to preserve their working-class masculinity through industrial work eventually led them to be complicit in the process of reproducing the social order. “Ironically,” Willis writes, “as the shop-floor becomes a prison, education is seen retrospectively, and hopelessly, as the only escape” (1977, 107). Willis’ groundbreaking ethnography furthered the study of social reproduction by providing an on-the-ground view of reproduction that included the purposeful actions and negotiations by those involved in the process. By focusing on previously these under-theorized elements of the superstructure, Willis’ work demonstrates how attitudes and orientations towards hold towards schooling can contribute to their success or marginalization.

Other ethnographic studies built on Willis’ foundational study by demonstrating how race and gender intersect with class-indicative attitudes towards schooling (Bettie 2003; Foley 1990; MacLeod 1987; McRobbie 1978; Weis 1990). Weis (1990), for example, demonstrates how the effects of deindustrialization are apparent in the attitudes towards schooling held by working-class men and women. In a context of industrial job loss, the students in Weis’ study see schooling as the only potential way for social mobility. Unlike the outright opposition shown by Willis’ lads, Weis concluded that her participants possessed a “contradictory relationship to schooling” (1990, 21). Though there was “continual grumbling about school authority,” Weis found “few direct challenges to this authority that result in a true breakdown of order within the school.” Indeed, Weis writes, “virtually all students articulate some value for education, albeit in highly utilitarian terms” (1990, 22). Going further, Weis shows how the young women differ
from previous work (McRobbie 1978) in that the young women in her study struggle to define their identity as individual wage-earners as opposed to the roles of wives and mothers expected by the men in in their lives. Building on Willis’ work, Weis further complicates the idea of social reproduction by showing how the specter of deindustrialization has the capacity to transform working-class attitudes and aspirations as well as gender ideologies. In this case, young women’s attitudes towards schooling are shaped by their belief in education to provide an escape from patriarchy (Weis 1990).

Ethnographic work focusing on race and attitudes towards schooling has been useful in demonstrating the intersection between race and class as well as the stigma of racialization. Research has noted the ways in which negative attitudes and lowered expectations for working-class and students of color are often projected onto students who may internalize or resist them (Bettie 2003; Fine 1991; Michaels 1981; Weis 1985). Although, as Bettie (2003) notes in her ethnography of working-class Mexican-American women that their negative attitudes and low aspirations for school were both a symptom and reaction to class- and race-based forms of school marginalization, school personal and “las chicas” themselves often analyzed their school failure in solely in terms of gender and sexuality. MacLeod’s (1987) ethnography, focuses on Black and White groups of working-class youth in a small, multiracial city he terms “Clarendon Heights.” While the working-class Black youth he calls “The Brothers” have high hopes for schooling, derived in part from their parents’ optimism stemming from gains made during the Civil Rights Era, the working-class Whites, who have experienced social stagnation for generations, possess decidedly anti-school orientations. While the White youths reject school outright and embrace racist ideologies, their Black cohort buy into the “achievement ideology” and strive for success despite barriers of race and class (MacLeod 1987).
The work of Ogbu and his colleagues (Fordham 1996; Ogbu 1987; Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi 1986) put forth a provocative analysis of significance of school attitudes among African Americans. According to Ogbu (1987; 2008), the oppositional identities which African Americans may display towards schooling are reinforced by the school system itself which devalues the knowledge and culture of minorities as well as the minority students’ own community which has not reaped the rewards of schooling (Fine and Weis 1998). In associating schooling with Whiteness, Ogbu claims that Black youth resist identification with schooling as a way to protect their distinct identities (2008). While it has been noted that African Americans have good reasons to develop oppositional identities towards schooling – among them being the disproportionate punishment of Black students (Nolan and Anyon 2004) and lower wages for African Americans with the same credentials as Whites (Iceland 2017) – several scholars have noted the high aspirations and positive attitudes of Black youth and their parents despite acknowledging discrimination (Downey 2008; MacLeod 1987; Weis and Fine 2004).

While much of this literature has focused on the ways in which working-class and students of color either resist or conform to the expectations of their schools, other scholars have elaborated on the attitudes and orientation middle-class students have towards schools and opportunity in the United States. The work of Lareau (1989; 2003) has been especially useful for demonstrating the ways that middle-class parents inculcate an orientation to schooling and school-based culture and knowledge which provides them with an advantage over those from working-class backgrounds. By engaging in “concerted cultivation,” a highly-structured parenting style involving organized scheduled activities and the conscious development of language use for negotiating social institutions, middle-class parents instill an attitude of “entitlement” in their children thereby giving them an advantage over working-class students.
who lack such an orientation (Lareau 2003). Further research has shown that the cultural and linguistic expectations and knowledge expected in schools match those developed in many middle-class families (Gee 2012; Anyon 1980; Heath 1983). These factors allow middle-class students and their families to leverage institutions such as schools successfully to their advantage (Ball 2003; Brantlinger 2003; Katz 2012).

However, the relationship of schools to the middle-class is complicated. Since the middle-class does not possess enough inherited economic wealth to reproduce itself, its position must be “renewed in each individual through fresh effort and commitment” (Ehrenreich 1989, 15). Educational credentials, however, are an evanescent form of capital and do not guarantee membership to the middle-class nor is cultural capital transmitted seamlessly (Lareau 2003). Indeed, though the middle-class has historically been linked with the fulfillment of the “American Dream,” scholars have noted the anxiety of downward mobility which routinely plagues those who fret over their ability to meet or surpass the position of their parents (Ehrenreich 1989; Newman 1988; Ortner 2003). As Ortner writes, “If much working-class culture can be understood as a set of discourses and practices embodying the ambivalence of upward mobility, much of middle-class culture can be seen as a set of discourses and practices embodying the terror of downward mobility” (2008, 31). The increasingly intense attention paid by middle-class parents on their children’s education can be viewed as a strategy to manage such anxieties about downward mobility (Katz 2012).

Despite these anxieties, the belief in meritocracy is strong among the middle-class students since it both justifies their social position as a result of individual hard work and masks the advantages conveyed to them through the transference of cultural capital which schools are predisposed to favor (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Brantlinger 2003; Lamont 2000; McNamee
and Miller 2014). The belief in meritocracy is so robust among the middle-class that those who fail to take advantage of those opportunities often blame themselves for their own lack of success (Ehrenreich 1989; Moss 2003; Newman 1988). Lastly, with the decline of social institutions such as labor unions, members of the middle-class are more likely to describe social success in individualistic rather than collective terms (Lamont 2000; Weis 2004).

In sum, the aspirations and expectations held by students and teachers can have significant effects on the potential for academic achievement. The work of Claude Steele and others have empirically demonstrated these effects through what he calls “stereotype threat.” In one such study, the performance of African American men on the same test differed drastically depending on whether it was described as a test of “physical” versus “intellectual” abilities (Steele and Aronson 1995). Steele hypothesizes that the consciousness of a stereotype labeling Black men as intellectually inferior led to the differences in scores. Steele’s work shows that the expectations and aspirations which students bring to classrooms can have powerful effects on their potential for success or failure. Similarly, the positive stereotyping of Asian-American students can have a reverse effect as even those with mediocre abilities may be tracked into higher achieving classes. Students may then internalize the positive conception that their teachers have of them and begin improve their performance (Lee and Zhou 2017). In the case of immigrants, much scholarly work has questioned whether the optimistic attitudes and high aspirations of new arrivals are responsible for their levels of success (Hsin and Xie 2013; Kao and Tienda 1995). The next section explores this question making use of data from Parkside High School to help elucidate the role of aspirations in student attainment.
Educational Aspirations and Attitudes among Immigrants and Refugees

While the literature on Social Reproduction has provided some useful insight into the ways in which student attitudes and aspirations both reflect and reinforce their school success and thus their position in society, most theorists from this paradigm have focused on native-born populations. In contrast, scholars studying the attitudes and aspirations of immigrants and refugees have typically analyzed the ways in which assimilation pressures, generational differences, and cultural conflicts can reduce the optimistic perspective that immigrants often bring to the United States (Gibson 1988; Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi 1986; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Waters and Jiménez 2005). Few have situated the study of immigrant and refugee attitudes and aspirations in the paradigm of Social Reproduction thereby neglecting the significant effects which social class has on these factors (see Feliciano and Lanuza 2017; Lee and Zhou 2017 for exceptions). The following section reviews this literature briefly and suggests that class affects the ways in which immigrant and refugee students understand meritocracy and opportunity in the United States. These perspectives, in turn, inform the aspirations and attitudes which students bring to school and can have serious consequences for both their desires for social mobility and their ability to realize such desires.

Several studies have argued that immigrants possess highly optimistic attitudes towards their chances for social mobility in the United States (Kao and Tienda 1995; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Raleigh and Kao 2010). The so-called “immigrant optimism hypothesis” put forth by Kao and Tienda (1995), for example, claims that the high aspirations and positive attitudes towards schooling held by immigrant families helps propel student success. Supporting this theory is data which show that newly-arrived immigrant populations actually outperform 3rd generation immigrants despite the barriers of learning English and adjusting to a new country. It is,
however, the 2nd generation children with immigrant parents who have the highest rates of success due to a combination of parents’ high aspirations and the English-language aptitudes of their children (Kao and Tienda 1995, 16). More recent work has supported Kao and Tienda’s earlier thesis by claiming that newer generations of immigrants still maintain higher aspirations for their children and a generally more positive outlook to the future than those held by later generations and native populations (Escobar 2006; Raleigh and Kao 2010).

The work of Suárez-Orozco (1987; 2001) provides some insight into the ways in which the high aspirations of immigrants and refugees are created and sustained. In ethnographic research conducted among Central American immigrants and refugees, Suárez-Orozco (1987) found that newly-immigrant and refugee students made sense of their experiences in the U.S. through a “dual frame of reference” in which they compared the U.S. to their previous homeland. The students in Suárez-Orozco’s study spoke positively of the U.S., overlooking many negative aspects because it was still seen as favorable compared to the country from which they had migrated (Suárez-Orozco 1987). In this sense, immigrant and refugee families may rationalize their hardships through the ardent belief in that education will provide a lever for social mobility (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova 2008). Immigrant and refugee youth thus feel especially motivated to excel in school as a way to repay their parents for the sacrifices they made in migrating to the United States, as well as a method to recover from the downward mobility that their families may have faced experienced after migration (Suárez-Orozco 1987; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2000). The pressure to “make up” for the losses suffered by families due to migration can be both a motivator and a source of stress for students who feel obligated to succeed academically (Louie 2004).
Although much of Ogbu’s work primarily focused on the Black achievement gap, he also sought to answer the question of why some newly-established immigrant groups, despite the linguistic disadvantage, outperform native-born African Americans. Ogbu claimed that the ways in which immigrant groups are incorporated in the U.S. has a large bearing on their attitudes towards schooling and subsequently their ability to succeed in school (1989; 2008). Ogbu writes, “The main factor differentiating the more successful from the less successful minorities appears to be the nature of the history, subordination and exploitation of the minorities, and the nature of the minorities’ own instrumental and expressive responses to their treatment, which enter into the process of their schooling” (1987, 317). According to Ogbu, “involuntary minorities” such as African Americans or Native Americans, who were forcibly incorporated into U.S. society, develop an oppositional cultural identity towards schooling which they associate with Whiteness, oppression and exclusion (Fordham 1996; Ogbu 2008; Ogbu 1989). In contrast, “voluntary minorities,” such as immigrants who migrate to the United States in search of a better life, are more likely to see “cultural differences as barriers to be overcome in order to achieve their long-range goals of future employment and not as markers of identity to be maintained” (1987, 327). Because they lack negative perceptions of schooling, voluntary minorities possess what Matute-Bianchi and Ogbu call an “immigrant orientation” which involves a strong belief in the American Dream as well as support for meritocratic ideology (1986).

Though Ogbu’s work did not account for the ways that the process of incorporation for immigrants and refugees changes over time, researchers have generally supported his original thesis insofar that, in contrast to newcomers, well-established minority groups in the United States are more likely to develop oppositional identities towards schooling, as both a reaction to cultural marginalization and as a rejection of the potential for education to facilitate class
mobility (Erikson 1987; Gibson 1988; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Raleigh and Kao 2010). Yet, Ogbu’s general division between involuntary and voluntary immigrants masks the major divisions among immigrant and refugee groups since it focuses solely on their incorporation in U.S. society. By ignoring the significance of class position on school success, these analyses can run the risk of overemphasizing the cultural background of immigrants and refugees, displacing the blame of academically unsuccessful students onto individuals and their families. In other words, if one’s orientation to school is the major factor in his or her achievement, then what can we make of students who have positive attitudes towards school yet fail academically? In contrast, locating school success and failure in a group’s “cultural frame of reference” runs the risk of comparing the cultural values of less successful groups to the immigrant and refugee students which are held up as “model minorities” (Lee 2005; Louie 2004). Additionally, many students do not neatly fit into Ogbu’s bipartite model of voluntary and involuntary minorities (Gibson 1997); refugees are, by definition, involuntary immigrants, yet they come to the U.S. with widely different cultural backgrounds and perceptions of schooling (Fry 2007).

As the literature on class advantages in school shows, students from different class positions differ not only in their attitudes towards education, but also come to school with different reserves of cultural capital from which to draw (Lareau 2003). Notwithstanding the educational achievements of immigrant and refugee populations, the declining graduation rate of English Language Learners demonstrates that the challenges of schooling in the U.S. cannot be overcome simply through a positive outlook. These data seriously call into question the notions of immigrant overachievement and suggest that these students are not, in fact, exceptions to the process of Social Reproduction. As Jaffe-Walter and Lee remind us, “Optimism, a dual frame of reference, high aspirations, and a belief that formal education is the path to a better life –
qualities identified as characteristic of many successful immigrant youth – frequently prove insufficient catalysts for school success when immigrant youth are faced with institutional racism, low teacher expectations, and under-resourced schools” (2011, 396).

In addition, others have called into question the purported “immigrant advantage” provided by parental motivation, high aspirations, and an optimistic outlook as the influence of these factors seems to fade over time spent in the U.S. leading to a drop-off in academic performance (Suárez-Orozco 2001). A study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2015), for example, found that levels of crime and negative health indicators among first generation immigrants are significantly lower than rates of the native-born in the U.S., yet increase after the first generation and reach near-parity by the third generation. Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes, and Milburn (2009) note that immigrant students’ academic engagement sharply declines after the third year spent in U.S. schools. Furthermore, in an era which stresses “college for all,” native-born students have nearly closed the gap between their aspirations and those of immigrants, with immigrant families only exceeding them in their higher expectations for their children to attend graduate school (Felicano and Lanuza 2016).

Taking into account aspects of selectivity can also shed light on the seemingly remarkable academic achievements of immigrant students (Feliciano 2005). While the contemporary wave of immigrants have overall higher levels of education than previous eras, these credentials are highly stratified among immigrants and refugees (Iceland 2017). Fry (2005) reports, for example, that among foreign-born dropouts, 70 percent are Students with Interrupted Formal Schooling (SIFE). Among highly-achieving groups, family resources upon arrival matter significantly. For example, more than 12 times as many Chinese families in the U.S. hold Bachelor’s Degrees compared with those in China. For Vietnamese in the U.S. the proportion
was more than 5 times higher, and Koreans in the U.S. had nearly twice as many Bachelor’s Degrees than did those in Korea (Lee and Zhou 2017, 2320). Lastly, Felicano and Lanuza (2017) argue persuasively that the high achievements of immigrants disappear when their parents’ educational attainment is “contextualized.” Thus, when the parental attainment of second-generation Mexican-Americans is considered in absolute terms, their gains appear substantial: parents average below the 20th percentile in the U.S, though their children make it to the 40th percentile. Yet, the same level of educational attainment put these parents at the 65th percentile in the context of Mexico. Thus, their children are not making progress but actually losing ground when their intergenerational mobility is considered relative to each country (Felicano and Lanuza 2017). The authors conclude that that the “most common intergenerational mobility pattern among children of immigrants is not extraordinary upward mobility, but class reproduction” (Feliciano and Lanuza 2017, 212).

In conclusion, the attitudes and aspirations of students and their families can play a crucial role in the process of social reproduction; attitudes are not simply a window into how students feel about schooling, but have significant bearing on their actual academic trajectories. Among immigrant and refugee students, an optimistic perspective on schooling and a strong belief in meritocracy has been viewed as a factor in their relative educational success, yet as the above critiques make clear, class factors play a mitigating role in the realization of these youth’s high aspirations. While the students at Parkside High validate claims of “immigrant optimism,” the realization of their high aspirations is stratified along class lines and hampered by a climate of high-stakes testing and postindustrialization.
Optimism and Achievement at Parkside High School

Sara came to the United States from Iraq in 2014 with her parents and four sisters. Her parents both had engineering degrees although only her father had worked in Iraq. Now seventeen years old, she expected to follow her sister, Miriam, to a four-year college to pursue a career in medicine. Sara was almost never absent from classes and worked diligently even when her classmates were distracted with their phones or chatting. One day right before Christmas break, the students of Mr. Anderson’s English class sat talking or flipping through their phones. Mr. Anderson had passed out a poem to read, but most students seemed uninterested and unenthusiastic. A long break was right around the corner and no one really felt like working. Sara sat in the corner with a binder on her desk, papers neatly filed inside, and used a pen to follow the words on the poem as she read. After a while, I saw her pick up smartphone like the other students, and I figured that she must have succumbed to the temptation of surfing the Internet like most other students in the class. Yet as she scribbled a few words in Arabic next to words she had underlined in the poem, I realized that she was using on online dictionary to help her figure out some vocabulary she did not know. A few weeks later, when school was back in session, I overheard Mr. Anderson speaking to a student who had asked him if there was a way she could improve her class grade. “You’re just like Sara here!” he joked, “Maybe you’re cousins… you both have 95 averages and ask ‘How can I raise my grade?’”

At the end of the school year, I attended the annual ENL Potluck Dinner. Dozens of students and their families piled into the school cafeteria adorned formalwear from their native countries. A row of tables set up in the front of the room were full of dishes cooked by families and teachers. Loud Afghani music was blaring from speakers in the back of the room where a group of Iraqi and Afghani students had huddled around an iPod which was producing the music.
I stood talking with Sara and her family when a new song came on that must have been popular among students because everyone started to cheer and holler. The loud, rhythmic music seemed to get louder and the group of dancing students began to jump up and down in time with the beat, laughing and cheering at the music. Sara turned to me and said without a hint of sarcasm, “They don’t have much fun in classes, so this is their chance to enjoy school.”

Sara’s offhand comment suggests that social class plays a role in students’ expectations of their own and their peers’ potential for academic success. Highly-educated and tenacious, Sara seemed to imply that her classmates struggled academically in school and were in need of the catharsis provided by the dancing, while for her, the “fun” part of school was in the classroom. Indeed, while the following data drawn from newcomers and former students at Parkside High School do support claims about “immigrant optimism,” not all students are able to utilize education as a lever to realize their ambitions. Nearly all the newcomers and former students participating in this study articulated positive attitudes and optimistic views of education and opportunity in the United States, yet their levels of academic success were often stratified along class lines which pointed to the forces of Social Reproduction (Feliciano and Lanuza 2017).

Parents, as noted by several researchers, play a crucial role in providing children with class-based resources from which to draw in school settings (Brantlinger 2003; Heath 1983; Katz 2012; Lareau 2003). The parents of students in this study across class and cultural backgrounds explicitly supported their children through instilling in them the value of education while also motivating them to succeed indirectly as a way to repay them for their sacrifices. For working-class students and those from agrarian backgrounds, whose parents had little or no formal education, schools represented a valuable opportunity that their parents never had. In contrast, many middle-class students whose parents were highly-educated professionals in their former
countries now worked menial wage-labor jobs with long hours. Their children, well-aware of these sacrifices were highly conscious of these sacrifices and sought to work hard as a way to repay their families for their suffering (Suárez-Orozco 1987; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova 2008).

Much of the data presented below supports previous research which claimed that immigrants are more likely to believe in meritocracy and see individual merit as the reason behind academic success. Yet other students (and even some who initially articulated a belief in meritocracy) were critical of meritocratic ideology and spoke of the constraints and inequalities for immigrant and refugee students. Notably, it was students who came from refugee camps who came closest to articulating a critical view of meritocracy in class terms. Furthermore, the dual frame of reference described by Suárez-Orozco and others proved to be a salient feature of many students’ perspectives on opportunity in the U.S.; yet once again these perspectives were not simple or one-sided. Many students spoke favorably about the U.S. and the schools here, while others were critical of the U.S. credentialing system which did not validate family members’ and friends’ international degrees. Several highly-educated, middle-class students found the U.S. schools to be easier and more helpful to students than their previous schools, and they chastised native-born students and other ELLs for not taking advantage of the opportunities that were available to them.

Lastly, aspirations and attitudes must be contextualized within a social and political-economic context which includes a transition to a two-tiered economy characterized by low-wage service work and highly-paid professional jobs (Lipman 2004; Reich 2010), the resurgence of nativism (Appadurai 2006; Hill 2008), and high-stakes exams which have reduced graduation rates for New York State ELLs from two-thirds to one-half (NYSED 2016; Ravitch 2010). These
factors serve as an important backdrop to the aspirations and attitudes of the students participating in this study, and they are discussed in detail in future chapters.

“The opportunities are there for you”: Views of Meritocracy at Parkside High

I believe that here, it’s the land of opportunities. It’s just the land of opportunities. You can get, wherever you go, you have the opportunity to do something. Whether you’re going to work, or study, or travel, or… you just have to know where you’re going and that’s all. I believe this society that this society is so fair and supportive.
- Sadiq, age 22

The quote above from Sadiq – an Iraqi refugee and former Parkside student who now attends college – demonstrates how many students participating in this research study, when discussing their views on school success and failure, claimed that individual students were ultimately responsible for their academic futures. Many students, like Sadiq, drew both on a strong belief in meritocracy and a dual frame of reference to organize their discussion of education and opportunity.

The strength of meritocratic ideology was made visible one day in Mr. Anderson’s English Regents class as he brought up the Excelsior program introduced by New York State’s Governor Andrew Cuomo. The program, set to go into effect in the fall of 2017, provides tuition-free scholarships to public colleges throughout the state for families earning below 125,000 dollars per year. The cost of college had been a topic which, as for most college-age students, caused significant anxieties. For example, during another period Mr. Anderson had students read a short news article written by a graduate student who lived out of a van for several semesters to cut costs. The article described the rising tuition costs for college as a reason for the student’s lifestyle choice to which a Karen refugee exclaimed in the back exclaimed, “See? That’s why
I’m not going!” To my surprise, however, the Excelsior Scholarship program was met with criticism rooted in the belief that, if students did not have to pay for college, it would be detrimental to the quality of the school. “No one will take it seriously!” said a Dominican student in the back. “Free college is a bad idea,” explained Karim, an Iraqi refugee, “It will turn it into Parkside High School!” Since nearly all the students in the class were from low-income families, I had expected they would be in full support of a program which would alleviate them of tuition costs. However, as shown by comments below, belief in meritocracy served as an ideological backdrop to many discussions of education and social mobility.

The ways in which high aspirations were linked to a belief in meritocracy were articulated clearly by Mo, a Jordanian immigrant who arrived with his family to New York State in 2013. Mo’s parents, both college-educated, moved with Mo and his baby sister to the U.S. “to have better education and better lives.” While Mo’s mother stayed at home to take care of his baby sister, Mo’s father, who previously “ran a big computer business” back in Jordan, now worked long hours as a driver and secretary for a car dealership. Friendly and consistently engaged in class, Mo would often come to class donning markers of his new country like a New York Yankees cap and a NYCFC (New York City’s Major League Soccer Team) shirt. Mo’s aspirations for career, education, and citizenship were intimately bound together. When asked what he saw himself doing career-wise in ten years he told me, “I didn’t really decide yet, but I’m doing research on echocardiography, about the heart, how the blood pressure works in the heart, and all kinds of stuff on the heart... and how you breathe, and that kind of stuff.” After I responded with slight surprise at how specific his answer was, he responded with less certainty:

Well, I’m trying in the future to work in specialty or a specific position in medical. In the hospital maybe, they can call me over to do something specific, not to do everything in general like a nurse or LPN… so I’m trying to work on something like that. I haven’t
really planned yet, but that’s like my first real step to work on. And then probably, after that, it depends on how life is going to go, and how things are going to go with me.

When I asked him about his life outside of work, Mo envisioned himself as a full member of American society. “I would like to live how the Americans live… I would love to try to do that. I would love to be dreaming as a person that I’m born American, my family was American and all of this kind of stuff – and then I woke up and I start to compare between how I live right now and my dream.” Mo’s aspirations were linked closely to his belief in American meritocracy:

I think we get some really good chances, we get more help, I think more than the American students because it’s their language that their born with. I think that’s something that you can’t change. I think we really get a lot of help with language, in the beginning you get a lot of help, a lot of advantage, and good points to work on. I think they work on us, to help us. On the other hand, too, if you really want to study, then you need to learn the language. As bad as you want to breathe, you can really find people to help you. They help you enough, but I think you got to help yourself, too. They give you a lot of good opportunities to do it, but it’s on you right now. That’s what I think.

Mo saw schools in the U.S. as not only fair for immigrants and refugees, but an institution which even granted them special treatment. According to this framework, it is up to the student to take advantage of the opportunities presented to him or her. When asked why some students graduate and others do not, Mo pointed to the family as a crucial factor in student success or failure:

If I want to talk in general…it depends about the family, have they really been teaching their children to learn the language or to study and to look to the future? I think the biggest point that is really the family because if you have a really good family, and they want you to have good education, then the student or the person is really going to understand what they’re saying.

Although Mo located the family as a significant factor in academic attainment, he spoke in meritocratic terms which portray all families as equally capable of producing academically successful children, depending only on parents’ willingness to do so. Comments made by other students echoed Mo’s feelings about meritocracy and opportunity in the U.S. When asked whether the U.S. was a fair society for immigrants, Marie, a 24-year-old Congolese refugee who
had graduated from Parkside High School in 2014, said, “Absolutely. I don’t know how to say this, but I think they do their best to help them succeed in this country. Once you have your papers to stay here and to work here, I mean the opportunities are there for you. It’s not just for Americans. I think they’re very fair.” Now a college graduate with a Master’s Degree in Accounting, Marie envisioned the academic success of immigrants and refugees, including herself, as a result of hard-work and individual endeavor:

Going back to what I said – you don’t really have to be a nerd in order to graduate. I believe that success depends on you. It really depends on how much effort you put in, how you’re willing to succeed. Some students, to be honest, I know they had the capacity to learn and graduate on time, but I can say they didn’t know why they were there. They didn’t really put in the effort that they were required to put in.

As exemplified by Marie and Mo’s comments, the meritocratic ideology situates both academic success and failure as a result of individual merit (MacLeod 1987; McNamee and Miller 2014). Thus, academically successful students utilized this logic to explain not only their own academic performance, but the failure of academically unsuccessful students as well. Both Mo and Marie came from modest, lower-middle class backgrounds: Marie’s parents had a high school education and had owned a small business in Congo, and Mo’s parents both were college educated. Their class background and education before coming to the U.S. did not single-handedly lead them to academic success, however, their belief in meritocracy put forth the view that one’s background did not matter in the U.S. and everyone had the opportunity to achieve. Such a view obscures the ways in which schools confer advantages to members of privileged class backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Brantlinger 2003).

Other students distinguished themselves from immigrants and refugees they knew who lacked the work ethic required to take advantage of the opportunities presented to them. Carlos, an Ecuadorian immigrant who had lived in the U.S. for six years at the time of the study,
explained to me about a friend of his from the Philippines. “I know a guy who is still here, and he was supposed to graduate last year... I think he’s not trying because he used to be in some of my classes. He’s lazy. He was always late to the classes. He didn’t really do the work in class, and then other stuff, so we basically knew he was going to fail the Regents.” Akash, a 21-year old college student from Bangladesh who graduated Parkside High School in 2014, compared himself to his cousin who dropped out of high school the same year he graduated:

   He works at Wal-Mart, and he bought a BMW, so he’s happy with his life. It just depends on what you want to do. If you’re happy with your life, with a range of like 8-12 dollars an hour, that’s fine. But if you’re aiming [for] ‘Hey, I got to work for the state, I got to work for the government’ or to make $80,000 a year, that’s two totally different things. You just make your own target and just work through it…. You have a lot of opportunities, you just have to take them. You have all the money around. It’s not that someone is going to come and give it to you.

In this frame, succeeding in the United States meant you may have to work hard from the bottom up. Even if immigrants and refugees were treated unequally, one still had the opportunity to succeed given the right attitude and work ethic. Khadijah, an articulate and outspoken graduate of Parkside, was adamant in this position. Now 24-years old and a college graduate, Khadijah was just 16 when she arrived in the U.S. from Iraq. Accustomed to an upper-middle-class lifestyle in Iraq, Khadijah quickly learned she would need to work her way up from the bottom of the social hierarchy in the U.S. With a strong belief in the potential for social mobility, Khadijah sternly criticized those who were unwilling take advantage of the opportunities she felt was available to those who worked hard in the U.S.:

   It’s just a matter of people trying to get those opportunities. A lot of people come here and think that ‘I’m not going to work as a cleaner. I’m not going to work in housekeeping. I’m not going to do this.’ I don’t know what they expect. You’re not going to be a CEO of a company when you first come here and you don’t speak any English.
Khadijah referred to her sister who began working at Parkside Medical Center as a housekeeper then became a Patient Care Associate and now a Coordinator of a unit. “You just can’t sit in the house and say ‘Oh there are no jobs. No one is hiring me. I don’t have opportunity,’” She concluded, “I feel like this country has so much opportunity if you just try and work for it.” Although she hopes to one day be a heart surgeon, Khadijah currently holds down two jobs to support her parents who are unemployed.

The comments above demonstrate the ways in which a belief in meritocracy can serve as both a motivator for students to succeed and an obstruction to a critical analysis of the role that class plays in educational inequality. While the students above all came from relatively well-educated, moderately affluent families, beliefs in meritocracy were not confined to those from the middle-class. But for those who did not succeed in school, a belief in meritocracy can also lead to self-blame instead of class critique. The following section builds on the theme of meritocracy by discussing the comparative frame of reference many students used when evaluating their lives in the U.S. In general, such comparisons supported a belief in meritocracy, although moments of critique were also present as well.

The U.S in Context: Seeing Through a Dual Frame of Reference

Many of the respondents in this study displayed a strong dual frame of reference, comparing aspects of the schools as well as the opportunity structure of their native country to those of the U.S. As previous researchers have shown, a strong dual frame of reference can motivate newcomer immigrants and refugees to succeed academically since they view the opportunity structure in the U.S. as providing more potential for social mobility than they had in their previous country (Ogbu 1987; Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi 1986; Louie 2004; Suárez-Orozco
Of Suárez-Orozco’s primary informants, for example, told him that he worked hard in school because he felt he’d be rewarded in the U.S.: “In El Salvador you get ahead by who you know; here you get ahead by what you know” (1987, 96). As a result, immigrants and refugees with a dual frame of reference thus view their own success or failure as a result of their own individual merit. Thus, the dual frame of reference is strongly linked to meritocratic ideology.

Although students in this study generally compared the U.S. favorably to their native countries, several were critical of the opportunity structure of the U.S. Following previous scholarly work, the preceding section argued that immigrant and refugee students – especially those from middle-class backgrounds – held positive views of the U.S. and believed strongly in meritocracy. However, as the following narratives show, many students with college-educated family members also issued critiques of the U.S. as the credentials of their family members and friends were not accepted by employers thus forcing them to either cope with low-wage service work and the resulting downward mobility or return to college for an American degree. The students who participated in this study with the lowest amounts of formal education before arriving to the U.S. were the most likely to emphasize the discrepancies in cultural capital between themselves and their more highly-educated peers and came closest to articulating a class critique of education. Even those who compared the U.S. favorably to their former country still felt that they still needed to work harder than native-born students in order to achieve at the same level. The data here demonstrate the complex and contradictory nature of a dual frame of reference. In comparing the U.S. to their previous country, students seemed, at times, limited in their critique of the U.S. and tolerant of discrimination, while in other moments they presented penetrating critiques of the meritocratic ideology and inequality.
Students like Khadijah viewed the American school system through a dual frame of reference as a way of validating their beliefs in U.S. meritocracy. For these students, especially those from the Middle East and Sudan, U.S. schools were described as more supportive, less rigorous, and kinder to students as compared with schools in their former countries where teachers did not stay after school for extra help and often physically punished students for behavioral or academic infringements. These differences, according to several students, made graduation accessible to all students. As Khadijah said of failing students, “They choose not to graduate. Honestly, I don’t see any reason that would make them not graduate. Even if there’s a language barrier, there’s a lot of help. Like in the Middle East, you would never find a teacher who stays after school to help students. You’d have to pay a teacher for that, and it would be expensive.” Kyaw Reh, a 19-year-old refugee from Burma, described his appreciation of the schools here: “I love it because it’s different than my country. Here they support you a lot. Just one class has three or four teachers. If you have a question you can just ask, ask, ask, and they can answer. When I lived in Burma, it’s like one class has forty students and just one teacher.”

Other students described the challenge and rigor of schools in their former country, suggesting that since American schools were less difficult, no student should have trouble graduating. When asked about the biggest challenges in school, Miriam, Sara’s older sister who was now eighteen years old replied with surprise at the question:

Big challenges? I don’t have any challenges. I took everything in my country, it was easy for me. Everything I took in my country, I took it again here, but in the easy way. I took it there in the hard way, and I took more and more. Here when I came here, they make it easier – the subjects. When I was in my country, I took Calculus there, and here they don’t allow Calculus. I don’t know they just make it easy. I feel like I’m in First Grade and the teacher gives me a note and makes it fun with games. They are too nice. Very nice – I can’t tell you how nice they are. In Iraq the teacher explains the topic and you have to do everything on your own. We have a lot of tests there, we have a test every month.
Mariel, an 18-year-old senior from the Philippines echoed a similar sentiment as Miriam when comparing high school in the U.S. to her former school. “It’s easy to go to school here because in the Philippines we have exams every quarter.” She continued, “And if you fail one quarter you have to retake it next school year. But here we only have one exam which is the Regents. So it’s easier to study here.” Even Mehdi, an Afghani refugee, who at age 19 was still struggling to graduate told me, “I don’t know about other students, but if you study, you can pass it. We had big tests, especially in Iran – they have big tests since first grade. They have really big and hard tests. So I was pretty good at them, all of them. So tests are challenging, but it’s just you.”

The fact that corporal punishment was illegal in the U.S. also factored in to several students’ comparisons. Karim told me that he preferred schools here “because they give you the choice, and there is no punishment if you behave badly.” He continued, “So, I mean, for our old school – the school in our old countries were harder, very strict.” Aziz, an Iraqi refugee who was sitting next to Karim listening, added, “They force you to learn.” Sadiq described his fondness for American schools as compared to those in Iraq:

Back in Iraq, I remember, I hated my studies so much. I got to the level of not even wanting to go to the high school because the teachers are mean. They hit us if we don’t do the homework, or take us out of the class. It’s so disrespectful. It doesn’t make you want to go and study. That’s not right to do that. Imagine if you’re a high school student and a teacher comes and slaps you in the face. That’s not right. Even if you’re 16, 17, 18 the teacher cannot hit you. It’s so disrespectful – in front of the class. So in here it was totally different. For me, I took advantage of it. I passed the school. It was good. It was really good.

Other students compared the opportunity structure of the U.S. favorably to the limited potential for social mobility they envisioned for themselves had they not immigrated to the U.S. Carmen, a graduate of Parkside High who had emigrated to the U.S. in 2010 from the Dominican Republic, explained to me the reason why she left. “My stepmother brought us here… because I had a good life in the Dominican Republic, but she said that here we’d have lots of opportunities, more than
over there. For example, over there if you’re over than 30 years old you won’t get a job. I see here really old ladies work and have a car and have a nice life.” Ana, a Parkside High graduate who migrated from Puerto Rico in 2011 explained, “We came here for more opportunities because my country doesn’t have the same education.” Leila, a Libyan refugee, said:

There’s definitely a lot more opportunity for people here. Even if you come here at an older age, there’s opportunities for you to become better - to go to school, to work. You don’t find that in the Middle East. A lot of people in the Middle East who graduate as engineers or technology majors… they’re on the top of their class, and then you’d find them in the street putting like a table with cigarettes to sell because there are no jobs.

As this section shows, students who viewed the U.S. through a dual frame of reference also had a strong sense of meritocracy. Because the U.S. provided better opportunities than their previous countries, these students believed, it was up to them to take advantage of such potentials for social mobility. However, as the following section shows, conceptions and critiques of meritocracy were often divided along class lines.

**Student Critiques of Meritocracy**

Not all students who utilized a dual frame of reference spoke favorably about the opportunity structure in the United States. Especially among well-educated, middle-class families, a significant point of contention was the rejection of their family members’ credentials which they acquired in their former countries. Though formerly occupying professional-managerial positions, many of these family members suffered downward mobility as they were no longer seen as qualified for the same position in the U.S. Sandeep, a Bhutanese refugee who lived in a refugee camp in Nepal for 19 years before migrating to the U.S. in 2008, described the struggles that he and his sisters had upon arrival in the United States. Riding his bike six miles to a nearby city, Sandeep was able to take two years of college before arriving to the U.S. Though only some
of his credits were accepted when he transferred to a four-year college after arrival, he made it through while holding down a part-time job. Unlike their brother, Sandeep’s sisters who both received Bachelor’s Degrees from a Nepali college could not find employers in their fields who would accept their credentials. “Bringing that degree here didn’t work out,” he told me, “so they were forced to take entry level jobs and then just work hard to make life better. They have to do it… hoping for that sun to shine, you know?”

When asked whether immigrants and refugees have the same opportunities as native-born Americans in the U.S., Leila paused and then responded:

No because there are so many people that I know that are like doctors and engineers and stuff. They came from my country, and then they want to apply for jobs here after they got their green cards here and their paperwork and stuff. But they didn’t get the job. They told them that they have to go to college and take some tests and stuff. They need to start over. So it’s really hard. You finish school, and you finish school and everything, and then they make you start all over again. One of my uncles is a doctor, but he wanted to work at the hospital. They interviewed him and everything, and they told him “No we can’t take you because you need to have American school paperwork.” So he has to go to two years of college again. But he already finished probably 10 or more years of college. But then he has to go again. So that’s like – I don’t know – how do I say this. It makes people like “Oh I already did this and I have to do it again.” And after all of that maybe, they’re not going to take you. So that’s really hard.

Like Leila’s uncle, Marie’s brother came to the U.S. with a graduate degree yet could not utilize it when he arrived. Despite having a Master’s Degree in Communications, his degree was treated “basically like a high school diploma here.” Yet, because some of the credits from the Congolese college were able to be transferred, Marie’s brother was able to re-complete his degree in the U.S. and later obtained a job through the state. Even though her brother was able to regain his middle-class position, Marie described the hardship of having to complete the same degree again after arriving in the U.S.:

You can understand the pain of… you went to school the same amount of time as an American student here, but your diploma is devalued here, it doesn’t have the same value
as an American one. So I think they don’t like that. Some of them get discouraged and say, “You know what, just let it go, I’m not going to go to school again. I’m just going to do a minimum wage job.”

Karim and Sharif, both refugees from Iraq, told me similar stories about their fathers’ declining class position upon arriving in the U.S. Aziz said, “My dad works at Parkside Med. I think he does something... he used to be a vet in Egypt [where they had lived for eight years before being resettled in the United States]. I don’t remember what he really did, but he works right now with animals at Parkside Med.” I asked whether it was similar to his job in Egypt and Aziz responded, “Sort of... well no, not really. They’re not going to believe his education here.” Like Aziz, Sharif told me that his father was an accredited mechanic in Iraq and Jordan, where they initially fled to, yet he could not find a job at the same level here. “And he also graduated as a mechanic, but the problem is that when he came here, that he has to take these things again. Some people, I don’t think they can. I don’t think it’s fair. Like he has a degree from Iraq so he shouldn’t take it again, he can work anywhere he wants,” he said.

In the final weeks of the school year in which I conducted my research, a new student was added to the class. She was a young woman from Afghanistan who sat quietly in the corner sometimes talking in English with several of the Iraqi girls. One day I overheard Mr. Anderson talking with her. “You’re back in high school after some college? That must be frustrating,” he said as she nodded her head. Although she just arrived in the U.S., she planned to take the Regents Exams since she likely had little time to graduate before she turned 21. Like this young woman, Bashir told me he was enrolled in a dental school in Afghanistan before he was granted refugee status and came to the U.S. He asked me whether the college I went to had a dental program, and I told him that they did not. Even as he looked ahead to reestablish his career path, Bashir was still struggling to pass all his Regents Exams and graduate from high school.
Just as the students above utilized the dual frame of reference to develop a critical perspective on the opportunity structure in the U.S., others penetrated (Willis 1977) meritocratic ideology by raising sophisticated critiques of school failure. In contrast to individualist explanations for academic performance, many of these students pointed to the different educational backgrounds brought by students to the U.S. as well as the unfair expectations which limited their ability to graduate.

Several students who developed nascent class critiques of schooling had fled Burma and spent most of their youth refugee camps in Thailand. Many of these students had family members who could not graduate and several were concerned about their own possibility of graduating themselves, since many aged out of high school before they could pass the necessary exams. These students noted how the educational resources and cultural capital that other students possessed before coming to the U.S. put them at a distinct schooling advantage. Muu Reh, a sixteen-year-old student working her way to graduate high school, explained why many Karen students are not able to finish school: “I think that in other countries, they teach better than in Thailand or Burma. Because a lot of my friends, when they first come here they know a little English… from Iraq and Philippines.” Her sister, Aung, nodded her head in agreement, “Yeah. Some people are learning before they come here, so it’s better for them.” Other Karen students provided similar reasons for their struggles in school. “Maybe they know more about things than we do… like education,” said Shi Reh, a Karen student. “Yeah, sometimes they speak English already. Maybe in their culture they learn more than us because we lived in the camp,” she continued, “We don’t have enough education.”

Lily elaborated on this view, calling attention to challenges that students coming from refugee camps have when they get to the United States. Though Lily lived in Malaysia and not a
refugee camp, she was told by the resettlement agency after arriving in the U.S. at age 19 that it was unlikely she could graduate. Yet, Lily persevered in high school, staying after school with her ENL teachers every day studying and just barely graduating before she aged out. She was currently taking classes at the community college, working at Parkside Medical Center and hoped one day to be a perfusionist in an operating room. As she said:

You know, people that come from my country… some are different. There’s two ways that people come from my country: whether they come from Thailand or coming from Malaysia. The people who come from Thailand, they live in the camp and they have school in the camp, but I think that it’s more… it’s harder to get education over there. So a lot of people – yeah that’s why the one who told me that I can’t go to high school – he knows a lot of people coming from Thailand and go to high school don’t graduate. That’s why he told me that.

Aside from their complaints over international credentials, most middle-class students in this study articulated strong beliefs in meritocracy. However, a few students described mitigating factors in school success outside of individual effort. Whereas other highly-educated students had mentioned individual effort and work ethic as the main factor in school success, Miriam described factors which can influence school performance. “For most of them, the language is hard for them, especially students who didn’t go to school ever. They didn’t go to school when they were born, they lived in a camp. They didn’t like go to school, and most of them here didn’t go to school in Parkside High School, the immigrants came and I think most of them are from Burma and Karen,” she said. Yet, when delineating between Iraqis and Yemenis, whom she saw as two highly-educated groups of students, the difference boiled down to individual merit: “I think those people aren’t graduating because all Iraqis that are here, they graduate from high school, and maybe Yemenis. But Yemenis don’t study, so they might not graduate. They speak English, but they don’t graduate. But the first and major effect is the language, and some effect is
like they don’t want to study, they are being lazy and they just want to come and hang out.

That’s it.”

Mariel told me she thought some students didn’t complete high school because of their experiences before coming to the U.S. “I think it’s because some of them are from countries that don’t really talk in English, and it’s hard for them to understand the topics, so some of them are failing,” she said. Marie, too, though expressing support for meritocratic explanations of school performance also described some factors can influence academic success:

There are also other students who are trying so hard but they’re not able to graduate. It’s not because they’re not willing to, but it’s because of the English barrier. I really think that’s what’s preventing them for graduating on time. Others are coming here when their age is 19 or 20 and they really don’t have enough time there. They only have one year to take all the Regents exams. It’s really hard to that in one year. It’s a very short time. Just to summarize – the English barrier is number one, age is another barrier because they don’t have enough time. Once they’re 21 or 20… you have to get out.

Other students located their critiques of meritocracy in the social exclusion experienced by immigrants and refugees. As Soe Rah told me, “I feel like if you are here, then of course you’re going to have more advantages because you’re a citizen, right? So you’re going to be treated differently. They know your status as a citizen.” The contradictory feelings towards meritocracy was well-articulated by Ibrahim, an eighteen-year-old Sudanese refugee who moved to Parkside in 2014. When asked whether there are a lot of opportunities for immigrants in the U.S., Ibrahim utilized a dual frame of reference saying, “Sure. There are a lot. There’s a big difference from here and my country. Like here, I never thought I would be able to work as a teenager. So yeah, there are a lot of opportunities to get jobs and a better life and everything.” Yet moments later, when I asked if there were any differences between the opportunities for native-born Americans and immigrants, Ibrahim responded, “I think it’s different for them. I mean, it’s better for the
people who are born here. They get the opportunities and everything is better for them. They understand the language and especially that plays a big role in those things [opportunities].

Many students also felt that the additional responsibilities they shouldered distinguished them from native-born American students whom they portrayed as complacent or spoiled.

Mahmoud, an 18-year old Iraqi refugee who arrived to the U.S. in 2014, described the native-born Americans in the following way: “They’re taking the life… just playing, like the easy way. They get everything. It’s not like us; if we need anything, we have to get that the hard way. But I think the American would get it the easy way. Everything – they have it. We have to work harder to get everything.”

Mahmoud echoed a similar critique of American students, suggesting that they have a much easier time not just in school but in the labor market. Referring to his father’s struggle to find a well-paying position as a mechanic he said, “The American people, they have [the] easier way. They go to the boss to give the application and they can work. But my father, he’s like a better a mechanic, but he can’t work because his English is not good like him [native-born Americans].” Lily had similar sentiments when describing her job at the hospital. She told me that she used to work as hard as she could even pushing beds that would normally require two people. She explained that she felt the need to prove to her American bosses that she was a capable worker and worthy of her job. “I mean, we do things… to show them that we can do it. I think it’s because we’re afraid to lose our jobs,” she said. Yet some of her Asian coworkers told not to work too hard because she will be exploited. “They told me, ‘We Asian people are working too hard, so other people will control us and give us more hard things to do…You work too hard, don’t work that hard. If people know that you can do this much, they’ll give you more than what you can do.’” Khadijah suggested that immigrants and refugees appreciated their jobs
more than Americans and made them more attractive to employers. “[Immigrants, refugees] offer you more than Americans,” she said. “And I feel like sometimes that’s true because I have worked with a lot of people from different countries and Americans, and I feel like – no offense – but sometimes American complain too much. That’s why people sometimes don’t want to hire them. But that’s just my view of it.”

In a conversation with Karim and Aziz, both students suggested that native-born students do not appreciate the opportunities that they have in the U.S. “The people right here, American people, they just don’t know they have a big chance,” said Aziz. Karim responded, “Exactly. Like when I came here, I just appreciate everything, I’m thankful for everything I had. But I believe that some American people, they don’t see the chance they have, the opportunity that they have.” He paused, then continued, “If they go through what some immigrants have been through, they will be grateful.” Both youths commented on the pressure and challenges of immigrant children to help support their family economically and serve as a translator for doctor’s appointments, landlords, and teachers (Orellana 2009). Mehdi described similar hardships as Karim and Aziz, but felt that these responsibilities made immigrants and refugees more hardworking and determined than Americans:

The only reason I would say immigrants have more opportunities is because they’re more hardworking. They see how the world is. They suffered for stuff first, so now they know. Especially in my case, I have a lot of experience… but life gives you a lot of experience, I lived a few years in one country, a few years in another country, and now I’m here for five years. I want to thank god for it first of all, because I can handle my problems better than a kid who stays in one country or stays with their parents, and they don’t see any problems.

For Kyaw Reh, immigrant students, despite the opportunities afforded to them by the U.S. school system, still were disadvantaged compared to native-born students: “You feel like you’re different than other students, because other students, when the bell rings, they just go home and
they don’t have to worry too much. But for immigrant students, they worry a lot. Even when they go home,” he continued, “they still have to do homework. The immigrant students just give all their hours to education, like studying hard. So like they [American students] can play and watch TV, but not us.” In the beginning of the school year, a Burmese student named Htoo Rah told me that scored high enough on the NYSESLAT placement exam but still wanted to take ENL classes to improve his English for college. “In the senior year,” he said, “we work harder than ever, but American students just take a break.”

Another example of critical views came from a Nepali student named Arjun whom I had previously tutored at Parkside High before I began my dissertation study. Although only a few students would consistently come after school to work with a graduate student they hardly knew, I recall Arjun coming every week to work on his Regents English exam, thanking me profusely for what little help I could provide. Though he was not a student in the classes in which I attended at Parkside High, I spotted him several months later during an ENL Potluck Dinner. He came up to me smiling as always and asked me what I was still doing at the high school. After explaining my study to him, he wished me well and told me that he was working nearly full-time at Wal-Mart and ready to graduate and begin college. “You know,” he began, “I have a Nepali friend who came to the US a few years ago and is now he is working on his PhD in Engineering…. I know I can do that, too.” I told him that it was wonderful to hear, and that it is a good motivation to find other successful immigrants. Still smiling he said, “Yeah, well, you know American kids, they quit too easily.”

The critical narratives presented above demonstrate that immigrants and refugees appropriate a dual-frame of reference to both support and critique views of meritocracy. Middle-class students, though generally supportive of a meritocratic narrative, were nonetheless critical
of the U.S. for refusing to validate their family members’ international degrees. Students from lower class backgrounds articulated more sophisticated critiques of meritocracy and emphasized the role of education and social class in influencing one’s potential for academic success. While many students compared the U.S. favorably to their former countries, several students discussed the inequalities that immigrants and refugees faced compared to native-born Americans. These inequalities were often seen as inherent to the immigrant experience, and overcoming them as a feature which contributed to making them successful in a new country.

“It’s two of us for just one education”: Parental and Student Sacrifice

Parents figured strongly into the attitudes and aspirations of the immigrant and refugee students who participated in this study. As scholars have made clear, parents heavily influence their children’s aspirations and attitudes towards education (Li 2008; Louie 2004; MacLeod 1987; Ogbu 1987; Suárez-Orozco 1987; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez Orozco, and Todorova 2008) and also serve as the source of cultural capital which students bring to schools (Gee 2012; Heath 1983; Katz 2012; Lareau 2003). Teachers, too, recognized the influence of parents on schooling as several of those I interviewed listed parental attitudes towards school as a factor in their children’s academic success. During Mrs. Dykstra’s class one day, for example, she split students up into groups and asked if I’d be okay working with one of them. After I agreed, she directed me to a small group at the front of the room and said, “These kids are probably the ones who will go to college because they’re parents are like [making a pushing motion].” However, the parents of many students faced significant challenges in the U.S. Students, for example, reported the hardship of downward mobility their parents experienced after arriving to the U.S. (Li 2008). Yet they also recognized the sacrifices their parents made for them and, like the
Central American youth researched by Suarez-Orozco (1987), sought to repay them through academic success.

Carmen, whose father arrived only one year before our interview practiced law in the Dominican Republic but could only manage to land a job at a restaurant in the United States. “I can tell that he’s frustrated,” she said. Ana, whose mother had migrated from Puerto Rico three years ago, finished her Nursing degree in the U.S., yet ended up changing career paths and currently worked as a supervisor for a cleaning service. According to Ana, her mother said, “I cannot be in the hospital. You have to be there for like 12 hours and you don’t see the sun.” Despite seeing her mother’s struggles in the healthcare industry, Ana persisted in her ultimate goal of becoming a doctor. However, she told me that she recently began to volunteer at the hospital as a way of testing whether she would like working there or not.

As Akash put it, “I saw my parents working really hard when I got here. I can see them having a good life back in Bangladesh, and the only reason we came here was for my education and my younger brother’s education.” Even though her father was able to complete his Engineering degree in the U.S. and find a well-paying position, Miriam described the impact of relocation on her father: “My dad until now, he doesn’t like the way he lives here. He feels uncomfortable. But he’s impatient, he wants to try, but he would love to go back there [Iraq]. He left his job, and he spent 25 years doing his job. He’s an engineer. And his house, he spent a lot of money to build it, and then he left it, and his mom, when she called him, he began to cry. She’s still there.”

Khadijah’s parents had also experienced downward mobility in the U.S. Her father had started off as an English teacher and then later owned and operated several stores in Iraq. Her mother was a hairdresser. “We were rich – we had so much money there,” she said. “We didn’t
have a house, we had houses.”’ After the war started, her family moved to Syria where her father bought and sold gold. As the conflict in Syria escalated, Khadijah and her family once again relocated – this time to the U.S. where her father first worked in the kitchen at Parkside Medical Center and then as a bus driver for the city’s transportation service. She explained how hard her father had worked to maintain a comfortable way of life: “We didn’t have the same as what we had before. But my dad was working in the kitchen just so that he’d never make us feel like we needed anything. Nothing was different for us even though we know that my dad was going through a hard time. But he never made us feel that way.” Troubles eventually set in, however, as her mother had to close the salon she had opened outside of Parkside, and her father slipped on a patch of ice and hurt his back after a shift at work. Khadijah currently worked two jobs to support her parents. “I’ve been paying all the bills,” she explained, “And I don’t mind that because I love my parents.”

Shi Wah’s father, like several other Karen parents, worked a physically demanding job at the recycling center outside of town. She said, “My father wants to go back to Thailand, too. He likes it better there – the old lifestyle. In Thailand my father could get money work he wanted, he could quit any time he wanted. But if you get a job here you have to work every day. In Thailand, you can work today, tomorrow but then you can stop if you’re tired. You can’t do it like that here.” Kyaw Reh described the hardships that his mother faced in the U.S. and emphasized the mutual sacrifices that they had made for each other:

She can’t stay without me because she doesn’t understand where to go or English words… she can’t read anything, medication, or go to the hospital. Even if she called 911, how’s she going to say ‘Can I get a police car or an ambulance?’ So my mom had a difficult time even though she had education. So I had to stick with my mom because I understand English. So my mom, for the first years, she can’t find a job because she doesn’t understand English. She goes to ENL classes at the library for a few hours, and I go to work because we need to pay money, we need to pay rent and get food. So my mom
can’t find a job. And so I go to work and to school, I can’t choose. I have a goal but I have family, too.

After a year, Kyaw Reh’s mom found a job working housekeeping at a hotel. Though she is now 65, she works full time along with Kyaw Reh who holds down a position working as a waiter at a Thai restaurant on the outskirts of Parkside. Framing his education as more than an individual endeavor, Kyaw Reh concluded, “She supports me and I support my education. It’s two people just for one education.” Like Kyaw Reh, Lily explained the conflict between choosing education and the need to work to support one’s family. Pointing to the realities of serial migration and remittances (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez Orozco, and Todorova 2008), Lily explained, “If you’re working you can have money, so you can support your family back home. We don’t come – like the whole family – we don’t come to the USA. Some family is left back home, the family are still back home, so we need to take care of them. That’s why a lot of people drop out of high school.” Kyaw Reh told me his father was denied access to the U.S. because of his connections to the Burmese military, yet advised him before he left, “Whatever it is you want to do, you have to focus on education. If you don’t have education, it’s so hard to live. Whatever happens, just keep going to school.”

Sandeep, whose parents had not graduated high school, described his parents’ desire for their children to learn. “My mother was always saying, ‘I didn’t get a chance to learn, so if it happens for my children the same way, it will not be good… Even though I didn’t get the chance to learn, I have to give this chance to my children, to learn more and to do something in their life… to work easily in their life.’” Mehdi told me about his parents who were forced to leave school as children living in Afghanistan. His father had worked as a construction worker in Afghanistan and Iran, then later in Turkey where they fled to in 2007, spending five years there before coming to the U.S.:
They think a lot about education here. I feel like they’re over-exaggerating. They think a lot about it, you know, and sometimes they’re pushing too much because they never went to school and they don’t know what it feels like I guess. That’s why they’re doing it so much. They keep saying, “We regret not going to school.” Like they’re not regretting that they didn’t go to school – that they didn’t let them go to school. The situation was not good and they weren’t able to go even though they wanted to.

Children also worked hard to help support their families financially. Although it has been argued that holding a job down while going to school can help provide structure and discipline for students (Newman 1999; 2006), others have claimed that busy work schedules can burden students and hamper their academic attainment (Gándara 2004). The significance of work was clear in classes and interviews with students. During English class one day, the class read the short story “A&P” by John Updike in which a young man working at a grocery store becomes enchanted by three young girls who enter the store after coming straight from the beach. When the young man’s manager chastises the girls for their lack of clothing, the boy becomes irritated and quits his job. After reading the story, I turned to Mahmoud and Ahmad, a Bangladeshi immigrant, and asked them whether they would have done the same thing as the protagonist of the story. “No, no!” Mahmoud said pragmatically. “You’ve got to work and make money to help your family.” Ali nodded his head and added, “It’s so hard to find another job.” Another day, I noticed that Aziz, who was looking rather sleepy, pulled out a 16-oz “Monster Energy Drink,” looked at me, and said sheepishly as he opened it, “I know, I know, but I need this!” I joked naïvely, “Stayed up too late last night, huh?” He then told me that Thursday through Sunday he drove an hour to work a 10-hour shift at a gas station and convenience store. Like Aziz, Karim told me he had to work to help support his family financially as well as providing interpretive services. “I’m the only one who speaks English in the family. I have to do everything for them: their appointments, their paperwork, my dad’s work and stuff. So I’m like an adult outside the school. And I’m a high school student inside the school. It’s like I have two different lives,” he
said. Students viewed the additional responsibilities of working part time as a necessary part of their lives as new immigrants/refugees, and felt the need to reciprocate for their parents’ sacrifices in migrating to the U.S. Working, furthermore, seemed to separate them from “American” students who in comparison seemed lazy and unambitious.

In sum, student participants across nearly all class and cultural backgrounds reported that their parents expressed high expectations and supportive attitudes towards their schooling (Feliciano and Lanuza 2016). Students whose parents had little or no formal education were keen on having their children take advantage of schooling in the U.S. even if they lacked the cultural and social capital to directly help their children accomplish these goals. By holding down a job and handling interpretive duties, students gained a firsthand sense of their families’ economic hardships (Orellana 2009) and expressed the need to reciprocate for their parents’ tribulations in the U.S. (Suárez-Orozco 1987; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez Orozco, and Todorova 2008).

**Conclusion**

The data from this chapter, in general, validates previous work which has emphasized the high aspirations and positive attitudes towards education and opportunity held by immigrants and refugees (Kao and Tienda 1995; Louie 2004; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez Orozco, and Todorova 2008). Motivated by their parents’ sacrifices, the opportunities they feel are available to them in the U.S., and the belief in meritocracy which suggests that individuals are in charge of their own success and failure, students across class groups view education as an avenue for social mobility. Although strong beliefs in meritocracy and a dual frame of reference clearly motivated these students to work hard in school, any model which sees the individual as ultimately responsible for his or her academic performance also can limit class critiques of social
inequality and place blame on the individual students, their cultures, or their families for school failure.

However, even participants such as Marie and Miriam who had articulated meritocratic views, were also somewhat critical of the opportunity structure in the U.S. and presented alternative explanations for school success and failure. Many middle- and lower-middle class students like Sara and Mahmoud turned the dual-frame on its head, complaining that the U.S. unfairly rejected their friends’ and family members’ international credentials and relegated them to low-wage service work. Other students, mostly of working- and lower-class backgrounds, articulated more penetrating analyses of school inequality by focusing on the differences in educational preparation and cultural capital acquired brought by students to the United States. Students from Burma such as Soe Rah and Aung were especially critical in their views of meritocracy and understood academic success less of a result of individual ability and more due to the resources brought to the U.S. by students. Such contrasting narratives demonstrate that the meritocracy – as with any ideology – is necessarily partial and amenable to critique (Gramsci 1971; Willis 1977). Nonetheless, class differences proved significant in these conceptualizations as those from the middle-class and who were more successful in school were less likely to offer deep criticisms of meritocracy as it would take away individual credit from their academic accomplishments (Ehrenreich 1989; Newman 1988). Thus for students like Sharif, it was ultimately up to the individual to take advantage in “the land of opportunities.”

Despite the high aspirations evident across immigrant and refugee groups, previous scholarship has argued that the ability to take advantage of academic opportunities is highly stratified along class lines with those from middle-class backgrounds generally faring better than those from lower echelons (Feliciano and Lanuza 2016, Fry 2005). Those who possess the
cultural capital to succeed on academic tasks and navigate the educational landscape of the U.S. are more likely to turn their hopes into realities. Such students are not only hopeful for positive results, but expect them based on prior results and realistic appraisals of their abilities. Louie (2007) argues that expectations differ from aspirations in their tangibility. She writes, “Aspirations signal an ideal, or a hoped for result; expectations, on the other hand, are accompanied by a focused and realistic educational roadmap of specific steps to be taken, to translate the aspiration into outcome” (Louie 2007, 2230). Thus, students like Mo and Sara did not only set their aspirations high, but expected these results and developed plans which could lead them towards their goals.

As the following chapters demonstrate, the high aspirations and optimism of immigrant and refugee youth are further challenged by a daunting educational milieu which increasingly emphasizes high stakes testing (Apple 2003; Hursh 2008; Menken 2008) and a sociopolitical climate which can create assimilation pressures on newcomers (Lee 2005; Waters and Jiménez 2005). These barriers are evident in the declining aspirations and lowered levels of performance and academic engagement among ELLs after several years spent in the U.S. (Fry 2005; North 2009; Suárez-Orozco 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes, and Milburn 2009). Such a drop in attainment could have significant class consequences for students entering the labor market without credentials and could result in permanent incorporation into the ranks of the working-poor (Portes and Zhou 1993).
Assimilation, Class Mobility, and Whiteness

As immigration rose during the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, concerns grew over the abilities for new groups to integrate into the United States, and the subject of ethnic assimilation became a prominent focus for sociologists (Park and Burgess 1925). In eventually what came to be referred to as the “straight line” theory of assimilation, sociologists argued that each new ethnic group in the U.S. would eventually be incorporated into the mainstream to the point where their distinctiveness would be unrecognizable (Waters et al. 2010). Indeed among “white ethnics” – many who were regarded as non-white in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century – only 1 in 5 currently have partners with identical ancestries, reflecting the erasure of formerly racial boundaries (Lee and Bean 2004: 228). The assimilation of European populations into the white mainstream contrasts with other groups such as Native Americans who, despite attempts at forcible assimilation, relocation, and high rates of intermarriage, still remain distinctively nonwhite (Nagel 1996). African-Americans, too, have generally been neglected by such theories of assimilation as they generally were viewed as unable or unwilling to fully-integrate into U.S. society (Lacy 2004).

While the end goal of assimilation, according to the Chicago School, was the full integration of immigrants into mainstream American society entailing abandonment of distinct cultural features brought from their previous countries, later perspectives complicated the “straight line” theory (Waters and Jiménez 2005). The post-1965 generation of immigrants
brought new attention to the study of assimilation and challenged dogmatic assumptions about
the ways groups are incorporated into the United States. In short, it became clear that immigrant
groups were assimilating at different rates and into different sectors of society based on factors
of class and race. Portes and Zhou (1993), in their theory of segmented assimilation, point to
three general paths taken by immigrants in the United States. According to this theory,
immigrants may either become fully integrated into the white middle-class and forego their
cultural distinctions or descend into the underclass and live a life of poverty. A third option
includes the preservation of one’s culture while seeking economic and social mobility through
selective forms of assimilation and the leveraging the social capital of one’s ethnic community
(Gibson 1988; Louie 2004; Zhou and Bankston 1999,). In the third scenario, maintaining one’s
ethnic ties as opposed to full assimilation reaps more benefits for the immigrant group (Waters et
al. 2010). Whether groups experience upward or downward mobility depends not just on the
willful adoption of mainstream American values, but also on the economic and cultural capital
brought to the U.S., levels of racial discrimination experienced in the U.S., and dynamics of
immigrant families (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Generational differences have also been a focus in the study of immigrant assimilation,
and the changes experienced by immigrant families over the first and second generation is often
the starting point for such analyses (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993; Waters
1999; Zhou and Bankston 1999). The age at which one immigrates can play such a significant
role that Rumbaut (2004) suggests dividing the first generation into decimals: the 1.25 generation
refers to young adults who migrated after spending their youth in another country, the 1.5
generation are those who migrated in adolescence, while the 1.75 generation refers to those who
migrated as children. The differences in assimilation experiences between these groups can be
significant as those who arrive at a younger age are more likely to acquire English proficiency and assimilate more quickly than the 1.25 generation (Rumbaut 2004). Conflicts between generations can occur when family members acculturate at different rates, a process Portes and Zhou (1993) refer to as “dissonant acculturation” (Waters et al. 2010).

The study of assimilation has deep connections to the concept of social reproduction. Firstly, the potential for immigrants to become upwardly mobile is often highly dependent class factors: the levels of cultural and economic capital which immigrants bring with them to the U.S. can be highly determinate of their ability to replicate their former class position in the U.S. (Li 2008; Feliciano and Lanuza 2016). And since the acquisition of mainstream American culture is coded as middle-class, those who already arrive with a middle-class habitus possess cultural attributes more conducive to such forms of assimilation (Urcuioli 1996; Moss 2003). Formerly middle-class immigrants can thus utilize their cultural capital in order to reap benefits from the educational system and claw their way back up the social ladder (Li 2008).

Currently, the U.S. has the largest proportion of foreign-born individuals since 1890, however the demographics of the contemporary immigrant population is vastly different (Haller, Portes, and Lynch 2011). The Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, which abolished national quotas for entry into the country also established new pathways into the U.S., highlights the significance of selectivity in the contemporary immigrant population (Gándara and Hopkins 2010). The large number of Latin Americans who came to the United States in the late 20th century, for example, generally came to reunite with family members already living in the U.S. This differed from the new arrivals of Asian immigrants who more likely to come to the U.S. with work visas and higher levels of education (Feliciano 2005; Kao, Vaquera, and Goyette 2013). The differing class resources of each group upon arrival were reproduced over time. In 2016, for example, only 13%
of Latinos and Hispanics possessed Bachelor’s degrees while nearly half of all Asians in the United States had graduated college (Iceland 2017). Consequently, those who cannot make it into the middle-class are more likely to be racially stigmatized (Hill 2008) and contrasted against “model minorities” who have higher rates of attainment (Lee 2005; Louie 2004). Even those with arrive less cultural capital may be able to rely heavily on the social capital in their socially-mobile ethnic communities which can help spread knowledge about navigating school systems and welfare benefits (Louie 2004). The strength of the ethnic community can also play a significant role in safeguarding the cultural values of immigrants and provide a space for them to continue to practice previous ways of life (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Zhou and Bankston 1998; Zou 2002).

From this perspective, the process of cultural assimilation and class reproduction are intimately linked, and social mobility is seen to be predicated on adopting the values of the dominant cultural group (Trueba and McLaren 2000). As Lee explains, cultural assimilation in the United States has long been understood as “a prerequisite for socioeconomic assimilation, social mobility, and the successful achievement of the American dream… the failure to assimilate into the dominant culture was understood to be problematic for both the immigrant and the larger society” (2002, 8). However, while newcomers to the United States may buy into the American Dream, they may find that opportunities for social mobility are contingent upon developing an identity which does not conflict with the dominant cultural configuration (Lee 2005). Iceland writes, “Even for immigrants who quickly integrate into cultural mainstream of the United States, social mobility is not a guarantee. Immigrants, often investing heavily in education, have a lower wage-return on years of schooling compared with whites” (2017, 34). Those who find that they have exchanged their cultures for little in return may develop
oppositional identities and assimilate into the racialized underclass (Ogbu 1987; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Therefore, immigrants’ search for class mobility may interrupt the need for cultural continuity in their new country (Ong 2003; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez Orozco, and Todorova 2008). Furthermore, the “hourglass” shape of the contemporary job market has only heightened the need for integration as the lack of stable, industrial work for undereducated workers can mean permanent incorporation into the underclass (Holdaway and Alba 2009; Stiglitz 2012).

Despite scholarly evidence that immigrants are assimilating as quickly as previous generations and learning English at a faster pace than their predecessors (NASEM 2015), xenophobia and ethnonationalism has once again surfaced in the form of anti-immigrant legislation and fears that the growing minority population will soon outnumber the white majority (Appadurai 2006; Hill 2008). Portes and Rumbaut refer to factors of discrimination which may stifle immigrants’ incorporation into the middle-class of their new country as the “context of reception” (2001). In their framework, racialization complicates the straight line theories which assumed that all immigrant groups would eventually come to lose their distinctiveness as separate cultures.

Thus, the ability for new immigrants to integrate into the middle-class also is dependent on their racial status and vice-versa (Lee 2005; Olsen 1997; Urcuioli 1996). Indeed the history of immigration in the U.S. forces a reconceptualization of race as a static binary between White and non-White, and instead demonstrates how racial ascription has always involved a set of shifting categories of belonging and exclusion created through social practice (Brodkin 1998; Lacy 2007; Omi and Winant 1994; Perry 2002; Roediger 2005). Roediger (2005), for example, argues that newly-arrived immigrant groups to the U.S. have historically occupied a “non-white” status
which placed them between the “hard racism” experienced by African Americans and “full inclusion” enjoyed by White men. The concept of race throughout the 20th century, he explains, that “if an immigrant from Sicily walked about in a city long enough or frequented universities and governmental institutions, she could accumulate racial labels indefinitely” (Roediger 2005, 35). Bonilla-Silva (2004), too, argues the U.S. has become a “tri-racial” society which positions Latin Americans in between the advantages enjoyed by Whites and the racism endured by African Americans. Lee and Bean (2004) similarly conclude that the rates of social mobility, decreased residential segregation, and increased intermarriage with whites show that some immigrant groups have crossed the color lines, though it remains to be determined whether African Americans are following the same trend. The new boundary, they suggest, may have moved from White/non-White to Black/non-Black.

The ambiguous position of immigrant groups vis-à-vis racial categories in the U.S. also demonstrates the significance of culture and class factors in influencing racial ascription together with the assumed pseudo-biological differences along which races are allegedly divided (Garner and Selod 2015; Gould 1981; Silverstein 2005). As Garner and Selod write, “the long 19th century of body-fixated race theory is an anomaly in a longer history that evidences various combinations of culture and phenotype being combined to define racial characteristics” (2015, 12). In this sense, one’s complexion as well as the visibility of his or her cultural features, whether it be a hijab or heavily-accented English, can contribute to racial positioning. Language plays an integral role in class and racial negotiations since speaking the standard variety of English is seen as a prerequisite to entering the middle-class (Urciuoli 1996).

As historians have shown, attaining middle-class status can help mitigate racialization though avenues for such class mobility are often selectively applied (Brodkin 1998; Ignatiev
While post-World War II class mobility and cultural assimilation offered some immigrant groups the opportunity for “Whitening,” the denigration and racialization of African Americans who were excluded from such options (Lacy 2007; Wilson 1987) allowed immigrants to demarcate themselves from those at the bottom of the racial hierarchy (Davis 1986; Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 2005). Groups such as American Jews, for example, viewed as distinctively non-White throughout the first half of the 20th century, slowly became “White” as they enjoyed upward class mobility in a post-WWII landscape which offered them opportunities for federally subsidized homeownership and postsecondary education (Brodkin 1998). (The high frequency of hate-crimes against Jews and resurgence of neo-Nazi groups throughout the U.S. suggests that Jews may not be as fully White as Brodkin argues [Lucas 2017].) Irish immigrants, too, climbed the racial hierarchy, in part, through the political mobilization of unions, the Catholic Church and membership in the Democratic Party across Northern cities (Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991). The denial of these opportunities to African Americans (Wilson 1987) combined with the embrace of racializing ideologies and strategic forms of assimilation (Lacy 2004) provided the 20th-century immigrant populations with a mechanism for distancing themselves from American Blacks and a way to associate themselves with Whiteness (Morrison 1993; Roediger 2005; Waters 1999). As Toni Morrison writes, “the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is understood to be African Americans” (1993, 57). Europeans, formerly seen as non-White, now have the “option” of disclosing and celebrating their identities when they please in contrast with racialized groups which are allowed no such choice (Alba 1990; Waters 1990).
Researchers have documented the ways in which individuals have negotiated their class and racial positions by constructing identities in opposition to racialized groups (Fordham 1996, Lee 2005; Lamont 2000; Lacy 2007; Moss 2003; Waters 1999). Several studies, in particular, have elucidated the liminal, non-White status often occupied by racialized immigrants and the strategies they use to mitigate such stigma by distancing themselves from those at the bottom of the racial hierarchy in the United States. Mary Waters’ monograph *Black Identities* (1999), for example, skillfully describes the ways in which newly arrived Black Caribbean immigrants endeavor to avoid being associated with African Americans at their workplaces. By emphasizing their Caribbean heritage and accent, these immigrants sharpened boundaries between themselves and African Americans “us[ing] the image of Black Americans to construct a West Indian identity by saying what they were not” (Waters 1999, 73). Stacey Lee (2002) found that Hmong youth who performed poorly in school and resisted assimilation were more likely to be seen as racially non-White. While many of these students embraced the racialized identity as a form of resistance, others utilized strategies of “ideological Whitening” which made use of the association between diligent students, Asian “model minorities,” and “honorary Whiteness” (Lee 2005). Similar to the division racial division between the “good” and “bad” Hmong students of Lee’s study, Shankar (2008) found that well-integrated, upwardly mobile Desi teens in Silicon Valley drew a sharp distinction between themselves and newly-arrived “FOBs” (fresh off the boat). Without the economic and cultural capital needed buy the right clothes, understand the time and place to use their native language, or succeed in the competitive consumer-driven culture of Silicon Valley, FOBs were subjected to both class and racial stigmas (Shankar 2008).

These ethnographies demonstrate the ways in which individuals strategically negotiate their own racialization by attempting to construct identities in opposition to stigmatized Others often
through discourses which emphasize class-based distinctions (Bourdieu 1984). These studies further demonstrate, like the participants in this study, that American immigrants must negotiate their own non-White status in a racially hierarchical society (Lee 2005).

Thus, the process of assimilation is itself classed and racialized as pressures on immigrants to assimilate “involve not just an embrace of American identity but specifically of white American identity” (Roediger 2005, 178). For immigrants, assimilation refers not solely to the forced abandonment of one’s culture, but to the embrace of the White American, middle-class habitus which may include disdain of other racialized minorities (Lee 2005; Roediger 2005; Urcuioli 1996). Therefore, the aspirations for class mobility and integration among immigrants and refugees, can also be read as a desire to escape racialization. From this perspective, middle-classness is associated with Whiteness, whereas poverty and segregation are seen as features of racialized groups (Moss 2003; Ortner 2006; Urcuioli 1996). As Urcuioli puts it, “racializing discourses represent difference as dangerous, occurring outside the proper social domains and incorrigibly working-class or poor” (1996, 18).

**Schools and Assimilation**

For newcomers to the U.S., schools are a crucial point of contact with the state and can serve as a powerful tool in transmitting dominant cultural values such as meritocracy and citizenship (Loewen 2004). Schools both teach individuals about their place in the social order and establish hegemonic meanings of what it means to be member of society (Althusser 1971; Apple 1979 Spindler 1974). Apple, for example, has argued that the curriculum acts as a tool for transmitting the “official knowledge” of dominant groups, excluding the voices of all others (1985). Other scholars have shown that educational policy can exert coercive power in limiting the use of
culturally-sensitive pedagogies including bilingual education or the use of non-standard dialects in the classroom (Delpit 1995; Gándara and Hopkins 2010; Menken 2008).

The power to assimilate new immigrant populations has historically been an important aspect of public schooling in the United States and served as a major impetus in establishing the state-run public school (Nasaw 1979). As Katz (1987) points out, the vast numbers of Irish parochial and German-language schools were systematically undercut in favor of the Common School which was portrayed as a “great equalizer,” but gained popularity, in part, due to their function of assimilating these populations. Anti-German sentiment during World War I helped to eradicate the use of German in schools throughout the country (Menken 2008). Indian Boarding Schools operated throughout the late 19th and 20th century with the express intention of assimilation indigenous youths. With the promise of “killing the Indian and saving the man,” these schools forced American Indian youth to abandon all aspects of their native cultures including dress, language, and religion (Churchill 2004; Nagel 1995).

Immigrant and refugee students unwilling or incapable of adopting mainstream American culture and language are therefore more likely to be stigmatized than youth who adopt dominant aspects of U.S. culture. In schools, language differences are especially significant because they are closely tied to ideas about class mobility and citizenship (Bartlett and García 2012; Lee 2005; Urcuioli 1996; Valenzuela 1999). Despite evidence which has pointed to the utility of bilingual education and significance of valuing native languages in the classroom, monolingual immersion has been a dominant paradigm for teaching immigrants (Hornburger 2003; Menken 2008). The push for “English only” in schools is often supported not by empirical evidence, but guided by fears that students who maintain their own language will be never become proficient in English and unable to act as active citizens (Rosa 2016). In addition, since race and school performance
are intimately linked, students at multiracial high schools must manage their racial identities in an institutional context where Whiteness is ideologically associated with school success (Fordham 1996; Lee 2005; Ogbu 1987).

Furthermore, pressures to assimilate have been shown to have deleterious effects on the academic performance of immigrant and refugee youth (Lee 2005; Valenzuela 1999; Waters and Jiménez 2005). The leveling of high immigrant aspirations is implicated in the process of exclusion and discrimination as well. As Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes, and Milburn (2009, 154) explain, “These stressors complicate immigrant origin students’ adjustment to new schools and community settings, taxing even the most robust immigrant adolescents’ coping capacities and leaving them vulnerable to academic failure.” Previous ethnographers have shown that students who feel that they must sacrifice their home culture in order to succeed in school are likely to develop oppositional attitudes towards education (Lee 2005; MacLeod 1987; Ogbu 1987; Phillips 2009; Valenzuela 1999; Willis 1977), whereas students who are able to preserve their cultural and linguistic traditions feel less like they must choose between success in school and isolation from their ethnic community and family (Gibson 1988; Sarroub 2005; Shankar 2008). As discussed above, maintaining close connections to one’s ethnic community can provide social and psychological benefits for immigrant and refugee youth (Louie 2004; Suárez-Orozco 1987). Zhou and Bankston (1998), for example, found that Vietnamese youth who were more closely connected to their ethnic communities had more academic success than those who were identified more with American youth culture.

Schools are also implicated in the threat of dissonant acculturation outlined by Portes and Zhou (1993). Because newcomer youth often learn English more quickly than their parents, they must often take over many domestic responsibilities and can thereby upset family structure (Ong
2003; Orellana 2009). As Gibson writes, “Assimilation pressures … can have unintended and extremely negative consequences; children may feel forced to choose between their parents’ culture, the culture of the white mainstream majority, and their own need to express their evolving identities” (2002, 245). Outside of their homes, many of these students may find themselves stuck between the expectations of schools and their native cultures (Sarroub 2005), and when entering the job market immigrants and refugees must work to “fit the expectations of employers and their own economic needs, and … acquire communicative skills in another language and culture, without depriving themselves from their quintessential selves and security of the home culture” (Trueba and Zou 2002, 5). This assertion is evidenced by applied educational research which has shown that pedagogies that view students’ native culture and language as a resource, not an obstacle to overcome, can empower immigrant and refugee students (Bartlett and García 2008; González, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Moll and Diaz 1987; Nieto 2010; Sarroub 2005; Suoto-Manning 2010;).

Lastly, because many immigrant and refugee students view education as a crucial lever for social mobility, schools remain one of the most important sites for the reproduction of class and culture (Alba and Lee 2013). Those best equipped to succeed in school, therefore, have a higher potential for social mobility and are less likely to experience downward assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993).

**Class, Race, and Assimilation at Parkside High**

Participants of this study had varying perspectives on assimilation, cultural identity, and race. Many of the youth I spoke with seemed to feel unthreatened by assimilation pressures and confidently asserted that they would have no trouble practicing their own cultures in the United
States. Some of these students felt that the U.S. Constitution protected their freedom to practice their own cultures, and that they would have no trouble adapting to the “American way of life” after some time. Yet, others described their struggles to fit in to a new culture and articulated feelings of exclusion and isolation. Many Muslim students, though largely from middle-class backgrounds, expressed concerns that their religious obligations prevented them from fully integrating into American society and worried that their younger siblings might abandon their cultures and fully “Americanize”. Such contradictory feelings shed light on the ways in which racialization is closely linked with class mobility (Dhingra 2003).

Ethnic communities played a significant role in these students’ conceptions of cultural assimilation (Haller, Portes and Lynch 2011). While some students were relieved to find a community to practice their native cultures and speak their first languages, others feared that maintaining strong ties to these communities would inhibit their ability to integrate and stymie their potential for social mobility. Teachers, too, expressed concerns about assimilating English Language Learners and suggested that segregating students in ENL classes in which they had little contact with native-born students could slow the acquisition of English and overall integration into U.S. society. Anxieties over the need to learn English quickly in order to both “fit in” with mainstream Americans and acquire class mobility demonstrate the intersections between language, class, and Whiteness (Urciuoli 1996).

Generational differences were a significant background to questions of assimilation (Rumbaut 2004). Although some participants feared their younger siblings would become “too American,” others lamented that their own age upon arrival prevented them from full integration. Class divisions among parents surfaced as an important part of assimilation; children whose parents were from middle-class backgrounds and spoke English proficiently were often more
capable of acquiring well-paid, secure work. These participants worried little about their parents’ integration into the U.S., while students of working-class and poor families seemed more concerned about their parents ability to “fit into” American society. Dissonant acculturation, in Portes and Zhou’s (1993) terms, was often experienced in classed ways.

Race also surfaced as an important topic as several participants, mainly Muslim students, reported experiences of racism. Other students articulated nascent racism towards African Americans with whom they often occupied the same urban space. Class divisions intersected with race, however, as participants often associated racialization with poverty and segregation and something that class mobility could potentially alleviate. Furthermore, the fieldwork conducted for this paper coincided with the nomination and subsequent election of Republican candidate Donald Trump whose campaign platform included consistent anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy initiatives which included the promise to build a wall along the US-Mexico border as well as a ban on immigrants and refugees from seven Muslim-majority countries (many of which were the homelands of students participating in this project). The anxiety and frustration expressed by students and teachers over Trump’s controversial ascent to political power served as a significant backdrop to this study and often framed discussions about discrimination, xenophobia and assimilation.

“I’m like a lizard – I can go anywhere”: Adaptation and Accommodation at Parkside High

Despite coping with an entirely new language and culture, many participants in this study described the ease with which they adapted to the United States. Significantly, many of these students came from middle-class families and had a moderate level of English proficiency upon arriving to the U.S., both of which eased their integration into the white, middle-class
mainstream. Though many of these students commented on the early challenges of adaptation, they seemed to have few struggles balancing their native cultures with the expectations of assimilation in the United States.

Mo’s perspectives on culture and assimilation in the United States best exemplified the selective assimilation found by previous researchers (Gibson 1988; Lacy 2007; Portes and Zhou 1993) whereby immigrants take on culture features of their new country while still maintaining aspects of their native culture. As described in the previous chapter, Mo came to class often wearing a Yankees baseball cap and other clothes from American sports teams. Though his full name was Mohammed, he preferred the shortened, more-Americanized version of his name: Mo. When asked whether it was a challenge to “fit in” in the United States, Mo felt that the laws protecting freedom of speech and religion made it easier for immigrants. “I don’t think it’s that hard to fit in. Because in the United States they have the freedom of speech… you have the right to say anything as long as you aren’t hurting anyone.” For Mo, the multiculturalism of the U.S. allowed him to take part in society without sacrificing his own culture. Furthermore, he felt that learning from other cultures was a valuable part of being American. Spending time in a diverse neighborhood and in the Muslim community of Parkside opened up new ways of thinking and living:

That’s the thing I really love about it – you learn about other cultures. And I have the countries around… my neighbors are, the countries around my country I really have no idea about them even though they speak my language and they’re a Muslim country, but that was it. But when I came here I started to gain more knowledge, I started to hear a lot of different people, why they’re coming here, the people that they’re coming from because they have war in their country. Many things, but I really love it that you really communicate with people. You have a lot of different knowledge from different countries, and you just think, “Oh my country, wow you have that but we don’t have that in my country.”
Mo was the only student interviewed who said that he did “feel like an American” and that he “pretty much did live like them.” While he clearly yearned to adopt American customs, Mo felt little pressure to change his identity as an Arabic-speaking Muslim. Indeed these differences only contributed to the conception of a multicultural society which Mo imagined the U.S. to be. For example, Mo expressed no concern about whether his sister, age three, would follow the traditions of his family, learn Arabic, and become a Muslim woman. “Of course, she can,” he told me with a smile.

Other students such as Ali, a West African immigrant who arrived a month after I began my fieldwork, found the U.S. to be a more tolerant society than he had expected. “I’m Muslim and before I came here, people used to say to me always, ‘In the United States, people don’t like Muslims. And when you’re there you have to pray, but you have to catch yourself, so that people do not see you if you’re praying. Even if you’re at your home, you have to make it secret,’” he explained to me. “But when I came here, we have a mosque near our home in North Avenue… there’s like American Muslims and immigrant Muslims – and everyone is going on their way, and doing what they want to do.”

Ibrahim expressed a similar confidence in his family’s ability to integrate into American society without sacrificing aspects of their own culture. “It will be no problem,” he told me. “We actually do our culture here, we do Sudanese culture… but we can do American culture too.”

“What about fitting in here with Americans, is it hard?” I asked Ibrahim. “I think I fit in well here. I listen to American music all the time! I mean, it’s not really a big separation – they don’t really separate you because America is built of immigrants,” he replied. When I asked about the experiences of his little sister, age five, he explained that she would have no trouble being both Sudanese and American, but then went on to discuss his cousin who was born in the United
“He doesn’t speak Arabic, only English. He wants to learn the language… but he can’t. There’s no one encouraging him a lot,” he said.

**Ethnic Communities in Parkside High**

Ethnic communities were described by students both as a way in which they could maintain ties to their native identities and which, at times, had the potential to stymie their integration into American society. Several students were pleasantly surprised by the presence of other immigrants and refugees in their neighborhoods with whom they could speak their mother languages. Sadiq told me that he was anxious about his first day at Parkside High before he met with some fellow Iraqis:

I felt like I’m going to go to school with no English and no one is going to help me… we had the idea that before we come, that when we go to America, there’s no one from our community here – no one speaks Arabic here. And we’re just going to be lost here. My first day, I walked into the class – I didn’t know anybody – so I sat on a table and I see three guys walking up to me and say “Hey are you from Iraq?” They spoke Arabic, and they helped me… and it was like “Ah!” It was a big relief. I liked it, and I thought it might be easy for me here.

Karim and Aziz also described the surprise they felt when they encountered other Arabic-speakers in Parkside. “I didn’t think I was going to find so many refugees and so many Arabic people. I thought I would be isolated with American, White people. But it turns out there is a small community here that you can feel that you’re at home,” Karim said. However, according to Karim, it was a feeling of exclusion in the first place which drove the creation of the community to begin with: “It’s because immigrants get along easily with other immigrants even if they’re not from the same country. But it’s because they feel like, you know, that’s not their place [here]. So they just get along easily.” Aziz, who was listening to Karim’s comments nodded his head and said, “Yeah, I would be more American if I was in another state where there weren’t Arabic
people.” He added, “It’s kind of good and bad being in the Arabic community and the American community at the same time. The bad part is that you’re going to… you’re not going to learn English that quickly.” Karim agreed, “Yeah, you will just stick with them because it’s the easier way. You won’t take the hard path to learn English and be part of the community.” They both went on to criticize those they knew who had come to the United States and, in their opinion, done little to integrate into the mainstream. “There are some Arabic students that have been here for four or five years, and they don’t speak English! That’s the sad part because they don’t communicate with American people or other students,” Aziz explained. Notably, both students framed the need to integrate in linguistic terms – learning English – thereby underscoring the belief that one must be English-speaking in order to move up in the class hierarchy and fully participate in American society and (Urciuoli 1996).

Later in an interview, Aziz told me that he felt comfortable in the U.S. balancing his identity as an Iraqi refugee and an American. This ability, he felt, separated him from others who lacked such the capacity for such integration:

Aziz: Yeah I fit in here. You can do whatever you want in America. My family is always saying that I’m like a lizard, I can go anywhere.
Aaron: What’s the secret to that? How do you do that so well?
Aziz: I just communicate with people. I just got one class or two classes with American students – I have US History and Gym. And the rest of my classes are just with students like me – they’re refugees. They’re all quiet. I’m the black sheep to be honest because I feel bored. Yeah, I’m not like them – I mean I’m good with everyone.

Aziz clearly demonstrated evidence of integration in American society. He was one of the few students I saw chatting with native-born students and seemed to have friends across ethnoracial boundaries. He often came to class wearing stylish clothes such as knit sweaters and baggy jeans (though he did not wear them low on his hips like many African American men at the school).
He also bragged about taking trips out of Parkside and buying consumer product such as new phones and accessories for his car. Indeed consumptive practices and the class resources required to access consumer goods is a powerful marker of one’s assimilation to the middle-class (Shankar 2008). Such goods communicate messages about class status and belonging for those who acquire them (Heiman 2015). Although Aziz was critical of other English Learners’ complacency to remain in their ethnic enclaves, it was notable that he painted himself as the “black sheep” – an outlier who was able to cross boundaries in the way that most immigrants and refugees were not.

Sharif and Mahmoud expressed a similar sentiment regarding the benefits and drawbacks of ethnic communities in the United States. Both Mahmoud and Sharif were proud of their identities as young Muslim men and enjoyed telling me about their plans for Ramadan. Both brothers also participated in mainstream American activities which they felt did not conflict with their identities as Muslims. Sharif, participated in the ROTC program at the high school and came to school once a month dressed in full military garb, while his brother Mahmoud told me about how hard he was practicing for the citizenship exam online. When I asked him if he had Thanksgiving plans, he said “No, but I am going to the mall for Black Friday!” Knowing that I was from New Jersey, the brothers approached me one day in school and told me about their trip to Paterson, a city with a strong Arabic-speaking community. “It was interesting,” Sharif said, “Even if you looked at the signs, the names of the restaurants and stores were all in Arabic!” Mahmoud quickly added, “Yes but if you live there you can’t learn English. Everyone just speaks Arabic.”

Jean, a Haitian immigrant who had lived in Brooklyn before coming to Parkside in 2015, suggested that Haitian community in his former neighborhood had held him back from learning
English. “That’s the part where I let myself down,” he explained, “because one of the schools that I used to go to… I made friends who spoke my native language so instead of speaking English every day, I ended up speaking my language. It made it hard for me to understand things later on in life, so I had to look back on these days that I didn’t take advantage of.” I asked him if there he found speakers of his language in Parkside, and he quickly replied, “No, and I’m happy for that because I get a lot of practice [in English] every day.” Like Karim, Sharif and Jean understand English as a fundamental requirement for class mobility and full integration into American society. The use of a foreign language or accented English serves as a powerful marker of “foreignness” and is viewed by these youth as an impediment to social mobility (Kibria 2000).

In contrast, other students expressed the desire for an ethnic community in which they could practice their cultures. For example, when I asked Daniel, an 18-year-old Filipino student who arrived in the U.S. in 2012, whether he “felt comfortable being Filipino” in Parkside, he told me that he felt the need “to be more American.” In describing “Americanness” as a discrete quality of which one could possess more or less, Daniel added, “I need to sometimes act like them too. I don’t act Filipino here [at school], but I act Filipino in my home.” Yet Daniel excitedly brought up several times a traveling basketball team that he was part of which was composed of Filipino boys. One Monday morning, I asked Daniel how his day had been. He told me his team had traveled to New Jersey to compete with another Filipino team. “We lost,” he said brightening up, “but it was really awesome.” Daniel also maintained transnational ties to the Philippines by taking annual trips to visit his father who still lived there and worked for the government. Mariel, also from the Philippines, described a trip she had taken to Los Angeles with her family. “It was like the Philippines there… the people, the weather. I wish it was like
that here.” Although her mother worked with several Filipina women at Parkside Medical Center, none of them had daughters Mariel’s age. “I wish there were a lot of Filipinos here,” she said.

A few students did not simply join ethnic communities but took an active role in maintaining them. Marie reflected on the cultural discrimination she had faced after her family fled the Congo and lived in a camp in Rwanda. It moved her to start a program in which young women teach each other traditional dances from their countries of origin. The group performed at several cultural events and church-sponsored activities. Soe Rah was also active in the local Karen church. He told me how he strove to make sure his young nephew learned to speak Karen and appreciate his culture. “That’s why we do the Karen New Year… the last one was held at Adams Middle School, and we encourage every Karen family to come. And usually every family does come unless they have work. But yeah, we have children and little kids there. And we try, in church they teach the Karen alphabet to children.” Soe Rah believed that the church was in making sure the younger generations “grew up Karen.” He said, “the pastors – they do play a huge role in influencing their people what to do. We see them as a leader.”

For many of these students, the church and mosque played a role not only in helping to reproduce immigrant and refugee culture, but was also an important node in the networks that many newcomers relied on for the knowledge needed to make it in the U.S. Marie told me, for example, that the minister at her church helped her find her first accounting job. For many new Karen families, the social capital localized in churches was crucial in helping secure basic material goods such as housing, welfare entitlements, jobs, and warm winter clothes. Shi Reh explained how much she relied on other Karen who had arrived before her and could help with transportation and navigating government social services. “It’s good because if Karen people are
there they will help you if you need it,” she said. Both she and her sister told me that they helped other Karen families learn about the school system and accompanied them on trips to the Department of Social Services. In fact, as I learned from a volunteer from the resettlement agency, many Karen families helped each other get jobs at the Parkside Medical Center and the recycling plant. Kuu Reh smiled as she told me that her employers at Parkside Med gave her an award for never missing work. “And now they say she can have a job there, too,” she smiled, pointing to her sister.

Some students did not draw on their ethnic communities for support, but were able to gain knowledge and resources by pioneering friends and relatives who had carved out lives for themselves in the U.S. and were able to help newcomers adapt. Carlos, for example, told me that having American friends was one of the keys to learning English and “fitting in” at Parkside High. When I asked him if it was hard to get along with Americans, he said “No, I am fine with it because my cousins, they were born here, and their parents came a long time ago. So they were basically born here. Thanks to them, they have like American friends, so I became friends with them. I am friends with a bunch of American people. I’m good with them.” The families of some students who had migrated before them provided an example of integration which saw as a frame of reference for their own pathway into American society. Ibrahim, whose father had migrated to the U.S. over twenty-five years ago, told me that it was easy to live here since a lot his family came to the U.S “a long time ago” and “most of them mix with Americans.” Mariel’s mother also had migrated over ten years before Mariel arrived in the United States and was able to provide her with advice on how to cope with living in the U.S. “My mom told me about Parkside,” she explained. “She told me that there’s not a lot of Filipinos here and we’re going to
be independent here. In Philippines, my grandmother always cooked for us… but here we have to work for ourselves.”

As evidenced by the data above, many students at Parkside High were optimistic about their ability to maintain their native language and identity. Some, like Mo, Aziz, Ibrahim, and Daniel suggested that they could balance their identities as immigrants and Americans and that these identities did not conflict with one another (Sirin and Fine 2008). Many students also exhibited a contradictory relationship with their ethnic communities. On one hand, these youth expressed a deep sense of commitment and belonging to these communities which served as spaces to preserve and practice their cultural identities. However, students also expressed concern over the potential for their communities to block entry into the mainstream U.S., with some going so far as to criticize those who they felt did not work hard enough to integrate into the U.S. and acquire English proficiency. Class divisions were also evident here as those from working-class and agrarian backgrounds did not view their communities as simply places to practice their cultures, but as invaluable sources of social capital which they relied on for economic survival (Portes and Zhou 1993; Stanton-Salazaar 2004). Thus for many of these students, strong maintaining ties to their communities and extended families was not only a cultural, but an economic, imperative to ensure that their families avoided poverty (Newman 1999). The utility of ethnic communities in providing a counterweight to the process of Social Reproduction as even those from working- and lower-class backgrounds may enjoy class mobility as a result of the “ethnic capital” available to them through community-based resources such as knowledge of school systems, tutoring services, and job placement networks (Hsin and Xie 2013; Louie 2004; Stanton-Salazaar 2004). Yet as demonstrated below, pressures to
“Americanize” can distance immigrants from their ethnic community and thereby obstruct the opportunity to reap the social capital available to them through ethnic networks.

While many of these students desired integration, most students exhibited “selective” forms of assimilation in which they consciously adopted aspects of American culture while striving to retain elements of their native identities (Gibson 1988; Lacy 2003; Portes and Zhou 1993). Even more “Americanized” newcomers such as Aziz and Mo had no intention of abandoning their identities as Muslim men. Both practiced Islam, attended the mosque, and fasted for Ramadan. Yet, as the next section shows, not all students dealt with assimilation pressures well. Some felt incapable of balancing their “multiple selves” (Sirin and Fine 2008), and others feared that they or their siblings would become completely “Americanized.” Lastly, as scholars have shown, racial dynamics play a significant role in the process of assimilation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993; Waters et al. 2010). For the youth in this study, assimilation – specifically into the middle-class – was framed as a way to mitigate experiences racial stigma though not entirely shielding them from its effects (Lacy 2007; Lareau 2003). Language played a significant role in this process as students felt that learning English was a prerequisite for entry into the American middle-class which they conceived of as White (Urciuoli 1996).

Americanization, Assimilation, and Racialization

For many of the immigrants and refugees I spoke with, integration was both desired and anxiety-provoking. In contrast with the comments made by students above, many students expressed concern over the effects of “Americanization.” While some students worried that their separation
from native speakers in sheltered classes hindered their ability to learn English, others stayed clear of American students after they experienced maltreatment.

The ambivalence towards integration was demonstrated one day in class as an ENL student passed out a survey to his classmates that was part of an assignment for another class. One question asked what the biggest challenge for ENL students was. Mo raised his hand and answered: “Being isolated is the hardest thing. Being around more American kids – that would help.” A Dominican student from the back chimed in, “But they may teach you bad things.” Several former students confirmed these fears as they discussed the challenges they experienced in mainstream courses with American students. These students suffered in silence as they faced a curriculum delivered at the language level of a native speaker while also struggling with the fear and trepidation of asking teachers for help in front of their American classmates. Marie confessed, “If I’m the only immigrant in that class, I’m not going to feel comfortable to raise my hand because I’m afraid that they’re going to laugh at my accent or my broken English. But if they’re [ENL students] a majority, they’ll feel more comfortable because they’ll know that most of them don’t speak English and no one is going to laugh at each other.” Nuu, Shi Reh’s younger sister, told me she barely opened her mouth in the class she had with Americans. “We were afraid to speak. I like the ESL class more,” she said. Her sister told me that many of her friends would skip classes and that the ENL class – with all immigrants and refugees – was the only one they would all attend.

Other students complained that the sheltered classes would prevent them learn English. Like a microcosm of their sentiments towards their ethnic communities, these students felt like they needed to be with American students in order to integrate. Carlos and Leila, for example,
both told me that being in classes with American students had helped them learn English. Leila explained:

If you’re always in the classroom with people who speak different languages and people who speak your language, you’re going to speak your language to them all the time. And you’re going to hear other people speaking languages… it doesn’t help teach you English. But when you’re with people who speak English and you hear them speak English. You’re like “I want to learn English so I want to hear what they’re saying and so I can speak with them.”

The tension between integration and assimilation was also evident in conversations with teachers and administrators about the offerings of sheltered versions of content area classes with only ENL classes versus the mainstream versions of these courses with both ENL and non-ENL students. Such comments reflect previous research which has demonstrated the ways in which teachers’ sentiments towards ELLs often rest on conceptualizations of equality: either ELLs should be treated the same as other students to avoid singling them out, or they required special treatment to help them cope with the unique challenges they faced as students in an entirely new school system and culture (Harklau 2000; Reeves 2004).

Mr. Anderson, for example, described the benefits and drawbacks of mainstream classes where ELLs were grouped together with their English-proficient peers: “Students either rose to the occasion and they were better off for it, or they just crumbled and learned nothing and dropped out.” On the other hand, he explained, when “you kind of segregate them, they’re not around, they’re not learning the culture and customs. They’re not making friends outside of their group. It’s good and it’s bad.” Mrs. O’Leary also commented on this conflict but ultimately concluded that sheltered classes helped students “feel like part of that [immigrant and refugee] community more quickly. I think they don’t feel as rushed, or have an urgent need, to assimilate into the American population.” On the other hand, teachers also expressed concern over the
“Americanization” of their students. Mrs. Kirkpatrick, a new ENL teacher at Parkside, lamented that some of her “more assimilated students” skip classes and go to Dunkin’ Donuts. “I’m a hollow voice when they see other kids going and doing it. [They say,] ‘American kids go and do it!’ and I’m like, ‘Don’t look at them, don’t watch the bad examples.’” Mrs. O’Leary told me that some of her male Muslim students struggle with having “too much freedom” at Parkside High School. They see [American] kids slacking off in the hallways… they do sometimes develop some of the things habits that we don’t want them to.”

These conversations also coincided with the Parkside School District’s plans to open a Newcomer Academy in 2018 specifically designed to prepare recently arrived immigrants and refugees. While several teachers expressed excitement and support for the program, others worried over “sheltering students too much” and “segregation.” Recent scholarship on such schools has shown, however, that these institutions respond to the needs of newcomers with culturally-responsive pedagogies, college preparation, and job training programs for aging youth (Bartlett and García 2012; Fine et al. 2007; Jaffe-Walter and Lee 2011).

Some students felt they did not need to assimilate to American culture in order to be a member of American society. Khadijah, for example, suggested that her family had no trouble maintaining their culture and felt little impetus to assimilate. “Like at home we definitely do maintain our culture, there’s nothing American about it,” she said. Although she said her family did not have a hard time adjusting to America, some significant differences remained. “Well, we don’t date, we get married. So that’s one difference…And even though a lot of people think that if you’re older, you shouldn’t be living at your parents’ house. If that’s American culture, I don’t need to assimilate to that. I don’t need to follow that tradition.” Kyaw Reh, too, was adamant about maintaining his Burmese identity and this belief was reinforced by his expectation to
return there after completing college. Contrasting sharply with Aziz’s comments about “being a lizard,” Kyaw Reh’s position instead supports Portes and Rumbaut’s (2001) claim that refugees and displaced people may feel less of an urge to “Americanize” if they view their life in the U.S. as a temporary situation:

Oh, I never think that I’m going to become American because I’m not that kind of person. For me, I just take care of my culture and where I’m from, and I learn from that. So I remember, and I think whatever is new is good, but I never forgot the history or the past – why we’re here. We have a point, we have a goal. For me, my goal is like to be here to study, finish school, and learn things I didn’t know before and then go back to Burma and help people.

Many students articulated their concern over assimilation by speaking disparagingly about other immigrants and refugees who abandoned their native identities to become “Americanized.” Karim, who had expressed concern over the assimilation of his younger brother said critically, “I’ve seen a lot of people who give up everything and they just become American and they forget about everything – their religion, their life, how they used to deal with things.” Sadiq believed that the family was ultimately responsible for maintaining one’s culture when moving to a new country:

It goes back to the family. The family strongly that holds onto the culture…then I believe the children will become American but not totally American. Unfortunately we have young guys from Iraq, they totally lost their culture. They just don’t care about it anymore. It’s not alright. It’s not, because you come here and you become a citizen, but you can’t forget about your culture.

As the acculturation literature suggests, children and parents can assimilate at different rates which may cause family conflicts (Portes and Zhou 1993; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez Orozco, and Todorova 2008; Waters and Jiménez 2005). For many students, maintaining one’s native culture and language was not only a matter of identity, but was necessary to maintain ties with their parents who were assimilating more slowly. Age upon arrival played a significant role in whether one could successfully integrate into American society without losing their cultural
identities. In contrast to the accounts discussed above, several respondents doubted whether their young siblings would be able to maintain their cultures, while others felt that members of older generations would never be able to fully adapt into the U.S.

Although Mahmoud was confident that his baby brother would be raised to learn Iraqi culture and speak Arabic, his brother Sharif was doubtful. He said, “We will try to teach my brother the culture, but I don’t think it will work.” He continued, “We speak English so he can learn it, but he should speak Arabic because he’s a Muslim. And to talk to my father and mother… it’s too hard for them to learn English.” Sharif suggested that he, too, would eventually become American over time. “If I still live in America for ten years, then of course, I will change my tradition to American. We have a saying in our country that is like, ‘He who lives with other people for forty days will be like them.’” Even Aziz, who had proudly asserted his ability to fit in anywhere, told me that he wished he had come to the U.S. at a younger age. “There are people – like my brother – he’s really lucky,” he said. “I wish I was him right now. He’s in middle school. He will talk way better English than me.” Sharif, who had been listening to Aziz talk, quickly added, “Yeah, but if I came younger, I would be a different person right now. I’m actually worried that my brother would forget our culture and religious values… like he will be a stupid American,” he added laughing. Aziz nodded and then said, “Yeah like my brother doesn’t know how to read Arabic, so that’s really bad.” Sadiq, on the other hand, told me that “it was super easy” for his younger brother to adapt to living here. “He got into this culture,” he said, “but he still held onto his culture from Iraq. He can balance, and it’s much easier for him than for me to get into this culture so easily.”

Many students also reflected on the challenges faced by older siblings and parents. Soe Rah compared the experiences of his younger and older siblings: “My older brother, he dropped
out of high school and I guess, it was because he was two years older than me… he had a harder
time adjusting than I did. But I can see that my younger siblings – they’re great with adjusting
because they’ve been here longer, they know how to get around. It’s easier for them, but it’s
harder for the older generations.” Miriam told me that her aunt and uncle came to the United
States at the same time as her family, but have had a hard time adjusting to life in the United
States. She explained, “They like America, but when you talk to them – they’ll tell you that they
want to go back.” Marie explained how conflicts can emerge across generations as assimilation
takes its toll:

Some [parents] are very concerned because they think that when they grow up in the
future and have their own kids, it’s just going to be American culture. They’re not going
to have that Indian or African or Asian culture in them. Some of them are really
concerned, and they really try to force their kids to identify with their culture – like
speaking their languages. Some of them have traditional clothes, but some of the kids
don’t want to wear it. They don’t want to be distinguished from Americans, so they say
“Oh I’m not wearing this because I don’t want to be picked on.”

Carlos, for instance, told me that her mother had an especially difficult time after arriving in the
United States. “She was always like crying and all this stuff because she didn’t really like this
country. It was very different for her and me. It wasn’t easy for her, but now she’s getting used to
it.” He continued, “When we used to live in Ecuador, we had her family – we used to live with
them. So when we came to the U.S. it’s mostly my dad’s side. My mom doesn’t really have her
side… they don’t live here in Parkside, they live in Queens. We go there once a week or twice a
week depending on if they’re not busy. We go there and we visit them, so she doesn’t feel
lonely.” Much like the Nuyorican respondents of Urciuoli’s (1996) study, these parents were
highly self-conscious regarding their English ability and experienced feelings of exclusion. As
the usage of Standard English remains linked with the White, middle-class, learning this code
was crucial for avoiding the twin threats of class stagnation and racialization.
Mehdi’s family had also struggled with the effects of assimilation. He told me, for example, that his older brother had suddenly moved out west just leaving a note behind. Meanwhile, his teenaged brother, whom I remembered as a shy, polite young man, began to skip classes with his friends which prompted his father to abruptly move them out of the school district. His youngest brother, age nine and member of what Rumbaut (2004) might call the 1.75 generation, was showing signs of Americanization. “He speaks English all the time,” Mehdi explained. “He speaks English with his cousin so that my parents can’t understand. And his Farsi is bad. He just makes simple sentences. He doesn’t know a lot of words.” In this sense, learning English was viewed as an avenue to class mobility and integration into U.S. society, but also presented the risk of losing one’s ethno-national identity. These youth therefore reckoned their own assimilation into the U.S. along both class and linguistic terms viewing English as a fundamental component to their entry into the middle-class, yet also one which could jeopardize their native identities and thus their connections to older generations and their ethnic community.

In contrast to the accounts above, several parents seemed to have an easier time adjusting to the U.S. and relied on class-based resources as well as their English-language abilities to gain entrance into the middle class. Many of these parents were able to obtain jobs in their former fields such as Miriam’s father who had been an engineer in Iraq before coming to the U.S. and found work at the a University near Parkside. Noora’s father who had been a biologist was also able to find work at the laboratory for Parkside Medical. This stood in stark contrast to the many other parents who worked at Parkside Medical Center but were changing sheets and cleaning bathrooms. Ana said that her mother was able to adjust to living here mostly because “she knew English already” and so it was “easy for her to understand people.” Sadiq said that his parents had a difficult time at first, but after learning some English they were able to adjust to living in
the U.S. more easily. “They communicate well,” he said, “but I believe it’s hard for them to make friends here.” Akash said that his father and uncle both had an easier time adapting to the U.S. than their wives because their previous jobs had taken him to different countries. His mom, however, “still has a language barrier… We tell her to practice, but she thinks to herself, ‘If I say it, it’s going to be wrong’ so she just doesn’t say anything. My aunt had the same problem, but my uncle was fine though as he had postings in different places.” With their parents earning middle-class wages, most of these students did not feel the need to get a job and could thus focus on their studies.

Unlike the respondents discussed at the beginning of the chapter, many students at Parkside High had ambivalent feelings towards assimilation. Several ardently resisted “Americanization” and felt that they did not need or want to assimilate. Despite the evidence showing the continuing assimilation of new immigrant generations (Holdaway and Alba 2010, Waters et al. 2016), many participants in this study feared that they were assimilating too slowly, in part, because of their separation from American students. These youths felt that their separation in sheltered classes could limit the English proficiency they felt would be necessary for full participation in American society. However, interactions with Americans, as both teachers and former students were quick to point out, also produced interracial conflicts and had the potential to negatively influence the behavior of newcomers (Lee 2005).

Fears of assimilation also surfaced in the family dynamics of immigrant and refugee families (Ong 2003). As Portes and Rumbaut (1993) originally suggested, conflicts can arise as parents and children acculturate at different rates. Although Waters et al. (2011) argued that dissonant acculturation was an “exception, not the norm,” many families in this study faced significant challenges as children assimilated more quickly than their parents. In addition, their
quicker acquisition of English led many students to take on more familial responsibilities (Orellana 2009). Yet, the experience of dissonant acculturation also was refracted through a class lens. Upwardly-mobile, English proficient parents quickly assimilated into the middle-class and had less potential for generational conflicts. Additionally, as the following section argues, entry into the middle-class provides a mitigating effect on the racialization experienced by immigrant groups, though not entirely shielding them from it.

**Multiculturalism and Americanization at Parkside High**

While assimilation is typically involves the pressure to abandon one’s distinctive cultural identity, multiculturalism, as a philosophy, claims that immigrants can maintain aspects of their native culture and still participate actively in their new countries of residence (Iceland 2017; Kao, Vaquera, and Goyette 2013; Taylor 1994). Despite the history of forced assimilation in the U.S., the notion of the “melting pot” in which all cultures and languages mix together still holds true for many Americans and in the popular discourse. Though popular, the “success” of multiculturalism as a political philosophy is unclear and the rise of ethno-nationalist movements across the world suggests a backlash to multicultural ideology. These rightwing critics of multiculturalism argue that immigrants will never integrate into new societies if they maintain their distinctive cultural identities (Huntington 1996), while others have suggested the multiculturalism creates a self-other dichotomy where Whiteness is rendered invisible and cultureless (Perry 2002; Shankar 2008).

Symbols of multiculturalism at Parkside High School were numerous but typically restricted to the ENL classrooms. Signs in Arabic, Karen, Nepali, Spanish and other languages were hung throughout the ENL wing alongside flags of different countries. Other markers
supporting multiculturalism and inclusion dotted the school’s environment. Stickers which, in several languages including Arabic, proclaimed “Hate has no home here” were stuck across many classroom doors, while inside of ESL classrooms (less so in mainstream rooms) proudly displayed flags, photographs, and writings from different countries. As prom rolled around, I noticed a sign put up in the hallway in favor of a Vietnamese girl for Prom Queen. It read: “Don’t be boring – vote for a foreign!” Every two weeks, students met for “International Club” where one student was selected to make a presentation about his or her country and bring in items from home such as food and clothes. Students would gather during these meetings to make informal presentations and pass out food they cooked from home. Every year, the ENL Department organized a potluck where students and their families gathered in the cafeteria bringing along traditional dishes and wearing clothes from their home countries. The following is field notes written during the first of two potlucks I was able to attend:

The dinner is loud with Arab and Afghani music blasting and different dishes of food laid out across a long table. There are some Yemeni kids who are taking control of the music and have a microphone which they periodically shout out things. The dancing goes back and forth between Yemeni and Iraqi boys and Afghani boys. Mrs. Hernandez takes over and demands that different groups of students come and play some of their music. Nepali kids come and put on some of their songs. Some Karen kids join them. At some point a group of Dominican boys take over and start playing different music. Groups of girls and boys dance Bachata. Interestingly, the Nepali boys and girls and the Karen stay and do their own dances to the Latin-Caribbean rhythms. They have no trouble taking on these different cultures, filling their plates with foreign foods and dancing to music they are unfamiliar with. At some point even some popular American songs come on and brings many different students to the dance floor. Everyone seems to be moving in their own way but no one is standing still.

The description of the potluck dinner above depicts a lively demonstration of multiculturalism where students from diverse backgrounds freely share their culture with others. As Shankar (2008) notes, multicultural events offer opportunities for empowerment insofar as students can craft representations of their own cultures. In Parkside High, the ENL Dinner served as a
transcultural event where students and their families could dress in clothes from their home country, bring traditional food dishes, and dance to music from throughout the world. The willingness to engage with other cultures was evident among the ELL population of Parkside High as the turnout for the dinners was always quite high with parents and siblings crowding the cafeteria each year. Such events fostered a sense of community among the various immigrant and refugee groups at Parkside High by allowing them to sample features of other cultures while presenting aspects of their own.

However, as critics point out, multicultural celebrations such as the dinner described above can inadvertently mark the boundaries where “Other” cultures can be displayed and appreciated as a departure from the dominant forms of culture which do not need to be named or recognized (Perry 2002; Rosaldo 1989). Indeed few teachers or students from outside the ENL Department attended either of the dinners I attended at Parkside. For example, when I asked Mehdi if he liked the potlucks he commented, “Yeah, they’re fun. They used to be bigger though. Now it’s just immigrant people and ENL teachers.” Nonetheless, ENL Dinners provided ENL students and families with a wonderful opportunity to maintain their cultural traditions and share them with each other. By providing a public space for families to display cultural features, the ENL Dinner ascribed positive value to these families’ way of life and served as an important counterweight to the everyday pressures to assimilate. Teachers, too, were also grateful for the ability to connect with parents in a comfortable and welcoming context that differed from the usual stress of academic discussions.

Other students and teachers commented positively on the multicultural climate at Parkside High, implying that it was easier to maintain their cultural identity in a diverse environment. Ana said, “[At Parkside High] there was a lot of culture mixing, and maybe the
American people – white and black – they used to learn from us and other cultures. So I feel like it wasn’t a problem for me and other people that I know. It wasn’t a problem. Parkside is very diverse.” ENL Teachers also praised the diversity of Parkside and claimed that it made it easier for their students to adjust to U.S. society. Mrs. O’Leary said, “I think because we have such a large international community here, they feel like part of that community more quickly, and I think they don’t feel as rushed, or urgent need, to assimilate into the American population yet.” Indeed, after Mehdi’s family had moved to Riverdale, a nearby suburb with a much more homogenous population than Parkside, he told me how hard it was to go to high school there. With an ELL population one-tenth the size of Parkside High’s, Mehdi told me, “Riverdale was crazy… nobody even would look at me there.” Despite the positive multicultural climate evident at Parkside High, as the following section demonstrates, the challenges of a diverse ethno-racial environment were also clearly manifested during my fieldwork there.

“*We’re just separate from everybody*”: Race and Racialization at Parkside High

Race and racism surfaced frequently in my fieldwork even when it was not an explicit topic of conversation. For example, when I asked a new Afghani student if he liked his new ESL teacher, a young White man, he remarked to me that he was “racist against Muslims.” Though I found no evidence to support his claim, the comment was validated by his friends who all nodded their heads as he spoke. Other Muslim youths detailed “bullying” incidents which occurred both in and out of school. Many of these events involved racialization as features of Muslim culture and identity such as food, dress, and music were highlighted by emphasizing their differences from that of native-born students. During one of my first days at the high school, for example, I waited after school in the library for a student participant. An Afghani girl on a computer accidentally
unplugged her earphones while listening to music causing the song to be played loudly throughout the library. Before she had a chance to silence the music, a booming reproach from a male African American student was heard from across the room: “Turn that Arab shit off!” Through his comment, the young man served to police certain areas of the school, demanding that public areas such as the library exclude any features of outsider culture. Additionally, by referring to the Afghani music as “Arab,” the young boy “flattened” the heterogeneity of all Muslim culture, turning it into a recognizable and essentialized Other (Omi and Winant 1994; Said 1978).

Many conversations with Muslim students about adjusting to American society inevitably turned to racism and Islamophobia. Sharif told me that it was hard it was to “fit in here”: “It’s too many troubles and stuff. And there are some people that are racist. Last time when I was walking with my friends, I saw some guy that said ‘You are from Iraq?’ and we said ‘Yes’ and he started to curse at us and stuff. He was mean… I think he was drinking because he had something in his hand.” Some students articulated feelings of exclusion from mainstream American society due to their religious obligations. Mehdi, for example, felt that he was free to practice Islam here but that it conflicted with the fundamentally secular values of the United States. “If you’re religious, you’re not going to be in American culture,” he told me bluntly. “If you’re Islamic or something religious – you’re not going to be American. Because Americans are too easy about everything and in Islam especially they have their own limits… You have to stay and follow the back-home rules and do it that way to keep being religious. If you turn to American, no you can’t.” Karim told me, “I want to do it [party] so badly so I can get along with them and be like, feel like someone American. And at the same time, I feel like that’s not who I am. I’m changing into another person and that’s not what I’ve been raised to do and what I’ve learned from my
Both students felt as if one had to choose between their identities as Muslims and their desire to “become Americans.”

While Mehdi first told me that it was not hard to be Muslim in the U.S. since “nobody cares where you’re from… all the things are the same,” he confessed that he knew “a lot of people who give up everything, and they just become American and they forget about everything. It’s wrong.” He added, “But if you have money here, it’s good. Yeah, like if you are coming here with a lot of money, then, you know, you can get everything sooner. But if you’re struggling with money and economic problems, it’s going to be really hard.” Mehdi’s comments demonstrated the role of class position and assimilation pressures. Those with higher class positions could afford to maintain their culture without fearing that they would be locked out of opportunities for social mobility. Later in the interview, Mehdi compared the US favorably to the racism and discrimination he felt as an Afghani living in Iran. This comparison created a dual-frame of reference (Ogbu 1987; Suárez-Orozco 1987) through which the racism experienced by Mehdi here in the United States seemed tolerable compared to the discrimination endured in Iran.

Many young women described the pressures they felt to limit the visibility of their religious practices such as prayer and wearing of the hijab. Miriam said, “It’s legal for you to practice your religion here, but I think that you feel like you are strange. People look at you like, ‘Why do they do that?’ It makes you want to do it alone; you don’t want anyone to see you.” When responding to the same question, Leila recounted the following story to me:

I think it’s kind of hard because people don’t know it most of the time. They start judging you about the things you do, or the things you eat, or the things you wear… so that’s kind of hard…When I wear the scarf every time people ask me, ‘Why are you wearing this? Are you bald or something?’ At first, I was like ‘No I wear this because of my religion and stuff.’ But then I started joking about it. And I told these two boys, I don’t even know them, but they were like ‘Oh you’re wearing this because you’re bald’ and stuff like that.
I was walking and I had a blank face, then I turned around I told them ‘If you really want to know the truth, I’m actually a vampire. All Muslim people are vampires. That’s why they wear this stuff.’

Khadijah felt that Muslim women had a harder time than men adjusting to life in the United States. Though Khadijah felt her family was “not very religious” – neither she nor her mother or sister covered their heads – she constantly felt uncomfortable due to the close proximity to men in school settings. She explained, “I think the females don’t like this [going to school with boys] because there’s a lot of harassment. When I was going to high school, my brother was going with me at the same time. And he was suspended so many times because every time someone tried to touch me, he would fight with them and hit them.” Miriam also suggested that her identity as not only a Muslim, but a Muslim woman, differed fundamentally from American women who valued their freedom to dress as they pleased: “I found that we are different totally than the American kids or the American people…Like even when you see people, I thought that Americans always wear shorts and they show all their body, but we can’t do that.” However, she added, not all American women behaved this way. “Mrs. O’Leary,” she continued, “told us that ‘we wear something to respect our body’ and that is so beautiful.” Such comments underscore the gendered contours of racialization and the differing experiences of young men and women as they grapple with their racial identities (Cainkar 2006).

Other students described more explicit instances of racism and expressed anxiety over their treatment during Donald Trump’s ascent to president. Indeed, during the ten days after Trump was elected, there were nine hundred reported incidents of hate crimes, and in forty percent of those cases, Trump’s name was used when victims were attacked (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017). While some students I spoke with shrugged off the Islamophobic comments made by Trump, others reported elevated levels of visibility and exclusion. In a classroom
conversation the day after Trump’s election, for example, one student said half-sarcastically that he was thinking of returning home to West Africa. Another joked, “Hurry close the door before Trump comes in!” Leila responded to the election scoffing, “White people are more scared of Trump than we are.” Despite these jokes, one teacher told me that a few students asked her why Trump hated them. “They’re afraid,” she said. As Ramadan approached, I asked Sharif’s brother, Mahmoud, if I could visit the mosque he goes to on Main Street. He said, “Sure, many people come to speak with the Imam there – news crews came one time.” I said, “Wow that is a lot of attention.” Nodding, he replied, “It’s important to teach people about Islam so that they aren’t learning about it from the wrong people… like Trump.” Khadijah spoke at length about Trump’s election and the growing feelings of Islamophobia felt by her family including an explicitly racist attack:

I feel like just in the last couple years it [racism towards Muslims] became a lot more common. For example, I know my mom’s friends who go to a church just for English classes. They told us that when this whole Donald Trump thing came and he said to ban Muslims and all that, they put our Holy Book, the Koran, and they put a jar of pee on top of it next to the door where they go to. And they were very sad to see that. And the church didn’t want to do anything, so they told the students not to say anything either. So I feel like just in the last couple of years there’s been a lot more discrimination and a lot more pointing fingers at people than now.

When I asked her if this incident made her angry, she replied, “I’m not one to complain, so I don’t really care if someone is racist against me or if they say something that’s not nice. I tend to just walk away and pretend like it never happened.”

Muslim youth, however, were not the only youth of this study to report race-based discrimination. Carmen, for example, told me that difficulty she had in finding a job. Finally, she found a salon which was willing to hire her, but then the manager “asked her for her papers.” She went on:
So she asked me like, “Do you have citizenship? Do you have a green card?” And I said, “Yes I have a green card from the Dominican Republic, I speak Spanish.” She closed the book and she said “Well we’re going to call you later.” And that was last year and they still haven’t called me. I thought that was really rude because they didn’t give me a chance to prove it to them that I can do it – even just because I’m from another country, I can do it.

Several teachers described ongoing the racial tensions at the school which occasionally surfaced in hallway “bullying” incidents, physical altercations, and online harassment. In discussing relations between African Americans and the ELL population, several teachers mentioned incidents in which African American students called Muslim students “terrorists” as well as a brawl between Karen refugees and African American youth in a South Parkside neighborhood which involved weapons and police intervention. As an administrator thoughtfully explained, “What happens with an oppressed group is, another oppressed group that’s been around longer might actually have conflict with them.” In referring to numerous negative comments about African Americans made by her students, Mr. Anderson said that some immigrants “don’t come here with a very high view of African-Americans to begin with.” Indeed several students mentioned the discomfort and fear of African Americans they experienced when they were resettled in the largely Black neighborhoods on Parkside’s North end. This view was articulated by Miriam, who described her first neighborhood in Parkside: “My home was on Main Street, and the place there is a little bit… it’s not comfortable. I heard a lot of things about Black people and what they do to immigrant people, and so it was scary for me to go there… [I heard] that they didn’t get along with immigrants. Friends told us that. They said that a bunch of people killed them, so it was scary for me.” Ana, too, compared her first neighborhood unfavorably with the rest of the city due to its racial makeup: “It’s okay. But it’s a lot of Black people so… it’s not a good example.”
Kyaw Reh commented on what he felt were the differences between African Americans and immigrants with dark complexions whom he also saw as Black (though himself not a member):

I don’t want to be mean, but in Parkside, you have a lot of two groups of Black people. The one is the biggest: basically like American Black people. And the other Black groups are from Sudan or other countries: like immigrant Black people. Immigrant Black people are really nice usually, friendly, whatever… it’s like we can speak a little bit even though we speak different language. But American Black people are just like that they don’t want to talk. So we don’t have a lot of American Black friends. But I can communicate with other Blacks from other countries, not from America.

I asked Mahmoud one day in class where he lived and he told me that he had actually just moved. When I inquired about his old neighborhood and why he moved, he told me that he used to live in a low-income neighborhood in the north of Parkside heavily populated by African Americans. “We had problems there… the blacks didn’t like us, they we’re always fighting. I didn’t like it,” he said. When asked about his new neighborhood, a more diverse working- and middle-class area in southern Parkside, he told me, “Oh my new neighborhood is better. The black people there have more money, and they get along with immigrants.” These comments were echoed by Karim who commented at length racial matters:

What I’ve learned is that there are two types of African Americans; there is the bad side, like where the black people have their own community – and then, like I don’t want to say ‘educated black people’ – but there are the ones who live with white people, or they act like white people. They are easier to get along with, when they feel like they are accepted or that they’re equal.

These comments further speak to the racial tensions described by teachers at Parkside High as well as the way in which urban space is cut along class and racial lines. Both students emphasize the distinctiveness of African Americans in their seeming unwillingness to communicate with immigrants in their neighborhoods. Salim, though he groups together Sudanese immigrants and African Americans as both phenotypically “Black,” he marks a clear boundary between the two
groups on socio-cultural grounds, thus reinforcing the intersection of culture and race (Silverstein 2005). Although my presence as a researcher and identity as a White male clearly did not dissuade these students from speaking frankly about African Americans, it is notable that Karim and Kyaw Reh demonstrate their understanding of racial politics in America by beginning their comments with what Van Dijk (1992) calls “goal-denials,” a preface to racializing discourses which seek to position speakers as not intending or responsible for any perceived racism.

As these comments make clear, the use of racializing discourses aimed at African Americans combined with strategic forms of assimilation serves as a mitigating influence on the racialization experienced by these youth. However, at times, several newcomers also re-appropriated racializing discourses as a way to express solidarity with African Americans. For example, when asked whether African Americans and immigrants get along, Muhammed, a newly-settled Iraqi refugee responded hesitantly “sometimes,” but added that the experiences African Americans are similar to immigrants because they both experienced racism at the hands of Whites. Amir, a Sudanese refugee, expressed a similar sentiment after attending an event in the library in honor of Black History Month. “It is good for them [African Americans] to have the history month,” he said. When I asked him if immigrants have similarities with African Americans he paused and then said, “I don’t know… I don’t feel like it’s my country. Maybe that is similar to what they feel.” Even Sadiq, who had criticized African Americans for their unwillingness to talk to immigrants, told me that he had tried to make more of an effort to be friendly with Blacks in his neighborhood. “Over time,” he said, “my mind has changed a little.”

Another poignant example of solidarity between Muslim youth and African Americans was displayed during a school play put on by students last fall. During the play, immigrants,
refugees, and African American youth recounted powerful narratives involving bullying, racial profiling, and discrimination. One skit entailed a Puerto Rican girl shown to be pregnant in a hospital. As nurses surround her asking questions, the girl exasperatedly tries to explain in Spanish. One nurse turns to other and scoffs, “She’s been here five years and still doesn’t know English?” Later in the play, a young Sudanese woman comes on stage speaking rhetorically to the crowd: “Mom, why did daddy shave his beard? Is it okay to be religious here? Why do they call me a terrorist?” In a final scene, an African American girl describes an incident in which her family was pulled over by Parkside police, taken out of their vehicle, and angrily told to show their hands. Her younger brother who is disabled did not want to take his deformed hand out of his pocket, and the cops become increasingly angry and point their weapons at him before he finally shows his hands. These interwoven narratives created spaces of solidarity between Muslim youth and African Americans by calling attention to the practices of exclusion and Othering to which both groups are subjected. These moments of solidarity were rare however, as immigrants and refugees hardly seemed to intermingle with African Americans in school. Indeed, throughout the span of my yearlong fieldwork study, I rarely saw African Americans and Muslim students talking with each other or with White students. As Mahmoud put it: “Black and white people stay apart mostly [in school] – and we’re just separate from everybody.”

The accounts presented above demonstrate the complex ways in which immigrant and refugee youth respond to racialization. Some, like Leila, respond to racialization aggressively, mocking antagonists and turning the racializing discourse on its head with satire. Rather than addressing the comments in terms of ethno-racial differences between herself and the normative American, Leila “interrupts” (Apple 2001) the racializing discourse, pushing the bullies’ remarks into absurdity by suggesting that Muslims are not only different culturally and/or racially, but
could, in fact, be mythical creatures. Yet others, such as Miriam and her family, are coached into silent acceptance of racist attacks on Islam and Muslim culture. Like Sharif, Khadijah, portrays racism as an inevitable aspect of American society – one which they detest but choose to try and ignore or, in Mahmoud’s case, try and explain to outsiders what Islam is “really about”. In many cases, religio-cultural features are emphasized by as a visible marker of difference and Otherness. As Silverstein argues, the racialization centers around social processes which portray cultural differences as “essentialized, naturalized, and/or biologized” (Silverstein 2005, 364). For young Muslim women in particular, head coverings can be an especially visible marker of identity, which according to Islamophobic ideology, is a clear example of Muslim women’s oppression or as evidence of the unwillingness of Muslims to assimilate (Abu-Lughod 2013; Al Saji 2010; Jaffe-Walter 2016). According to Al Saji, attacks on the veil construe Muslim culture as essentially patriarchal and oppressive towards women, and it is therefore “not only Muslim women who are othered, but also Muslim men, family life, and culture. The veil becomes a focal point in the othering of Islam” (2010, 887).

The participants in this study, however, are not passive victims of racialization, but competent agents (Ortner 1984; 2006) who do not simply accommodate racists but, at times, seek to avoid racialization through forms of strategic assimilation. In concordance with the findings of other scholarly work, it appears as if many of these students seek to distance themselves from African Americans with whom they see as failing to integrate into U.S. society (Roediger 2005; Waters 1999). Conversely, they also frame integration and class mobility as a potential way to mitigate their own racialization thereby linking middle-class position with Whiteness (Moss 2003, Ortner 2006, Urcuioli 1996). As in previous historical eras, immigrant groups appear to be crossing color lines, often through class mobility, while African Americans
remain quintessentially non-White. In an evaluation of the contemporary “color line”, Lee and Bean (2003) argue that while previous racial divisions in America had revolved around who was White and who was not, today’s divisions may center on who is Black and who is not. Lastly, the contested nature of Whiteness demonstrated in the passages above supports understandings racialization as a dynamic process in which individuals take an active part and underscores the significance of class in such negotiations (Bashi Treitler 2013; Omi and Winant 1994).

Conclusion

In sum, immigrant and refugee youth at Parkside High had contradictory feelings towards assimilation. While some students expressed the sincere impetus to take on aspects of American culture, most students selectively assimilated and had little intention of relinquishing their native identities (Gibson 1988; Lacy 2004). Nonetheless, these students worried that their spending too much time away from native-born Americans, either in ethnic communities or in sheltered classes, would harm their ability to integrate into American society and stifle the potential for social mobility. Other students contrasted with this perspective and felt little need or desire to change identities and fit into the United States.

The experiences also draw attention to the class and racial dimensions of assimilation. As Portes and Zhou (1993) initially described, the three potential paths to assimilation in the U.S. can be heavily shaped by the both the resources which immigrants bring to their new home as well as by experiences of racism and discrimination. Students whose parents arrived to the U.S. speaking English and with high levels of education, for example, had more success in assimilating upward and were less likely to experience dissonant acculturation. Comments regarding ethnic communities also were laden with class intersections. As previous research has
shown, maintaining ties with one’s community can help avoid downward assimilation into the underclass (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Thus for working-class and poor families, ethnic communities did not simply serve as a place to maintain cultural patrimony, but also functioned to redistribute wealth and communicate valuable knowledge about living in the United States.

Lastly, although Parkside High made efforts to create a multicultural climate, racial tensions were apparent throughout my fieldwork there. Many students – especially Muslims – were subjected to everyday forms of racialization at the hands of their American peers and in a wider sociopolitical sense by the intensification of Islamophobia in the public sphere by the Republican candidate for President, Donald Trump. However, the immigrants and refugees in this study did not act as passive objects of racialization but actively resisted racialization, at times by re-appropriating racializing discourses to both distinguish themselves from African Americans, while also deploying them as a way of creating solidarity across racial lines. Because racializing discourses associate class mobility, integration and Whiteness, analyses of race must necessarily take class marginalization into account without discounting the distinctive impact of racism. The comments made by students in this study further demonstrate the shifting position of immigrant and refugee youth vis-à-vis Whiteness as well as the complex ways in which racial identities are produced and reproduced over time (Fordham 1996; Omi and Winant 1994; Perry 2002).
Chapter 5
Aspiration and Attainment in a Climate of High-Stakes Exams

A normally boisterous ENL classroom of 26 students are sitting quietly preparing for the English Regents exams which they’ll be taking in less than a month. Ibrahim, a Sudanese refugee, leans over to me and asks exasperatedly, “What is this even about?” I look at the paper which is an old Regents exam from years ago. The long excerpt is from Mark Twain’s “Life on the Mississippi” in which an old steamboat captain describes how his passion for the beauty of the river has slowly been replaced by a practical perspective of the river’s features which he uses to navigate the boat safely. I read the passage quickly thinking that I can help offer Ibrahim some places to look for the main idea of the passage, but after skimming the passage I realize that I completely missed the point of the excerpt. I turn to Ibrahim sheepishly and tell him, “Let me read this again – it’s a hard one.” He replies, tongue in cheek, “If it’s hard for you, how do you think it is for us?”

April 9, 2016 Field notes, ENL Class

The excerpt above provides a sense of the challenges ELLs face on the Regents Exam including needing to understand complex linguistic information and possess culturally-specific background knowledge in order to pass. This chapter argues that high-stakes exams such as the Regents pose a significant barrier to realizing the high aspirations articulated by students in Chapter Two. The prominence of high-stakes exams also point to the intersection between language and social reproduction as the linguistic demands and embedded cultural knowledge required on such tests hamper ELLs’ graduation rates and therefore their pursuit of social mobility.

Researchers have noted that students with nonstandard dialects and rhetorical styles may be seen as incapable or at-risk regardless of their actual communicative abilities due to a “mismatch” between the expectations of school and the linguistic forms acquired by students (Delpit 1995; Hymes 1972; Michaels 1981; Phillips 2009). These “mismatches” occur along class lines as well, as working-class forms of language and literacy are less conducive to school
norms than those of the middle-class (Gee 2012; Heath 1983; Lareau 2003). While early studies argued that such linguistic differences were “deficits” to be overcome, linguists and anthropologists maintained that the forms of language used by the working-class and students of color were not deficient, but were entirely different, fully-functioning and rule-governed codes different from Standard English (Labov 1972; Collins 1988). Such linguistic differences are not only a result of class-specific socialization, but produced in a social and historical context of schooling which is often set in opposition to the values and behaviors of working-class and minority youth (Collins 1988).

Like other students who lack competency in Standard English, English Language Learners are often marginalized as their linguistic style may be viewed as an impediment rather than a resource (Rosa 2016; Valenzuela 1999). ELLs are further marginalized as their high aspirations and optimism come up against the high-stakes exams requiring sophisticated levels of English to pass. The resulting effect of these exams has been a drastic decline in the graduation rates of ELLs throughout New York State (Fry 2007; NYSED 2016; Menken 2008).

Despite their seeming objectivity, the correlation of standardized test scores to social class has been demonstrated for decades (Coleman et al. 1966; Jencks et al. 1972; Ravitch 2010). Several scholars have further called into question the applicability and validity of high stakes exams as they relate to non-native English speakers (Abedi 2004; Mahon 2010; Menken 2008). Nonetheless, such exams can serve as powerful gatekeepers for ELLs by limiting their access to college and thus social mobility. If schools function to reproduce the social order, tests are one of the main mechanisms contributing to this process.

This chapter discusses the impact of high-stakes exams on the aspirations and attainment of ELLs at Parkside High. The data below demonstrate how the challenge of the Regents, in
particular, negatively influences the high aspirations of students and can serve as powerful boundaries to graduation. The resulting deficit in attainment hampers the potential for social mobility which many newcomers expected to accomplish. Although many ELLs at Parkside High questioned the fairness of the Regents, the meritocratic ideology remained strong among many students who felt like they could pass the exams with enough effort. Teachers, too, felt the pressure of exams and criticized the ways in which the prominence of testing restricted their pedagogical and curricular control and obscured the abilities of their students. As the following section argues, high-stakes exams pose significant challenges to ELL populations and serve to stratify students along lines of both class and language.

**English Language Learners, High-stakes Exams, and Social Reproduction**

Language and class are intimately bound. As Bourdieu explains, all linguistic exchanges are also economic exchanges insofar as each linguistic code has value regulated “within the relations of power between a producer, endowed with a certain linguistic capital, and a consumer, and which is capable of procuring a certain material or symbolic profit” (1991, 48). In other words, linguistic codes do not simply convey referential information but also serve as “signs of wealth, intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and signs of authority, intended to be believed and obeyed” (1991, 49). The school system, Bourdieu continues, played “the most decisive role in devaluing dialects and establishing the new hierarchy of linguistic practices” as it claimed the power to evaluate which linguistic and cultural forms qualified an individual for various positions in the socio-economic landscape (1991, 22). More concisely put: “the value ascribed to a language is determined in part by the value ascribed to those who speak it” (Salomone 2010, 11).
Standardized tests have further cemented this process of symbolic stratification as students lacking the necessary registers to achieve a passing grade are deprived high school diplomas and often relegated to positions in the low-wage service economy. While testing has played a prominent role throughout U.S. history in stratifying populations by class, race, and national origin, during the neoliberal era of accountability and assessment the prevalence of standardized testing and the weight of test scores have both increased as passing grades are needed to graduate in many states and teachers’ evaluations are linked to the progress of their students on exams (Apple 2001; Hursh 2008; Lipman 2004; Ravitch 2010). Schools, too, are evaluated on whether their student subgroups, such as the English Learner population, are meeting the progress goals which include test scores. Schools with large ELL populations are therefore subjected to state sanctions, take-over, and shut-down even when they serve large populations of students with high needs (Yip 2013). Fine at al. (2007) call attention to the ways in which the use of high-stakes exams is closely linked to nativist ideologies which seek to safeguard the unity of the nation through enforcing monolingual, mono-cultural sanctions. Exams such as the Regents, in this sense, act as “border patrols” by limiting the opportunities of non-native English speakers (Fine et al. 2007, 77).

As demonstrated by previous research and by the data below, it is clear that the educational experience of English Language Learners in public schools is strongly influenced by standardized testing. Despite their strong correlation with socioeconomic status (Ravitch 2010; Mishel et al. 2012), test scores serve not only as gatekeepers to high school diplomas and cultural capital, but also reaffirm (and quantify) an abstracted view of competence which obscures the aptitudes of many students including ELLs (Bartlett and García 2011; González, Moll, and Amanti 2005). Indeed, despite the insistence on using tests as a neutral measurement to assess
individuals and schools, economists note that poor students who succeed on tests are less likely to graduate from college than wealthy kids who do poorly on the same exams. This fact along with the unequal wage returns on diplomas for students of differing gender and races seriously call into question the meritocratic nature of schools and the ability for tests to accurately measure academic ability (Mishel et al. 2012; Stiglitz 2012). As the particular forms of language needed to succeed on high stakes tests are estimated to take as long as five to seven years to develop (Cummins 1999), ELLs are put at a great disadvantage especially when they arrive to high school in their late teens.

High-aspiring ELLs such as the participants in this study must contend with high stakes examinations which dramatically alter their educational experiences and level high aspirations. For example, in California, while 74% of non-ELL students passed the math exit exam on the first try in 2004, only 49% of EL students passed on the first try. Additionally, 75% of the non-ELL population passed the Reading portion on the first try but only 39% of ELLs had the same outcome (Gándara and Hopkins 2010, 11). Since instituting the Regents Exam as a requirement for graduation in 2000, New York has seen the four-year graduation rate of ELLs statewide drop from around 50% to under a third (NYSED 2016). In a dramatic reversal, ELLs – whose high aspirations and optimism manifested themselves in the highest graduation rates among minority groups in 1996 nationwide – became the highest dropout minority by 2002 as more states adopted standardized tests as graduation requirements (Hursh 2008, 80).

Critics of standardized testing have claimed that the increased emphasis on accountability through testing and privatization has restructured the relationships of teachers, students and administrators often wresting local authority away from schools (Hursh 2008; Ravitch 2010). As evidenced by observational data and comments made by teachers at Parkside High, teachers must
often realign their curricula to fit the requirements of high-stakes testing, allowing little room for empowering or critical thought. Because teachers no longer can construct their own curriculum to meet the needs of different student groups, they are forced to relinquish control of their profession and are left to simply execute pre-designed plans (Braverman 1998; Apple 2001). Furthermore, non-mainstream students’ linguistic and cultural resources are left underutilized and instead seen as an impediment to success on such exams (Valenzuela 1999).

Tests restructure class time and curricula and also create a disjuncture between the function of knowledge for active citizenship and knowledge which is needed for academic success. This issue was noted nearly a century ago by philosopher John Dewey who expressed concern over the separation between knowledge and practice in schools in his book *Democracy and Education* (1916). Dewey, who believed schools should strive to create democratically minded citizens, argued that “[a]s formal teaching and training grow in extent, there is the danger of creating an undesirable split between the experience gained in more direct associations and what is acquired by school” (1916, 10). For Dewey, knowledge which has no pragmatic use in society “operates as pure physical stimuli, not as having a meaning or intellectual value” (1916, 19). Several decades later, Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy articulated similar ideas about the danger of severing knowledge from action. For Freire, authentic education requires students to connect the “word to the world,” or in other words, to use their literary skills to critically assess their environment. Freire calls this process of learning about the world in order to change it, “conscientization” (1977, 32). The use of standardized tests exemplifies Freire’s notion of “banking style education” where students are conceived of as empty vessels to be filled with “knowledge” (1998). By focusing on passive memorization and recapitulation, students are deterred from seeing the world as capable of being transformed by their actions, and teachers
become disengaged from the dialogic learning process and can only serve as managers who administer knowledge (Freire 1974).

To help students pass these tests, ESL curricula has moved from teaching ELLs language used for empowerment or enhance communicative competence to teaching language needed to pass exams (Auerbach 1995; Lipman 2004; McNeil 2000; Menken 2008; Savignon 1979). “Teaching to the test” has become especially widespread in states such as New York, which closely monitor the achievement of students and use test scores as part of teacher evaluations (Shohamy 2001). Ethnographers have also shown how high-stakes exams can have negative effects on successful and dedicated teachers working with minority students. With the pressure to align their curricula to the content of the test, teachers become disheartened as they can no longer cover issues outside of the test material (Lipman 2004; McNeil 2000). As Lipman writes, education which emphasizes scores on standardized exams “undermines a classroom culture that encourages students to question their texts, the teacher, and the authority of official knowledge” (2004, 46). Because students’ test performance is a purported measure of the performance of teachers and the quality of a school, students with low scores become a liability for teachers. McNeil found that the teachers at her field site often practiced “educational triage,” a system where teachers are pressured into helping the students close to passing state exams at the expense of those who have little chance of passing (2000, 149). Tests thus shape the school curriculum and further cement their status as what Apple calls “official knowledge”: the knowledge that seen as is valuable and worth acquiring (1985). Because tests can critically shape and constrain curriculum and pedagogy, they can therefore be viewed as a tool of social power. As Hall writes, “[The dominance of] ruling ideas… lies precisely in the power they have to contain within their limits, to frame within their circumference of thought, the reasoning and calculation of other
social groups” (1988, 44). These concerns were articulated by many teachers at Parkside High who felt pressured to help their ELL students pass the Regents Exam and worried that the constraints of the exam limited their ability to teach anything outside of the content of the test.

In conclusion, as many non-mainstream students lack the kinds of language competencies demanded by exams such as the New York State Regents, English Language Learners and other marginalized groups are often driven from high school despite their aptitudes in other academic subjects. Furthermore, because these exams often require certain academic registers, many curricula have moved from teaching ELLs language which can be used for empowerment to the language needed to pass exams. The data presented below also demonstrate the power of tests to act as disciplinary tools for both teachers and students thereby restricting the capacity for the kinds of learning advocated by critical educators while also serving to stratify students along class and linguistic lines.

**Learning English, Taking Tests**

The growth and prevalence of standardized testing in the U.S. is a historical process linked to both the development of compulsory public schooling in the United States in the late 19th century and the growth of intelligence testing in the early 20th century (Collins and Blot 2003; Nasaw 1979). While tests are intimately linked to the formation of language ideologies, the push towards monolingualism in the U.S. can be traced back at least as far back to the origins of American imperialism in the early 19th century where the problem of assimilating those who remained on newly-annexed lands often involved anxieties over language (Menken 2008; Spolsky 2004). During this period, the Bureau of Indian Affairs stepped up its aim to “civilize” Indian populations through coercive boarding schools which mandated the use of English and
outlawed any use of native languages (Nagel 1996). Despite the absence of a declared national language in the U.S. Constitution, Spanish was outlawed in schools by 1848 and the Naturalization Act of 1906 made the learning of English a requirement for citizenship (Spolsky 2004).

While early waves of European immigrants to the U.S. believed they could keep their native languages while still actively participating in American society, by the late 19th century, the influx of Eastern and Southern European immigrants caused a fervor over the national identity of the U.S. and public schools increasingly became seen as an institution capable of assimilating immigrant populations and readying them for their place in the industrial order (Apple 2004; Nasaw 1979). The use of a common language, proponents claimed, was needed in order to unify a diverse country. The growth of European nationalism in the 20th century further catalyzed a move towards monolingualism as reformers capitalized on anti-German sentiment during World War I, paving the way for English-only mandates in schools across dozens of states (Spolsky 2004). During this time, large numbers of German-language schools throughout the Midwest were forced to close (Heath 1983; Menken 2008). The academic achievement of English Learners throughout the 19th and 20th centuries unsurprisingly lagged behind native English speakers as their individualized needs were generally ignored in schools and the methods for teaching immigrants was best characterized by a “sink or swim” approach (Gándara and Hopkins 2010)

The gains made by the Civil Rights movement led to legislation which prohibited discrimination based on national origin and language. Bilingual education became even more widespread after the landmark Lau v. Nichols case in 1974 which ruled that minority language students must be granted the same access to the curriculum as native English speakers. Funding
for bilingual education was increased and viewed as a potential remedy for such inequalities (Gándara and Rumberger 2009; Menken 2008). Despite these gains, pushback in the 1970s and 1980s against bilingual education coalesced once again around the fears that immigrants were not assimilating quickly enough and that a plurilingual society was inherently a divided one (Waters and Jiménez 2005).

This brief historical sketch evidences the tension between monolingual and pluralist ideologies in the U.S. and the significance of the school in the promotion of language ideologies. In the contemporary era, the reception and evaluation of language use has become even more critical to academic success, and control of Standard English is often viewed as a prerequisite to educational attainment (Delpit 1995). As Gumperz notes, though much of the early 20th-century urban populations were composed of poor, non-native speakers of English, “language was not seen as a major barrier to educational opportunity. Language has become an educational issue and education a major political problem primarily during the last decades” (1982, 28).

Testing has played a significant role in the education of immigrants and has had profound effects on attitudes towards multilingualism. The rise of scientific racism and eugenics in the early 20th century facilitated a rapid increase in the use of intelligence testing and the growing belief that all individuals possessed a discrete “quantity” of intelligence which could be measured psychometrically. Beginning with the nascent IQ tests of Alfred Binet in 1904, the “era of mass testing” saw a reduction of the “wonderously complex and multifaceted set of human capabilities” known as “intelligence” into a single digit (Gould 1981, 24). While IQ tests have lost some of their power from challenges by psychologists wishing to expand the notion of “intelligence” (e.g. Gardener 1993; Goleman 1995), public schools have largely endorsed the notion that intelligence can be measured objectively by standardized tests (Varenne and
McDermott 1998). Despite their importance, scoring high on standardized tests is no more than “a good predictor of one’s ability score high on standardized tests” (Sacks 1999, 8).

Although Binet had developed the test simply to identify students with disabilities, the use of these exams was greatly expanded by figures such as Robert Yerkes and Carl Brigham who developed an intelligence test in the early 20th century and administered it to one million American soldiers during World War I. Unsurprisingly, immigrants scored poorly on the test since it was given in English and contained numerous cultural references which immigrants would not understand. In keeping with the spirit of eugenics, Brigham viewed these results as a confirmation that the White, Anglo-Saxon race was inherently superior to those from other regions in the world and pushed for immigration controls in order to maintain the racial purity of the White race (Gould 1981; Sacks 1999).

Although the racist interpretation of test scores has largely been discredited (save for its various proponents [e.g. Herrnstein and Murray 1994]), the value of test scores has increased during the late 20th century. Educational inequality was reframed as a national crisis of “standards” by reports such as A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). Neoliberal arguments also began to gain influence during this period which conceived of education as a consumer good which should be open to competition in the “free market” (Apple 2001). The economic and ideological changes brought about by neoliberalism have had important effects on schooling. In many ways, the struggles over the control over the U.S. public school system in the early 19th century still exist, although today they are heavily influenced by neoliberal ideology which seeks to limit the role of the government in everyday life (Apple 2001; Nasaw 1979). Neoliberals have sought to remove schools from the public sphere and proposed that privatization can ensure equality of access (Ravitch 2010). When the
market model proposed by neoliberals is applied to schools, education is seen as a commodity where consumers (families) should be given the freedom to choose the best school possible (Hursh 2008). The diversion of public funds away from schools and into voucher programs and charter schools is seen by neoliberals as an important way that consumers can rationally choose the best education for their families (Apple 2001). According to one of the earliest architects of the neoliberal project, “only those schools that satisfy their customers will survive – just as only those restaurants and bars that satisfy their customers survive: competition will see to that” (Friedman 1980, 159). Although the voucher program strongly advocated by Friedman never fully took hold, the privatization of public schools has continued throughout the Bush and Obama administrations (Lipman 2011; Ravitch 2010). In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, for example, “disaster capitalists” have taken advantage of the destruction of to rebuild New Orleans’ education system under neoliberal terms (Klein 2007). Four years after Katrina, New Orleans became the first city in the U.S. to have a majority of its students enrolled in charter schools (Sánchez 2010). Many critics have claimed that privatization and the school choice movement have had adverse effects on the schools which non-mainstream students such as ELLs are most likely to attend (Apple 2001; Hursh 2008; Ravitch 2010).

Neoliberal education reform has often used standardized testing as a means of disciplining teachers and students under the rubric of accountability. Because high-stakes tests are linked to the educational fate of students and job security of teachers, they take on a quality of Foucauldian power where classrooms become sites of self-discipline under threat of a de-personalized authority (Foucault 1975; Shohamy 2001). Although earlier tests were meant to simply gauge student progress or identify those with special needs, standardized tests now guide curricula and pedagogy (Ravitch 2010). The power of tests should not be surprising given the
long history of intelligence testing and anthropometry throughout the 20th century used to justify racism and colonialism (Gould 1981). In the neoliberal framework, test scores are the data which consumers utilize to make rational choices about which schools they ought to send their children (Ravitch 2010).

Parkside High was also subjected to state discipline due to its low test scores. Identified as a “struggling” school in 2015, Parkside High was designated as a “Receivership” school. Under this policy, Parkside must demonstrate adequate progress in the following two years or local control of the school would be handed over by the Board of Education to a “state-approved receiver” (NYSED 2016). While the effects of the receivership were not always made apparent in the day-to-day activities of the school, the heightened pressure to increase test scores was clearly articulated by teachers and students. Indeed during the time I conducted my fieldwork, Parkside High struggled to retain administrators and went through three principals. Yet as Levinson and Sutton remind us, though policy may be implemented at state levels, its effects are often experienced and reworked by actors on the ground (2001). Policy can thus be “appropriated” by “creative agents” ‘take in’ elements of policy, thereby incorporating these discursive and institutional resources into their own schemes of interest, motivation, and action” (Levinson and Sutton 2001, 1). As discussed below, teachers and students both engaged in agential practices which pushed back against the coercive power of high-stakes exams. Though limited in their success, these moments were spaces in which students and teachers engaged in various forms of resistance that subverted the disciplinary aims of testing policy and promoted critical views of meritocracy (Scott 1990).

High-stakes exams have also been used as a tool for standardizing languages and masking the unequal outcomes of schooling. Though the Civil Rights era saw the growth of
bilingual schooling and more acceptance of using non-standard dialects in schools, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has effectively curtailed these practices by acting as “de facto language policy” which has established English proficiency as a requirement for academic success (Menken 2008). In addition, as Fine et al. (2007) note, the highest stakes exams have been implemented in regions with the largest numbers of ELLs. For example, while NCLB did not outlaw bilingual education, it encouraged a focus on English-only education through assessment and accountability and even went so far as to change the “Office of Bilingual Education” to the “Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for LEP Students” (Menken 2008, 30). Indeed, between 1992 and 2002, the percentage of ELLs enrolled in bilingual programs declined from 37 percent to 17 percent despite an increase of 72 percent in the total population (Salomone 2010:9). NCLB thus revives deficit thinking by reframing the needs of ELLs as a “language problem” in which students must transition from their native language into English in order to succeed academically (Gándara and Rumberger 2009). In this sense, recent educational reforms which have focused on holding schools accountable for the academic achievement of their ELL population have actually served to enforce an English-only monolingualism.

In contrast, research has shown that pedagogies which utilize and validate the home language and culture of immigrant students have been more successful than strategies of immersion and assimilation (Bartlett and Garcia 2011; Fine et al. 2007; Hopkins et al. 2015; Jaffe-Walter and Lee 2012). While bilingual instruction has been shown to be an effective method of teaching non-native English speakers, many states have curbed the use of foreign languages in classrooms or neglected to give students bilingual instruction even when they are legally entitled to it (Cummins 1999; Gándara and Rumberger 2009; Hornberger 2003; Menken
Efforts such as the “funds of knowledge” approach which connect community experiences to classroom practices have demonstrated that even slight changes in the curriculum and pedagogy can drastically alter student outcomes (González, Moll and Amanti 2005; Moll and Diaz 1987). The fact that student outcomes can be so easily manipulated shows the socially constructed nature of academic success and failure (Varenne and McDermott 1998).

As discussed below, students and teachers grappled with the demands of high-stakes exams, often prioritizing the needs of the tests above other curricular lessons including culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies. Although bilingual education was not offered at Parkside High due to the sheer number of languages spoken by its ELL population, a Newcomer Academy set to open in the fall of 2017 planned to utilize home languages as a core portion of its curriculum. In addition to culturally-sensitive pedagogies, the Newcomer Academy hired language coaches in Karen, Arabic, and Burmese as well as a bilingual ENL Social Worker. The Newcomer Academy thus had potential to respond to the particular needs of Parkside’s ELL population and encourage authentic learning by incorporating elements of students’ lives into their education (Freire 1974).

The following section explores in further detail the ways in which the Regents Exams shaped the educational experiences of ELLs at Parkside High and limited teacher control of curriculum and pedagogy. The demands of the Regents also posed serious challenges to the high aspirations and optimistic attitudes articulated by students in previous chapters. Nonetheless, spaces of agency were apparent in the critiques of the Regents by teachers and students who challenged both the validity and fairness of the exams and thus the meritocratic ideology which tests claimed to implicitly support.
High-Stakes Exams at Parkside High: Meritocracy and Critique

New York State’s high school graduation test, the Regents Exam, presents significant challenges to students still struggling to acquire academic levels of English. As discussed in previous chapters, the failure to graduate high school has damaging consequences for one’s wage earning potential in the job market. For many of formerly middle-class participants in this study, the Regents represented a challenging obstacle to regaining their previous class position, while students from working-class and agrarian backgrounds felt obstructed from the class mobility which education, according to the meritocratic narrative, was supposed to provide. Many participants in this study worked tirelessly to pass the Regents Exam, spending hours studying after school and re-taking the exam three, four, and five times in order to pass it. Of the forty students interviewed, thirty-eight answered “Regents Exam” when asked what the “hardest part” of graduating high school was. Indeed, the challenge of the Regents was evident in the low graduation rate of ELLs at Parkside High, as only 1 in 4 graduated high school in four years.¹

Student Perspectives on High-Stakes Exams

While many students reiterated the meritocratic narrative covered in Chapter Two, the Regents Exam was one aspect of education in the United States which elicited some of the most critical opinions from both students and teachers. Furthermore, the Regents Exam cast an especially long shadow in classrooms as it seemed to saturate curriculum and pedagogy. Although nearly all high school students participating in this study aspired to attend college, the effects of high-stakes exams dampened the high aspirations and optimism detailed in earlier chapters. Many students, even those who arrived with high levels of formal education and English skills,

¹ The graduation rate of Parkside High as a whole was over twice this number, yet at 57% was far behind the state average which was close to 80% in 2016.
elaborated on their struggle to pass the Regents Exam before they aged out of high school.

Despite the challenge to acquire the level of English required by the Regents Exam, middle-class students had distinct advantages over those from working-class and agrarian backgrounds due to their previous education.

Many students maintained their belief in meritocracy even when it came to the Regents Exams which served as the main barrier between them and a high school diploma. Mahmoud, who was often quite critical of the Regents, told me one day in class that “the United States helps you… it makes it easy to pass the Regents.” He explained, “In my country [Iraq], if you fail like two tests, you have to take the whole grade again.” In an interview, Mo replied with a similar sentiment saying, “That’s what I love. In this school you can fail, and you have the chance to retake it. That’s not like it is in other countries – if you fail, you fail. And you have to the whole year just because of that one exam.” Yet, in a later interview, Mahmoud changed his tone a bit to reflect the additional challenges ELLs face when taking the Regents:

For the American students, the problem with them is they did not study. If they study then they will pass. Not like us… we are different culture, different language. We have to study hard and learn the language first. They have to do something for the ENL students so they can graduate!

But when I then asked if he thought it was fair for ENL students to take the same tests as American students, Mahmoud paused and said, “I think it’s fair, but it’s hard to do it.”

Many other students had similar complaints about the Regents Exam’s language requirements. Leila said:

We don’t have Regents in my country. But you have to pass the Regents [here] and they are like not always what you learn in classes. They’re much harder, and they use good English. Not the easy English, but the hard English. And if you don’t understand the hard English and stuff, then you have to take it twice or three times, and that’s hard.
Khadijah had similar experiences with the language required on the Regents and the discrepancy between classroom content and the requirements of the exam:

The only thing that made it challenging is the language. I just didn’t understand, so in math class, in Algebra class… my average in the class would be 95 and above, so I would be doing so good in the class, and I would be getting 90s and above on the exams, but then when I took the Regents Exam I would fail it. And that’s because I didn’t understand what the question was asking.

Like many students at Parkside High, Mo was constantly studying for the Regents. By senior year, he had passed all subjects except Living Environment, the biology requirement for graduation. “I’ve taken this class in my home country [Jordan],” he explained to me as he looked over the study guide given to him by his teacher. “I just don’t know these words in English. I can’t remember them.” Later that week, Mo was still poring over the Regents Review guide. Some students next to us were talking about going to Senior Prom. I asked Mo if he was planning on attending. “No,” he laughed. “I have to study. This is my prom,” he told me gesturing to the review packet.

The criticisms above made by Leila and Khadijah were echoed by other students who felt that the exams were unfair for English Language Learners regardless of the accommodations for them made by the state. These accommodations included extra time for ELLs to complete the Regents and written translations of exams for speakers of Chinese, Spanish, Korean, Russian, and Haitian Creole. For other languages, students were afforded bilingual glossaries and oral translators. Many students who had translators cited them as a source of contempt even though others felt that they gave ELLs an advantage. As Sadiq explained, “It is hard, but at the same time we had interpreters on the Regents so they can translate the English for us. So I feel like it’s easy.” Nonetheless, many other students complained that translators did not help them pass the exam. “Some translators just finish fast and then go… they don’t help a lot,” said Mahmoud.
Fatou, a Senegalese student in Mrs. O’Leary’s class was adamant in her complains about her French translator. “He just sits there and doesn’t offer to help!” “We’re just going to fail,” said Amadou who had the same translator for his exams.

Written translations also offered little help to students. As Menken (2008) describes, students must understand a concept in their first language in order for a translation to be useful: “Native language versions of tests are only useful when students can best demonstrate content knowledge in that language, usually because they have received content instruction in their native language” (2008, 85). Carlos illustrated this point lucidly when he described his experience with translations. Having been taught academic content primarily in English, Carlos found it difficult to make use of direct translations in his native language:

I did choose [to take] it in Spanish once, and it was different because when they ask you the question, they ask you in a different language and you learned it in English not in Spanish. So it was asking it in a different way and I was kind of confused. I didn’t know how to answer. I only probably knew had to answer it in English. I didn’t really know how to translate it to Spanish.

Mehdi echoed Carlos’ point as well. “You have to study it in your language first so you know what it is in your language first,” he explained. “And then you have to read that in English, so you know what this means in our language if you say it to me... the truth is that they’re not translating anything.”

The state, in an effort to better accommodate ELLs, allowed students six hours to complete the exams, rather than three. While this extra time clearly aided ELLs who grappled with the complex language of the exam, it also meant that students scheduled to multiple exams in one day could be at school for up to 12 hours. Mr. Anderson told me that he knew of at least two students who “passed out” during the exams. Bashir told me, for example, “When I took the tests last year, I was in the building until 1 AM. It took twelve hours.” He told me that he was
fortunate because his supervisor allowed him to take a walk around the building between exams and it really helped him clear his head, yet most proctors wouldn’t allow students such leniency.

For Muslim students, the stress of twelve hours of exams was compounded by the timing of the test which recently coincided with the holiday of Ramadan. These students explained the challenges of taking such an important exam while fasting. I was somewhat surprised by a comment made by Mahmoud one day in class who told me that he was so exasperated after a 12-hour day of exams taken while fasting that he “wasn’t ever going to come back to school” if he failed. Mo, too, told me that fasting for Ramadan had affected his performance on the Regents.

“It was the second test I took [that day],” he explained. “I was fasting and I just couldn’t focus.” Bashir overheard Mo’s comment and weighed in: “That’s your opinion, but I think if you study then you can pass.” Mo looked a bit frustrated and ashamed to have made his first comment, and Bashir, realizing the impact of what he said, walked back his initial statement. “But, you know, the same thing happened to me with Living Environment. It’s hard.” Mo seemed relieved and told me he was thinking of trying to talk to an administrator about the issue. “I think we should only take one test a day, especially during Ramadan. If enough people come [to complain] maybe something will change.” He then lowered his voice and continued, “But I doubt it. I just need to study more. I will pass.” The rapid reversal of Mo’s position indicates the limited spaces for student agency, the stubbornness of meritocracy, and the readiness to accept individual causes for academic performance.

Teachers, as demonstrated below, were more willing to issue critiques of the Regents Exams, and found limited ways extend their pedagogy and curriculum beyond the scope of the tests. Such moments demonstrate the capacity of agents to rework policy on the ground as well
as the incompleteness of ideologies such as meritocracy (Gramsci 1971; Levinson and Sutton 2001).

Teacher Perspectives on High-Stakes Exams

Many teachers felt that the tests did not adequately measure the progress or abilities of their students, and fretted over the toll that poor scores would take on their students’ aspirations. Mrs. O’Leary told me that she felt that students’ attitudes were particularly harmed by exams which are often administered soon after their arrival. She explained:

If you take a test that is unreasonable for you, and you’re failing it again and again and again – you just start to feel like, ‘What’s the point? I’ll go work and at least be able to pay for maybe a better nicer apartment for my family.’

Mr. Anderson similarly believed that “what they’re testing is very limited scope, and so it’s not like you’re proving proficiency… you just have to take the test over and over again, and then you become better at the test.” Mrs. Dykstra concluded, “It’s unfair. I think we’ve kind of set up them for failure.” Mr. Johansen commented at length about the ways in which tests dampen the aspirations of his students:

Yeah, it’s like this dark cloud hanging over our heads. And it really, it really makes me kind of sad because I know how hard these kids worked. And I won’t say a specific student, but I can think of a kid who at the beginning of the year – where they came here and spoke no English, like we had no communication at all. And by the end of the year this kid is, you know, we have full conversations, he’s talking about what we’re talking about. And he understands the concepts. But when they go to take that Regents Exam, he’s going to get in the 30s or the 40s, and I don’t think that’s fair. I think it really discourages these kids because they work so hard, but then they don’t get the results on this test that says they need to pass to graduate.

Mr. Johanson’s comments echo concerns held by many teachers at Parkside over the ability for tests to accurately measure academic performance of ELLs (Abedi 2004). These teachers also felt that the potential for tests to render academic progress invisible was especially troubling as it
sent negative messages to students about their potential to graduate high school and harmed their previously optimistic outlooks.

Because teachers’ evaluations were determined in part by their students test scores, tests serve a disciplinary function under the discourse of accountability (Ravitch 2010). The weight of test scores created the incentive to purge classrooms of ELLs as teachers viewed them as liabilities to bringing test scores down. As Mrs. O’Leary put it, “Other teachers don’t want our kids. Teachers and administrators are being negative about our kids because they look bad on their tests.” Mrs. Kirkpatrick told me that she even felt content-area teachers viewed the accommodations afforded to ELLs on the Regents as a “crutch”: “They think, ‘Oh you’re just cheating it, you’re helping them too much.’” Some teachers suggested that additional accommodations should be made for ELLs who struggled with the Regents. Mr. Anderson, for example, empathized with the predicament of students who wanted to observe Ramadan but still felt the pressure of succeeding on the Regents Exams. “Kids not have to make a decision. ‘Do I eat? Do I not eat?’ Some of them will eat anyway, and so now you’re pushing them into this corner where they’re questioning their deeply held values in order to take these stupid things. And then others won’t eat, and they won’t do as well.”

In conclusion, high-stakes exams played a significant role in the aspirations and perceptions of education held by participants of this study. While many felt that, with enough effort, they had the opportunity to pass the Regents Exam, others were critical of the exam on the grounds that it was unfair for students still learning English. Teachers, too, articulated criticisms of the exams which they felt masked the academic progress of their students and were inappropriate measures of their aptitudes. The following sections delve deeper into the attitudes held by students towards the Regents Exam as well as the negative influence which the Regents
had on the aspirations of newcomers. Teachers also felt frustrated by the power that the Regents held over their teaching and felt trapped between the need to teach their students how to pass the Regents and their view of education as more than test preparation. Lastly, I discuss the effects of high-stakes exams on pedagogy and curriculum at Parkside High and connect these issues to the wider discussion of social reproduction and class stratification among immigrant and refugee populations.

**Power and Presence of High-Stakes Exams in Classrooms**

In classrooms, the Regents Exams existed as an ever-present form of power that was capable of redefining curricular content to fit the needs of passing the exams. As discussed above, tests often limited the capacity for teachers to introduce critical content in their classrooms. In addition, the Regents replaced the Deweyian emphasis on education as preparation for active participation in society as the ends to all learning in the classroom. The Regents, increasingly the only significant form of assessment given to students, also served as the primary yardstick by which students measured their own educational successes and failures.

For instance, one day early in class several months before the Regents Exams were held, Mr. Anderson was handing out a short story to the class. The class seemed so distracted and distant that the stack of papers got held up several times as students using their smartphones did not notice that they needed to pass the papers to the next student. Mr. Anderson, exasperatedly asked students to look up at him and asked the class, “Why do we read these stories?” A Dominican student quickly replied, “To pass the Regents!” An Iraqi student sitting in the front of the class nodded her head, “Yes to pass the tests!” An Afghani student sitting in the back of the class on his smartphone scoffed and said to himself, “I passed the Regents already, so I don’t
Mr. Anderson looked frustrated but perhaps not shocked by the answers. “No, wrong answer!” he chastised the class. Mahmoud finally offered the answer Mr. Anderson was looking for: “To learn from the stories… and to improve our English.” “Thank you, Mahmoud,” replied Mr. Anderson tiredly. Months earlier, I had witnessed the exact inverse situation in Mr. Johansen’s class one day as he began class with a political cartoon depicting Uncle Sam and a Soviet Bear, both with large rockets strapped to their back, arguing with each other on top of the globe. “So what do you think this picture is trying to say?” Mr. Johansen asked the class. Some students looked around at each other with puzzled looks while others played absent-mindedly on their phones. A student complained, “Why do we have to do these?” “Because it will be on the Regents Exam!” replied Mr. Johansen. In both cases, passing the Regents Exam replaced other all other reasons for education and served as the ultimate goal for learning content, and the Deweyian and Freirean goal of education for civic participation was subverted by the power of the tests.

The pervasive power of testing was felt by students long before they prepared to graduate. In a sophomore ENL class, students were already being readied for the Regents Exams which lurked in their not-to-distant futures. Mrs. Dykstra, the ENL teacher, co-taught the class with Mr. White, an English teacher who had taught Regents preparation for decades at Parkside High. During many classes, students’ writing was guided explicitly towards the expectations of the Regents Exams. One day, for example, students were discussing the young-adult novel, *The Outsiders*. As they responded to some comprehension questions, Mrs. Dykstra corrected a student, saying “You have to use ‘textual evidence.’ Have you heard of this? When you have this on your Regents in 11th grade, you’ll need to know this… so we need to practice it now.” She went on to explain to the class, “Textual evidence is taken directly from the book.” On the
Smartboard in front of the room a template was provided to answer a Regents-like question about the Outsiders: “____ because ____ on page __ it says “____”. Later in the school year, students began working on a poetry portfolio in which they wrote poems of various types. While working on free verse poetry, a 16-year-old Bangladeshi student who had arrived in the middle of the school year showed me what he had written. Despite having no constraints on the topic or form of his poem, it is notable that he chose to write about test anxiety:

    On the day of the test
    As I walked to my desk praying
    That my marks would be the best
    Every second, my fear of failing growing

Teachers devoted a lot of time towards not only practicing the content of the exams, but also on test-taking strategies. For many students, learning how to take the Regents Exam and understanding what the questions on the test were asking were the first steps to passing the tests. In one of Mrs. O’Leary’s class, she handed out a practice Regents Exam essay question. On the Smartboard were directions to help students understand what they were being asked to do: “What is the task in my own words – what do I have to do? What are the things I should do in the response? What should I not do? What vocabulary do I not understand?” She explained to the class, “I know you get nervous, but you’re not actually writing the response today – we’re just looking at the directions.”

    In another class, Mr. Johansen passed out a Regents Review packet. He explained that his “old boss” at the school he used to teach at had him “pull the last ten years of exams, cut up the questions and note the frequency of each question.” He continued, “For example, I’ve never seen the answer C four times in a row.” The packet was constructed from this data. It showed what the likely answer would be if a given term was mentioned in the question. The packet had some sections that read, “If you see ____, the answer is either ____ or ____.” In showing how
powerfully the Regents influenced the topics he covered, Mr. Johansen explained, “If I never, ever said it, then it is probably not going to be the answer.” Mr. Anderson also discussed test-taking strategies with his students. He told students to focus on the essay portion of the English Regents Exam, telling students “You have more control over the writing… as long as people can understand what you’re saying.” The multiple choice section, he explained “isn’t fair, but I didn’t write it… if there are two words you don’t know, and they’re not in the dictionary, you’re not going to be able to answer it.”

As mentioned in the previous section, teachers were highly critical of the Regents Exam both as an accurate tool of assessment and a powerful influence over their curriculum and pedagogy. As Mrs. Dykstra explained, “You can’t really implement a lot of the things that are best practices such as discussion, turn and talk – these things – when you have so much curriculum to cover before a Regents, and I’m just saying specifically for Math.” Since she taught sophomores, she was relieved to not have heavy responsibilities to prepare her students for the Regents. “I’m lucky that I don’t have that Regents at the end, so we can kind of build their knowledge and their foundation, build some of their language,” she concluded, “I have that freedom.”

Much as McNeil (2002) described the form of “educational triage” she witnessed in a Texas high school, I found that the weight of Regents Exam scores pressed teachers into tending to the needs of students on the cusp of passing and ignoring those who had little chance of graduating. Mr. Anderson, responsible for preparing students for the English Regents Exam, for example, explained to me how Regents preparation had become his primary teaching responsibility despite wanting to focus on other things. Any students not preparing to take the Regents were disregarded due to the needs of the test. As he put it, “The test becomes a priority.
Everybody else gets independent book projects. Everyone else basically gets ignored by me.”

Another example of “educational triage” was illustrated during an ENL Department meeting which I attended early in my fieldwork. The purpose of the meeting was how to get students on the verge of passing the Regents over the final hurdle. The idea proposed by one teacher was to set up a mentoring program, but they first needed to know who should be eligible for such mentorship. On the projector was a spreadsheet with a few dozen students and their test scores and credit total. As they went through names they discussed the factors which made students likely or unlikely to graduate including their age, Regents scores, and personal characteristics. They began to delete kids who were either too old to pass or unlikely to bring up their test scores. Students who had a few more years before they aged out or whose test scores were not far from the threshold of graduating were assigned a teacher to help guide them to a passing grade.

Despite the power and prevalence of the Regents Exams in classrooms at Parkside High, students and teachers found ways to resist the hegemony of the exams and expand curriculum and pedagogy beyond the scope of the tests. In Mr. Dykstra’s class, for example, a sign hung prominently above the chalkboard and had her signature as well as her students’. It read:

While passing the English Exam is one of our goals, our more important goal is to improve our English skills so that we can achieve whatever we want in life. We focus and work hard at our learning activities NOT for a grade or credit, but for the knowledge and skill we can gain from them.

In Mrs. O’Leary’s class, a separate period after the Regents Exams was set aside for what she called “the airing of grievances.” These sessions became more and more organized and turned into a weekly after-school session where students eventually assembled to practice writing argumentative essays – a skill tested on the English Regents Exam – with essay topics elaborating on the criticisms they had brought up during the original class meetings. With the help of the school librarian, Mrs. O’Leary and I aided students in researching their topics and
constructing an essay which would be read. As a way of fulfilling his film class requirements, Carlos offered to film each student reading their essays aloud and then edit the video so it could be presented to the Board of Regents. Jean, the Haitian immigrant introduced in the previous chapter, gave his speech in the “United Nations” room. Standing behind a wooden podium and with a digitally-projected American flag waving in the background, Jean presented his argument that high school students, like those in college, should be allowed to have a break before they had to take the Regents Exams. Other students presented cogent arguments that English Learners ought to be given different tests than native speaking students and students should not have to take multiple exams in the same day. On the final day of filming, students each took turns in front of the camera saying their names and a few words in their native languages.

The film project provides a powerful example of the ways in which students and teachers pushed back against the power of the Regents Exams. Students were empowered through this project as they not only developed sophisticated critiques of the Regents Exam, but also practiced the persuasive writing techniques which were required on the exam. Students who did not want to appear in the film were nonetheless able to hone different skills by interviewing peers or, in Carlos’ case, practicing filming and editing. Although these students were still ultimately responsible for their Regents scores, spaces such as the film project facilitate critiques of meritocracy and encourage students to take an active role in transforming society (Freire 1970).

This section has detailed the powerful influence on pedagogy and curriculum wielded by the Regents Exam. Constantly aware of the challenges of the Regents, teachers felt pressured to tailor their class content to helping their students pass, often at the cost of a more critical pedagogy. Though teachers at Parkside were supportive of their students and welcomed
discussions about the fairness of the Regents Exam, they were also subjected to discipline from their students’ scores. Although teachers worked to open up spaces of agency to challenge the fairness of the Regents and extend their pedagogy beyond test preparation, other teachers felt relatively powerless to change the situation and often referred to the test empathetically as a burden which they and their students had to bear (Shohamy 2001). The following section expands on the ways in which student persistence and high aspirations come up against the demands of the Regents Exams.

Fighting the Odds: Student Persistence and Leveled Aspirations

Persistence was a key theme that re-emerged among both prospective graduates and former high school students. The anxieties discussed in the preceding section were well-founded, as many students required as many as four attempts to pass the Regents Exams despite staying after school several days a week to practice the exam. Like Kyaw Reh, both Kuu Reh and Shi Reh had received most of their schooling in refugee camps in Thailand. Though they came at younger ages than Kyaw Reh, both students required four and five attempts to pass their Regents Exams. Indeed, those who expected to graduate often had to take the Regents several times and recognized that they had to work harder than native-English speaking students.

Mr. Johansen, for example, told me that students had asked him to begin holding after-school study sessions early in the school year. Soon the review sessions were full of ELLs who outnumbered the American-born students. “The American kids in the Review session are impressed… These kids [ELLs] work so hard, harder than the American kids,” he told me. Kyaw Reh described what it was like for him during his first year of school. Since he arrived in the U.S. at age 19, he had only two years to acquire a high level of English and pass the five Regents
Exams needed to graduate. Despite holding down a part-time job, Kyaw Reh stayed after school nearly every day in order to improve his chances of passing the exams:

I was like working hard, and because I came with my mom, but she doesn’t go to work because she doesn’t understand English. So I go to work after school, and I stay after school like four days a week. So I stayed after school until 4:00 and I learned more and talked to the teacher. How can I get support, how can I learn more and better than like doing nothing? It’s only one hour, but it was good for immigrant students… they just want to learn more, and they just want to finish their homework because they don’t understand their class. So it’s tough for the first years. The first year is a tough year. Everything is like new and it’s so hard to learn. And I don’t know, I just focus on the things I had to do.

Kyaw Reh’s narrative shows not only the academic time and energy needed for ELLs to pass the Regents Exam, but also the extra demands placed on immigrant and refugee youth who must balance their educational aspirations with the obligation to support their family both financially and through interpretive work (Orellana 2009).

The challenge of the Regents Exam and the power it held over their futures was evident in many students’ comments about their struggle to graduate. Carmen, for example, told me what it was like for her after failing the exam several times:

Like inside of me, I said ‘If I don’t pass these Regents, I will not be able to visit my family or go out in the summer or go out with my friends or anything.’ I cried because I wanted to pass, and I wanted success. So I studied and I passed… I remember Christmas passed and I didn’t celebrate. I was just studying and studying and studying trying to pass my Regents, and thank god I did.

For Carmen, the importance of the Regents Exam weighed so heavily on her that she was willing to forego social events and holidays with family and friends in order to make time to pass the exams. Indeed some students were so eager to begin studying for the Regents that they often began to press teachers into using class time to prepare for the tests. In Mrs. O’Leary’s class one day, for example, students sat quietly reading a book of their choice. Mrs. O’Leary had told me that she was utilizing more unstructured time for reading because students responded positively
to being able to choose their own books to read. Suddenly, Ibrahim put his book down and asked, “Miss, when’s our next test?” Exasperatedly and with a hint of irony, Mrs. O’Leary replied, “Can you stop worrying about tests for just one day?” Later that month, Sharif approached Mr. Johansen and complained, “It’s been 20 days and we haven’t done any essays or DBQ [Document-based questions, part of the Regents U.S. History Exam]!” Mr. Johansen calmly informed him that they would be working on them later in the year, and that he should come after school for Regents review.

Due to the challenges that the Regents presented, several participants in this study were at risk of losing their ambition to graduate and internalized feelings of failure as a result of their performance on the exams. Even academically-successful students cited negative feelings about their own aptitudes when taking the Regents. Khadijah, for example, said she “felt so stupid” when she admitted that it took her several attempts to pass the Regents, and Carmen told me that the exams made her “feel dumb.” As the exams approached towards the end of the school year, low morale was especially apparent. Classes normally with over twenty students now had only half of their desks occupied. In the beginning of class one day late in the year, Mr. Anderson facetiously announced, “It’s your favorite time of the year: Regents Review!” He began to call out the names of at least ten students who still needed to pass the English Regents, but nearly all of those students were not present. Mr. Anderson groaned, “Everybody who needs to be here is absent.”

Although this study has focused primarily on college-bound ELLs, prospective dropouts were impossible not to notice. An Afghani student whose attendance had been spotty throughout the year was approached by Mr. Anderson at the end of class one day. “You’re close,” he said, “you can graduate in June.” “I’m not coming in June,” the young man looked up and replied, “I
got a job.” Mr. Anderson questioned the boy, “What job? What are you going to do without a diploma?” He simply shrugged his shoulders and gave no answer. Mr. Anderson wearily said to him, “Okay well that is your decision.” Muu Wah, a Karen refugee, described the near impossibility for students who arrive in high school with only a few years to pass the Regents Exams before aging out: “I didn’t pass any Regents because my English was low, and I had less time. I didn’t pass it. I go just two years to high school and I am already 21… it’s not enough time.” She paused and then continued, “And then I got a job and I worked. I do housekeeping [at Parkside Med]. And I got married, and I’m going to have a baby.”

Indeed some students who arrived with only a few years left before aging out of school told me that they were dissuaded from having any expectations to graduate. Lily, who arrived at age 19, explained:

When I came here they [staff at the resettlement agency] told me… “Even if you go to high school, it’s going to be hard because you don’t speak English and lots of people dropped out from high school because it’s hard. The state exam is really hard. So it’s just going to be you’re wasting your time.” They said, “Just go to work.” But I still wanted to try.

Like many students, Lily’s high aspirations and optimism came up against the barriers of the Regents Exam, yet she was doubly-hampered by the low expectations set by the resettlement agency who suggested that she should instead enter the workforce (Fernández-Kelly 2008). Although Lily and Kyaw Reh were able to graduate high school despite facing an uphill battle, many other students recounted stories of friends and family who could not manage to pass the Regents. Karim told me he knew “a lot of people” who didn’t graduate high school, many of whom did not have high levels of education before they arrived in the United States. “They don’t have the basics like Math, Biology, and English… and that’s hard for them.” He told me about “his best friend Sayyid” who arrived the same week as he did, but at 19 was a year older than
Karim. “But he never was at school over there [in Iraq],” Karim continued, “so they put him as a junior, like for the last two years of school. And he has to learn everything since first grade in these two years to take the Regents. That’s one struggle he faced and he couldn’t handle it so he dropped out.”

Mehdi’s academic trajectory provides an instructive example of the ways in which the challenges of high-stakes exams can be heightened by the demands of family and an unforgiving education system. As Mehdi’s narratives show, the confluence of these events can conspire to level the aspirations of an otherwise highly-achieving student. I first met Mehdi in 2012 when he had just arrived from Turkey and was just beginning high school. Though only 15, Mehdi was headstrong and since he spoke English better than his older brother, he was often tasked with taking his parents to doctor and dentist appointments and communicating with the family’s landlord. While his parents had received only a few years of formal education in Afghanistan, Mehdi was an articulate and bright young man who excelled as a student despite professing not to like going to school.

In 2015, Mehdi’s father decided it would be best to move their family to Riverdale, a nearby suburb of Parkside. Mehdi explained that his younger brother had been skipping classes and when a family friend told his father of an affordable rental opportunity, he decided it would be best for his family to move to a new town and school district. Right after they moved, Mehdi’s older brother abruptly left New York State and went out west with a friend leaving Mehdi with even more familial responsibilities. Adding to these tribulations, Mehdi’s new school refused to accept some of his credits and put him into the junior cohort despite only needing two tests to graduate. With only 1% of its student population classified as English Language Learners (NYSED 2016), Mehdi felt isolated and unable to keep up with the courses in his new school: “I
used to get all these notes home about how good of a student I was, but at Riverdale, I didn’t even think I would graduate,” he explained. A year later, he returned to Parkside High hoping that he would be able to pass the final two Regents Exams he needed in order to graduate. He was confronted by friends and staff who were surprised that he hadn’t graduated yet:

I came here my counselor and teachers were all surprised and said, “Oh you’re not graduating? You had four months until you graduation and what happened, you’re still here another year?” So that really made me upset and broke my heart… like I don’t want to go to school anymore. I’m not even thinking about going to college after high school. Like this whole thing breaks my heart so much that I don’t even want to do it anymore.

Mehdi’s comments above tragically illustrate the consequences that delayed graduation can have on student aspirations. In this case, the challenge of finishing high school was exacerbated by family obligations and an unaccommodating school district as he dutifully followed his parents to Riverdale where he was reclassified as a junior and prevented from graduating. As Fernández-Kelly and Portes (2008) note, family structure and birth order can play an important role in the academic trajectory taken by immigrant youth. In Mehdi’s case, familial obligations included the sacrifice of academic security at Parkside for the sake of his younger brother’s educational future.

When Mehdi wasn’t working delivering food for a local pizzeria, he was spending time under the hood of a car. His future aspiration was to graduate high school, enroll in a certification course at VVCC and eventually become a certified mechanic. Yet, as the school year went on I saw Mehdi less and less. His friend Abbas eventually told me that Mehdi had accumulated so many absences that he was only able to graduate if he started taking night classes. “I’m not sure if he’s going to the classes though,” Abbas told me with a frustrated shrug of his shoulders. Months went by until I ran into Mehdi outside of the school one day. “How are you doing?” I asked. “I’m here and there,” he told me and made a so-so gesture with his hand.
He went on to describe how some of his friends are now in college and that he felt ashamed when he tells them he’s still in high school, adding:

I just don’t want to go to school anymore because – it’s not that I’m tired of it – but I’ve been in this school for five years now. Instead of graduating last year, this is my fifth year here. That’s why I don’t like it. I don’t want to come here! I lost my motivation for school.

A month later, I saw Mehdi at the ENL Department’s yearly potluck. As we sat and ate, he told me that he was taking night classes and expected to graduate at the end of the year. I congratulated him and asked, “Will you miss it here?” “Yeah I will miss it,” he said, then quickly added, “But it’s hard to enjoy it while you’re here.”

As demonstrated by the data above, the positive aspirations of students struggling to graduate from high school were often leveled by the challenges of the Regents Exam. While students across all class backgrounds found the test difficult, well-educated students from middle-class backgrounds had more success than those with interrupted education or from lower class backgrounds (though age upon arrival was a crucial factor in determining how much time students had to pass the exams). The persistence of some students, as demonstrated by their determination to take the Regents four and five times, helped to offset these barriers, but the leveled aspirations incurred by many students and academic demands of the tests sometimes proved to be a challenge too hard to overcome. In sum, the Regents Exam poses a formidable barrier to ELLs yearning for postsecondary education.

**Conclusion**

As Menken (2008) and Mahon (2010) note, the regime of accountability brought on by NCLB has increased focus on the schooling of ELLs and their unique instructional requirements. Identifying ELLs as an “accountability group” for which schools must show academic gains has
resulted in raised expectations and heightened attention paid to students whose lagging rates of attainment had gone relatively unnoticed (Gándara and Rumberger 2009; Menken 2008). However, as these authors conclude, the positives of NCLB and other such educational policies which have relied on high-stakes exams to assess ELLs are greatly outweighed by the negatives. These drawbacks include a wider influence of testing on curriculum and pedagogy, the decline in aspirations and optimism among ELLs, and a drop in attainment among ELLs as a result of their inability to pass graduation exams. Furthermore, these scholars have questioned the validity and appropriateness of such exams for ELLs whose aptitudes in English are often examined on tests which are designed to assess other subjects (Mahon 2010; Menken 2008).

Data from this chapter validate previous scholarship which has argued that high-stakes exams have had a deleterious effect on the academic attainment of ELLs and narrowed curriculum and pedagogy in order to focus on the content of the exams (Lipman 2011; Mahon 2010; Menken 2008; Ravitch 2010). The power of high-stakes exams was evidenced in the data presented above as teachers and students at Parkside High School grappled with the effects of the Regents Exam which restructured class time and hampered student aspirations and attainment. Students’ models of meritocracy were challenged by the weight of the Regents Exam as they both questioned its fairness while claiming that anyone could pass it by working hard enough. Teachers, hamstrung by requirements of the Regents, often felt pressured to align their classes closely to Regents yet also strove to create spaces for critique and discussion about the demands of the exams.

Lastly, this study further demonstrates the connection between social reproduction and high-stakes testing. Although the sample size of this study is too small to be generalize about the total ELL population, the data here points to the potential for tests to stratify ELLs along class
lines. Thus, for students from lower class backgrounds and with less years of education than their middle-class peers, tests pose a significant gatekeeper to social mobility. Although many of the students in this study showed remarkable persistence to pass the Regents, the effects of high-stakes exams on the ELL population threatens to relegate these students to the low-wage, un-credentialed workforce. As history shows, tests have had a sordid past in stigmatizing members of lower classes, people of color, and immigrant groups (Gould 1981; Sacks 1999). Under the framework of neoliberalism, tests have become the primary form of what Bourdieu called “selection operations” – powerful mechanisms which serve to reproduce the social order (1998. 20). Nonetheless, the persistence of students and nascent critiques facilitated by teachers reminds us that all ideological configurations and structural constraints, no matter how powerful, are subject to transformation at the hands of agents (Gramsci 1971; Ortner 1984). It remains to be seen whether the high aspirations and persistence of ELLs at Parkside High will withstand the barriers they face in graduating.
Chapter 6
High School to Higher Education: College and Social Mobility Among English Language Learners

As previous chapters have argued, English Language Learners face a set of daunting challenges to graduating high school. For those entering college, the transition to higher education, too, was replete with obstacles as a lack of knowledge about the college process and concerns over the quality of community colleges provoked feelings of uncertainty and anxiety among prospective college students. Current and former college students reflected on substantial adversity which they experienced transitioning to college due to the increasing academic rigor and high levels of English demanded in college classes as well as the fear of not fulfilling their family’s high expectations. While some participants were able draw on class-based knowledge or individual motivation to traverse the pathway to a four-year institution, most college-bound participants, matching national trends, were likely to enroll in community colleges noted for their low cost and high rates of attrition. The concentration of ELLs in these two-year institutions suggests that the stratification along class and linguistic lines evident in high schools continues into postsecondary settings.

Social Reproduction and Higher Education

According to theories of Social Reproduction, the system of higher education serves to maintain social stratification by funneling middle- and upper-middle-class students into prestigious, private four-year universities while working-class and marginalized students of color either drop out in search of vocational or service work or pursue degrees at community colleges and public universities (Bowles and Gintis 1976). As Gamoran writes, “When most students reach a given
level of schooling, inequality re-emerges through differentiation within that level. For example as high school became a mass institution, separate tracks emerged that tended to be stratified by social class” (2008, 173). The split between four year and two year colleges can be explained by a similar logic (Brint and Karabel 1989) as students attending high schools which track them into four-year private Universities maintain a distinct advantage in the labor market to those who are less likely to enter prestigious postsecondary institutions (Davidson 2011; Demerath 2009).

In 2011, for example, college graduates, on average, earned nearly $28 per hour while those with high school degrees earned about $15.89. Although educated workers have long expected to earn more wages than those without credentials, the gulf between the wages for those with and without college degrees has widened in the last several decades during the breakdown of the Fordist-style economy of the early and mid-20th-century. Since 1973, the wage gap between high-school- and college-educated workers has increased from under 8 dollars to over n12 (Mishel et al. 2012). Additionally, those with college degrees are about half as likely to be unemployed than those with high school diplomas (U.S. Department of Labor 2017). These statistics point to the fact that college degrees are significant factors in employment status and class position and that the importance of a college degree has grown since the transition of the U.S. to a postindustrialized economy characterized by a two-tier job market in which positions capable of supporting a middle-class lifestyle increasingly require college education. As Louie argues:

Never in American history has the transition to college been as significant as it is today. In the last 30 years, a college education, in particular, the bachelor’s degree, has become the key to higher earnings, and overall, to a middle-class lifestyle in the United States. In an increasingly globalized economy, privileging information and communication technologies, it is more than likely that this emphasis on higher education in the American labor market will continue in the future (2007, 2223).
As discussed in the Chapter One, New York State’s workers have been subject to similar experiences of deindustrialization as half a million manufacturing jobs were lost from 1967 to 1990 (Lipman 2004). In Parkside, job growth is highly polarized with stable, well-paying work largely confined to positions in education, government, and healthcare requiring high levels of education while low-wage work in service and hospitality has grown alongside professional work (New York State Department of Labor 2017). These trends mirror the statewide economic portrait as “Leisure and Hospitality” employment has grown 22% from 2009 to 2014. During the same period of time, manufacturing jobs declined 5% although nearly the same percentage of construction jobs were added (New York Office of the State Comptroller 2015). Although the proportion of the New York State’s workforce belonging to unions has dropped drastically over the 20th century, it remains one of the most highly unionized workforces in the country at 24.1% compared with the national average at 10.9% (Milkman and Luce 2016, 2). In New York State, such workers earn an average of $9 per hour more than those not belonging to unions. However, as Milkman and Luce point out, only 13% of immigrants arriving to the New York State after the year 2000 work in unionized positions (2016, 18). Union membership is highly significant as the proportion of unionized workers is highly correlated to wage stratification and income inequality in the U.S. (Mishel and Rothstein 2007; Mishel et al. 2012). There are, however, some positives offsetting the bleak economic forecast for undereducated youth: Governor Cuomo has released plans to increase the minimum wage from $12 an hour to $15 by the end of 2019 (New York Department of Labor 2017). Furthermore, New York is one of the few states in the country to have recovered wage losses incurred during the Great Recession (New York Office of the State of Comptroller 2015).
Nonetheless, the polarized labor market and wage inequality have raised skepticism about meritocracy and opportunity in the U.S. and affirmed the connections between political-economy and schooling. Those who believe higher education will lead to social mobility must contend with rising tuition courses and run the risk of accruing massive debt as well as the inflated value of diplomas. As Kroeger and Gould (2017) report, the cost of a four-year education at a public school has increased 124.7 percent from 1984-1985 to 2014-2015. These rising costs have been met by increased scales of borrowing; between 2004 and 2014 alone, the number of student loan borrowers increased by 92 percent, while the average student loan balances increased 74 percent (Kroeger and Gould 2017). In 2010, student college debt ballooned to over a trillion dollars, overtaking credit debt in the United States. Currently, all college debt is now close to 1.5 trillion which is as much as credit and auto debt combined (Cilluffo 2017). The massive amount of debt in the United States held by college students serves as a warning to prospective students and motivates them to pursue degrees at community colleges. Meanwhile, those who graduate college saddled with debt are often pushed into low-paying work for which they are overqualified as the economy cannot accommodate the number of college graduates entering the labor force (Mishel et al. 2012). Furthermore, the U.S. government, even as wages have stagnated for decades, has continually rolled back the meager welfare benefits and unemployment safety net which was afforded to families struggling to stay above the poverty line (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). In turn, an expansive penal system has come to take the place of managing impoverished populations in the U.S. (Wacquant 2009).

The following sections provide insight into the challenges faced by ELLs as they struggle with the college process and academic demands required in postsecondary settings. While participants clearly recognized the economic importance of a college diploma, they were often
caught between the high expectations of parents and the cautionary advice given by peers that may serve to level high aspirations. Though immigrant students attend college in high numbers, their concentration in community colleges noted for their high rates of attrition threatens the potential for students to complete a four-year degree. In an economic context offering few options to those without college education, the attainment of a Bachelor’s Degree remains crucial to the prospect of social mobility.

**Immigrants and Higher Education**

Immigrants and refugees are both more likely to enroll in college than other minority groups in the United States and persist until they complete their degree (Kim and Díaz 2013: 65). Despite their over-achievement, many immigrants and refugees have characteristics which put them at risk for dropping out college than native-born students. According to Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco, more than half of immigrant students at college are over the age of 24, one-third have dependents, and three-quarters work either part or full-time (2011, 156). Many immigrant students also have the added responsibility of supporting their parents financially as well as providing help translating and guiding their parents who may not speak English (Orellana 2009). As students whose parents have college degrees are more likely to complete college themselves, immigrant and refugee students, whose parents by and large do not have postsecondary credentials, are at a disadvantage compared with the native-born population (Koyama 2007). Furthermore, immigrant and refugee college students, despite have great financial need for aid often lack information about how to finance their college careers. Possibly stemming from confusion over their eligibility for federal loans, immigrants and refugees are less likely than other student groups to apply for loans and more likely to cover much of their college
costs out of pocket (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco 2011, 157). Immigrant students entering college are also more likely than native-born students to require remediation with up to 80% underprepared for college-level rigor (Conway 2010, 225).

As illustrated in previous chapters, sharp class stratification exists both between ELLs and mainstream students and within the ELL population itself. This stratification is evident in higher education, too, as immigrants and refugees with lower SES and who were formerly classified as English Language Learners are more likely to attend community colleges rather than four-year colleges and universities (Conway 2009). Indeed, the development of community colleges have been described by scholars as a “shock absorber” for four-year institutions which feared being overrun with working-class and students of color in the 20th century. Gelber argues that community colleges historically served two social functions: to “providing vocational training for high school graduates who were uninterested or unable to earn a bachelor’s degree, and supply the general education necessary to enable students to transfer to four-year college” (2007, 2265). In a more critical vein, Brint and Karabel (1989) write that the main function of community colleges has been “aspiration management.” For students lower and working-class students wishing to join the middle-class, community colleges have functioned to divert these aspirations to vocational and two-year tracks which often do not end in four-year degrees (Brint and Karabel 1989). By transitioning from liberal arts and transfer programs towards vocational programs and terminal degrees, community colleges serve the function of maintaining social stratification at the postsecondary level (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Although attrition rates and growth in terminal degree programs at community colleges lend credence to assertions made by Brint and Karabel (1989), the data presented below, in fact, suggest that four-year colleges may be less receptive to the needs of ELLs than community colleges which are better-suited to aid
low income and minority populations (Dougherty 2001). Even if community colleges can provide additional opportunities for disadvantaged populations, transitioning to a four-year institution remains a crucial obstacle to attaining a Bachelor’s Degree.

Immigrant and refugee students, though enrolling at postsecondary institutions at a high rate, often end up in community colleges where transfer rates have historically remained below 50 percent (Brint and Karabel 1989, 230). This remains true today as only a third of community college students transfer to four-year institutions, and among that third only 42 percent complete their diploma within six years (Jenkins and Fink 2016). Although the specific rate of immigrant students transferring from community colleges to four-year universities is not measured, their presence at two-year institutions is sizeable. One estimate places the number of community college students “from immigrant background” at about 25 percent (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco 2011). The attraction of immigrants and refugees to community colleges is based on numerous factors. Financially-speaking, community colleges cost approximately one-tenth of what a four-year institution costs, making them a sensible choice for low-income populations. Additionally, community colleges are usually located close to home which allows immigrant and refugee students to continue to advocate for their parents and to support them economically. Lastly, community colleges are open admission and often offer assistance to students learning English which provides much-needed support for students formerly designated as ELL or with poor grades and test scores (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco 2011). Although community colleges are well-suited to support ELLs, their underrepresentation at four-year universities and private schools creates large disparities in economic and social capital, or what Louie calls a “prestige gap” (2007) which other students gain from four-year, private institutions (Davidson 2011; Demerath 2009; Ho 2009). Furthermore, the high numbers of
immigrant students in need of remediation upon entering college can interfere with their ability to successfully complete a four-year degree (Conway 2010).

Despite the high attrition rates, community colleges have expanded in size and scope in the last decade. Calling for an “additional 5 million community college graduates by 2020,” President Obama increased public funding to community colleges and pushed to make them free for all students (Sloane 2016). Indeed, the last decade has seen a steady proportion of students attend community colleges; over 40% of undergraduate students (nearly 9 million students) attend community college (NCES 2016). Students of color and from working-class and poor backgrounds also tend to be overrepresented in community colleges. Among the undergraduate population about as many White and Asian students attend community colleges as four-year institutions, yet twice as many African American and Hispanic/Latino students are enrolled in community colleges than in four-year universities (Ma and Baum 2016). Degree completion rates vary drastically for the community college population, too, as Black and Hispanic students have lower rates of degree attainment (45.9% and 55%, respectively) compared to the rates of Asians (71.7%) and White students (67.2%) (Shapiro et al. 2016). Social class also is highly significant in this divide since students at community colleges are more likely than those at four-year colleges to belong to the lowest income quartile and be the first members of their families to attend college (Ma and Baum 2016).

As discussed by previous scholars and echoed by the participants of this study, the barriers faced by ELLs in entering college can have damaging effects on the high aspirations and optimism which have been identified as the primary explanation for their academic success (Kao and Raleigh 2010; Louie 2007). The high aspirations articulated by participants in previous chapters are further complicated by the strong desire to fulfill high family expectations and the
leveling in high hopes by struggling peers and coworkers. Declines in optimism and aspirations for these students could have negative impacts on the capacity for ELLs to both enter college and finish with a four-year degree. As Jaffe-Walter and Lee write, “The social-class split within the immigrant population reflects the realities of economic opportunities in the global city, characterized by increasing inequalities and the proliferation of low-end service jobs that offer few opportunities for social mobility” (2011, 281). The economic context of the U.S. suggests that social mobility for ELLs entering the labor market without college degrees is an unlikely outcome. The differential postsecondary success among ELLs also points to the significance of class factors and continued process of social reproduction.

**Parkside High and the Pathway to Higher Education**

As noted in the previous chapter, the participants of this study, like those identified in the scholarly literature, possess high aspirations and generally positive attitudes towards schooling which extended to higher education as well. Despite the fact that nearly all college-bound students participating in this study told me they planned to attend Valley View Community College (VVCC), a mid-sized institution serving 13,000 students largely from the surrounding region, many students professed their desire to attend more prestigious, four-year universities. For example, in class one day students began asking me about “my university” and whether it was good. I hesitantly told them it was, but that there was nothing wrong with starting at a community college and that it was how I began my college career. Mo turned to me and said, “Yeah… but I want to go to a good school. I should go to Parkside State.” Samuel, a Congolese student who had been listening to our conversation scoffed and said, “Parkside State? You should be thinking about Harvard – go for Harvard.” Samuel’s comment illustrates the
recognition of students that private, four-year colleges are highly-valued in the U.S. and can provide students with precious social and cultural capital as well as casting doubt on the quality of community colleges (Brantlinger 2003; Demerath 2009). However, the underrepresentation of first-generation immigrant students at such institutions demonstrates that such aspirations are often difficult to fulfill. For immigrant and refugee students longing for Harvard, beginning at a community college can be a difficult pill to swallow.

Participants also recognized a college education as a crucially important piece to social mobility in the U.S. and often viewed college as the ends to a high school education. As Aziz put it, “High school wasn’t a big challenge; it’s more about what you do after.” For example, In U.S. History class one day, Mr. Johanson began to describe to students the importance of defending their positions in writing. “You need to do this in college guys,” he began. “How many of you want to go to college?” Immediately about two-thirds of the students raised their hands. Slowly, the rest of the students, looking around at their classmates, began to raise their hands until there were no students without his or her hands raised in the class. Several students who were aging out of school and had little hope of graduating reluctantly lifted their arms. Much like the process documented in the previous chapter in which the Regents Exam had taken precedent over other educational goals, academic knowledge was reframed as solely means to a postsecondary education. The fact that likely dropouts still professed a desire to go to college (or at least appear to desire to go to college) attests to the widespread recognition of the importance of postsecondary education in the contemporary economic context (Feliciano and Lanuza 2016).

During an English class later in the year, Mr. Anderson handed out a short article written by a former graduate student. The student, in order to pay for tuition costs, decided to forego housing expenses by living in a van during the semester and utilizing the University’s facilities
as much as possible. The article went into detail about the challenges this cost-saving measure created for the young man as he shivered the nights away, eating Ramen noodles for dinner and using gym showers every morning. Yet, the author concluded, because he had saved so much money, he would consider another semester living in his van. At the end of the article, Mr. Anderson asked the class, “How many of you would do that to save money for college?” Mo’s hand immediately went up, as did Sara, Miriam’s sister. Slowly, a few more hands went up in the class. Bashir explained, “It’s so expensive, you have to do stuff like that.” Though relative newcomers, these moments show how students were highly aware of the “prestige gap” between two- and four-year colleges and the extreme economic burden of a postsecondary education in the U.S. Such factors bore heavily on their choices and attitudes towards college.

Matching their high aspirations to attend college, most students described their ultimate career goals to be of four choices: doctor, engineer, lawyer, or pilot. Several students described how their career aspirations were influenced by parents who pushed them towards well-paying, high-status positions. Leila, for example, framed her future aspiration as a doctor as a choice made not by her, but by her family:

Yeah, because most of the time your parents choose your career. The most respectful careers are like engineering, doctor, and what’s the other thing… I forgot the third one. These two and another one that are the things that you can be. So if you are that, you’ll get a lot of respect from people, and it’s like you bring family honor and stuff like that. These are the three careers you have. And when your parents choose for you, you don’t have to think about it.

When Karim told me that he was considering becoming a nurse, I told him that it sounded like a good plan. He replied, “Not in my parents’ perspective. You gotta either be a doctor, engineer or a lawyer.” Aziz, sitting next to us nodded his head adding, “That is it. Anything else is not good.” As these comments show, college education was valued not simply for its potential to generate economic mobility, but for the intangible resources of honor and respect which had
significant value for students’ families. For Aziz, pursuing a career in nursing might have made economic sense but it contrasted with the high expectations of his family who pushed him towards more prestigious and lucrative occupations. As we will see in later sections, many students struggled to balance the high expectations of their parents with the leveling advice given by friends and peers who remarked to participants on the difficulties of fulfilling such high aspirations.

Carmen’s parents also influenced her academic and career trajectories. Currently enrolled at VVCC, she told me that her plan for after high school had actually been to become a police officer or enlist in the army but her parents refused to allow her to do either. “I had to stick with college,” she said. Yet, not all parents pressured their children towards high-status, professional positions. Carlos, who aspired to be a film director, told me that his parents supported his goal and didn’t pressure him to choose a professional career. “They didn’t go to college, so they want me to follow like my own dreams, they don’t want me to do things that make them happy. They want to see me happy, so they want me to follow my own path, and it took me a while to find what I wanted to be.” As subsequent sections argue, obligations to uphold family expectations powerfully influenced the aspirations and academic trajectories of participants. Even though Carlos felt free to pursue personal interests at college, he had serious doubts about whether this direction would yield economic security.

Many students also recognized the economic context of the U.S. and reflected on what their futures would be like without a college education. As the preceding section makes clear, the wage gap and differences in levels of employment between those with and without college education is critical; those without higher education are unlikely to attain class mobility or (re)gain entrance into the middle class (Mishel et al. 2012). As Aziz put it, “With no degree,
you’re just going to work at a gas station or McDonald’s. You’re nothing – you’re just going to work your whole life for 11 dollars. That’s nothing.” Mahmoud expressed the consequences of not graduating and continuing on to postsecondary education. “If they don’t graduate, they destroy their lives,” he explained, “They go out and work at the market or the stores, but they leave the school. Then they see that they cannot make it without college.” Daniel told me that, unlike his friends, he wasn’t looking forward to college but felt that he had to go because of his mother. “She says I have to go,” he told me. “Why does she want you to go?” I asked. “Well if you graduate college, you can get a job easily and get paid more,” he responded. As Mo put it, “If you don’t go to college, you won’t get a job… or you won’t get the job you want.” As demonstrated in subsequent sections, the high expectations of family often conflicted with cautionary tales of peers which both served to both motivate students to succeed and to temper their high career and academic aspirations.

Several students described friends and family members who didn’t complete high school and were working service jobs with little hope they could complete a diploma. Maria told me, for example, that several of her friends dropped out of high school and do not plan to complete their general equivalency diploma. “They [do] cleaning or sometimes they work at McDonalds or Burger King… I am like, ‘You don’t want to go to college?’ and they say, ‘No’ because they didn’t finish high school. And the GED is hard to get. They say, ‘I’m not going to waste my time because it’s hard to get the GED.’” Kuu Reh, an 18-year-old Karenni girl who fled Burma as a child and lived most of her life in a refugee camp in Thailand before arriving in Parkside in 2009, told me that her older brother couldn’t manage to graduate from Parkside High School because he arrived when he was already 20 years old. After going to school for only one year, he aged out and was forced into the low-wage labor force bouncing from job to job. He currently
works at the recycling center along with Kuu Reh’s father. Like Kuu Reh, Muu Reh’s siblings both dropped out of high school and began working to help support their family. One sibling works at Wal-Mart, while the other works alongside her parents a commercial laundry service.

Many students, too, understood the risk in attending community college. When I asked Bashir about his plans for after graduation, he told me, “Oh, definitely right to college. If you take a break, you will get lazy. I’m going to VVCC for two years and then I will transfer somewhere. But if you take a break, then you won’t go back.” Akash described a similar story about his cousin and the dangers of attrition a VVCC:

My cousin was a really sharp student. He studied at Valley View and studied Criminal Justice. He went there for like a year and a half, and then he got a full-time job and started making 2,000 dollars a month at Parkside Medical Center. He just took one semester off and after that, he took one class in the next semester. After that, he’s just totally off. Now he’s just “Oh I don’t like this major, I’ll change my major. I’ll go to this, I’ll go to that. I think he just passed three years.” I hope the best for him, and wish the best for him. But let’s see, I can’t force him. I tried to convince him a lot: “Hey just go to college and finish it.”

Sadiq had a similar perspective on community colleges seeing both advantages and disadvantages to the two-year institutions:

We all went to VVCC because they had really good programs and financial aid and stuff like that. So we went to that, and some students graduate and they take a break to make some money. Then they go back to the college. As a community college, my point of view about it, if you go to a community college, you really don’t need to take a break unless you’re going to a University. You got to take a loan for the University, there’s no financial aid. Even if there is, there’s only a little portion of it, and you have to pay the rest. That’s when you need to take a break. For two years, getting an Associate’s Degree, just go right away and you’ll finish it. The sooner you’ll finish it, the quicker you will get a job. I agree you will get a job with a diploma, but it’s definitely not the same as the Associates Degree. Unfortunately, many students don’t realize that. Or some of them drop out of school and they are just interested in making a business or making money.

In sum, the students at Parkside High clearly recognized the significance of a college education and set their sights on a degree which they believed could facilitate social mobility. Students’
high aspirations for college were buttressed by parents who strongly pushed them towards prestigious careers needing high levels of education. Furthermore, students’ own experiences in the low-wage service industry, as well as those of their family and friends, propelled them towards college with the recognition that their social positions were unlikely to improve without postsecondary credentials. These cautionary tales motivated students to perform well in college, but also served to undermine the high aspirations of students who began to wonder about their own potential to fulfill the steep expectations of their parents.

The following sections demonstrate how barriers facing students in transitioning to college – much like the Regents Exam discussed in the previous chapter – are implicated in the leveled aspirations of ELLs. Many students who were able to overcome the challenges of the Regents were then confronted with their lack of knowledge about the college process involving applying, enrolling, and paying for school. The importance of class position proved significant as students from middle-class families with college educated-parents or those who had spent more than five years in the U.S. were more likely to have accrued the cultural capital needed to navigate the college process. However, even for those ELLs who do enter college, the underrepresentation of ELLs at four-year universities, especially private institutions, suggests a growing “prestige gap” between ELLs and mainstream students which could ultimately translate to lower rates of social mobility for immigrant students (Louie 2007).

Anxiety, Uncertainty, and Pride: Going to (Community) College

Although students generally displayed high aspirations for college and awareness of the economic need for postsecondary credentials, most college-bound students in this study also articulated high levels of uncertainty and anxiety about college. These feelings were borne out by
current college students and recent graduates who described how high school had not prepared them for the challenges of postsecondary education. In turn, many of these current college students described leveled career aspirations as the paths to engineer and doctor became seemingly impossible to attain.

As much scholarly literature has discussed, guidance counselors play an important role in the college admissions process, as they are tasked with guiding students towards a college selection and a major. However, debates exist as to the importance of guidance counselors, how to measure their impact, and the ways in which they manage interactions with low income or students of color (Erickson and Shultz 1982; Gándara and Bial 2001; Hossler, Schmidt, and Vesper 1999; McDonough 1997). Students at Parkside High seemed divided on the quality and engagement of their guidance counselors, and there was no guidance counselor specifically designated to handle the ELL population at Parkview. Some seemed doubtful of the advice given to them by their counselors. Carlos, in class one day, told me he had just come from his guidance counselor’s office. “How did it go?” I asked. “Good, I guess… I think I will go to Valley View for film. My guidance counselor said it was a good idea. I guess it is the right choice, but I don’t know.” Other students had mixed feelings about their counselors. Mahmoud told me that his counselor “was always too busy for” him and that he had to make his decisions by himself, though Sadiq had told me that his counselor “helped [him] a lot.” Khadijah, too, said that she “received a lot of help from my guidance counselor. She kind of guided me through the whole process. She helped me apply to college…. And I always come back to visit her, and I always update her about what I’m doing – because she helped me the most.” Like Khadijah, Soe Rah told me that his guidance counselor “helped” a lot, and that she was well-suited to counsel him as she “knows the Karen people very well.” As Portes and Fernández-Kelly (2008) write, the
presence of a “significant other” – a teacher, sibling, or community member – can make all the difference in the academic trajectories of immigrant students. Though some participants seemed to highly value their counselors’ assistance, others felt ambivalent or resentful for their perceived lack of help.

For college-bound immigrants and refugees on their way to graduating high school, college represented a profound transition and set of new challenges. Despite their high aspirations, many students began to doubt the possibility of realizing their career goals and wondered if they would be overwhelmed in college. Carlos, for example, had been taking video editing classes in high school and seemed intent on becoming a director. Yet, as he discussed his future, he questioned whether this career path would grant him financial security despite his personal interest in it:

I’m not ready for college. I am planning on going to college, but I’m not ready for college. So after high school… my parents want me to go to college, and I also want to go to college but I’m not ready for college – that’s the thing. I don’t really know what I want to be. I want to study for behind the cameras, like with connecting and setting up the cameras, working behind the computers, taking shots, and that kind of stuff. So that’s the kind of stuff that I like, but I think it’s too much and too risky I guess. I want to have a good job.

Carlos was the only student in the study who articulated an individual career pursuit which diverted from the more prestigious occupational paths which other students felt their parents expected of them. However, his comments above illustrate not only the lack of preparedness of many ELLs transitioning to college, but also the difficulties in reconciling personal interests with a career more likely to yield economic security. Even with an obvious interest and talent in film, Carlos worried that pursuing an individual goal was “risky” compared to another career path which might guarantee social mobility.
Like Carlos, many other students expressed uncertainties about the college process. One day in class, for example, I asked Mo how his weekend was. He immediately began to tell me about the “research” he had been doing to help him learn about going to college. He explained that he went to two open houses over the weekend: one at a small private college located on the edge of Parkside, and the other at VVCC. He told me that he had learned a lot about each school and “gained experience” about college, but the application and enrollment process still seemed to intimidate him as he continued to ask me questions about the differences between the two prospects. “I want to do something in the medical field, maybe a nurse,” he told me, “But I don’t know which [college] to go to first.”

Karim expressed similar emotions when I asked him whether he was excited for college. “I’m actually afraid of graduating, I’m afraid of college because I heard that college is a lot harder.” He continued, “In high school, I see a lot of help that they provide here for us. It’s easy if you can give some effort and some time, you will pass it easily. But in college, you are alone and you have to go through it.” Mariel echoed these fears over the challenges that college could bring. She said, “I am nervous and excited [about college]. My sister said, ‘You’re not going to have friends there because you’re going to focus and study. It’s a lot different than high school.’” Like Karim and Carlos, Mariel was an excellent student who had a proficient level of English and a strong educational background before arriving in the United States despite all three sets of parents lacking a college education. Yet all three students told me that they planned to attend VVCC after they graduated. In these cases, peer and sibling influence mitigated high aspirations and tempered the optimistic views of prospective college students. However, the knowledge imparted to these students, even when disquieting, provided foresight into the challenges that awaited them and could prove to be advantageous (Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008).
As discussed in the introduction, I was often asked questions about college by students in class. Even though I was clear that my position at the University was as a graduate student and researcher, many students inquired about the college admission process hoping that I could help them. Such questions illustrated the uncertainty which students had about college as well as anxieties regarding two-year colleges. During one class, I became quickly inundated with questions as a student asked me if I thought community colleges were good. I gave my typical answer which was that I believed it was a good choice and that I attended a community college for two years before continuing on for my Bachelor’s Degree. Questions came flying in: “How many credits do I need?” “What is the GPA I will need?” “How can I transfer?” “Is it harder than high school?” I was particularly surprised when one day in class, Amadou, a student from West Africa, told me that he didn’t want to go to community college because it would be an extra two years of college. Ibrahim was sitting next to him overheard the comment and responded before I could explain: “No, no, you go for two years and then two more when you get to the bigger college.”

Worries over whether community college were “good enough” or would cause them to lose ground were well-founded considering the low rate of four-year degree completion for students who start at two-year schools. During one classroom conversation, Mr. Anderson was attempting to tell students that the major difference between community colleges and four-year, public schools was the cost. “There’s not much of a difference once you get your Bachelor’s Degree,” he assured students. A student in the back of the class scoffed, “You don’t have to do anything to get into VVCC… you just go.” Sharif responded, “Yeah, that’s why everybody from Parkside High goes there.” Leila proudly asserted, “I’m going to another school because I want
to be a doctor.” However, in a later interview, Leila seemed unsure of how to put her aspirations into practice. She reflected on her lack of knowledge about the college admissions process:

I don’t know about it [college]. I’m not sure. Everything goes back to … I didn’t go to high school to learn about what college, like what do I do in college, and what I should take in college and stuff like that. And here you have to ask learn by yourself. But then there they teach you. When you’re in high school they teach you. In high school you choose your career – in my country – and when you do that, they teach you that after you finish this, you go to college, if you want to do this you take this, and take that… but now I don’t know, so I have to like ask for myself and find out. And I don’t know anything about colleges. I know the names of them. I know Parkside State, Valley View, I know Jackson [a small, private college in Parkside]. I’ve been there, too, but I don’t know about them.

Reminiscent of Samuel’s offhand comment about Harvard, the above remarks suggest that students are well-aware of the differences in quality and prestige between public and private, two-year and four-year colleges in the United States. Yet even confident and highly-achieving students like Leila demonstrated a lack of knowledge about the college process in the U.S. and articulated uncertainty about the open process of college admissions which differed drastically from the system of postsecondary education in Libya. Such uncertainties likely meant that even students who recognized the disparities in colleges and yearned to attend a prestigious college, were still likely to end up starting at a community college.

Despite students’ anxieties regarding attending a community college, VVCC provided ENL students with many advantages to four-year institutions. For one, the financial burden of four-year colleges pushed many students towards choosing community colleges. Indeed the cost of attending VVCC ($2,750 per semester) was less than half the cost of attending the city’s largest public, four-year university ($4,775 per semester). Secondly, because community colleges were open admission, ENL students with low GPAs or SAT scores did not have to worry about being accepted to the college. Lastly, as VVCC served a large proportion of students whose first language was not English, they offered a credit-bearing course in English
Composition Course specifically for ENL students. Although VVCC did not maintain records on its ENL population (students were not administered English language exams before enrolling and only had a place to self-identify as “English Learning” on their initial application), an ENL instructor at VVCC attested to the persistence of the ENL population, commenting that their attrition rate was much lower than native-born students.

Even with the uncertainty documented in the previous section, it should be noted that these students were also incredibly proud of their achievements and still envisioned their futures brightly. The significance of college graduation for many students was illustrated vividly by Mohammed, a high-achieving Iraqi student who had lived in Parkside for the last four years. At the end of class Mohammed came up to me holding his phone and said, “I can’t wait for graduation. My uncle just graduated with a degree from Parkside State… it was amazing, the way they moved. It’s beautiful, oh my god! They walked on stage and they said his name.” He turned his phone to me with a video of the ceremony playing, and stopped it when his uncle started walking towards the stage. Pointing to his uncle’s big grin, he exclaimed, “Look at his face!” In the background family members were loudly cheering loudly his name was it was called. During another class period, Mr. Anderson had students read Robert Frost’s poem, “Happiness makes up in height for what it lacks in length.” When asked for the meaning of the poem, Karim raised his hand. “It’s like… well I waited seven years to be here, and being here makes me forget those seven years and all of those bad things.” Later in the class period, the phone in the classroom rang, and Mr. Anderson told Sharif that he had to go to the guidance office. He came back five minutes later and loudly proclaimed, “I’m going to hold the flag of my country!” The guidance counselor had apparently nominated Sharif to hold the Iraqi flag during
the graduation ceremony which was a great point of pride. In these moments anxiety and uncertainty were abated by the pride and excitement which a future at college promised.

As the preceding section shows, ELLs at Parkside have high aspirations for college but also demonstrate significant anxiety and uncertainty regarding the challenge of navigating the college process and the potential rigor of college-level academics. Many of these concerns justifiably surrounded community colleges which nearly all college-bound students planned to attend. The concentration of ELLs in community colleges as well as the differences among ELLs in their preparation and knowledge about the college process demonstrates the process of social stratification both among the ELL population and between ELLs and mainstream students. Yet, even with such monumental challenges, many ELLs exuded pride about attending college and felt determined that they would succeed academically in order to realize their lofty career aspirations. The following section explores the perspectives of former Parkside High students who attended college. Their experiences show that even academically-prepared ELLs struggle with the transition to college, and the challenges of graduating with a degree weigh heavily on the aspirations of hopeful students.

**Bumpy Transitions: Perspectives of Current and Former College Students**

The anxiety exhibited by prospective college students over their preparation for postsecondary education was validated by the comments made by current college students who described their struggles to cope with college-level courses and difficulties navigating the college process. For example, one day I ran into Mustafa, a current college student from Yemen who had come back to visit teachers at Parkside High. I asked him how he was doing and he replied wearily, “Study, sleep, repeat. That’s about it.”
Like the current high school students above, many college students commented on their unfamiliarity with the college admission process and the challenge of getting into a good school. Marie, for instance, told me she had “no idea” about what to do after she graduated from high school. She continued: “I didn’t know… it was as if I was blind, just because you’re not familiar with the American system and because of the language barrier, you’re not able to do research on your own and understand the whole process. I had no idea.” Ana, now a student at a small, private four-year University located in a city adjacent to Parkside, discussed the demands of college. “Oh, it’s completely different,” she said. “College is really hard, and you have to dedicate a lot of time. You cannot even have your own time, you cannot even watch TV. In high school, it was like a little bit easy, but college is different. Like you have to make sure that you do everything on time.” Lily, still taking classes at VVCC while working at Parkside Medical Center, hoped to get into the nursing program at a nearby four-year institution after graduated. Like Ana, she commented on the challenging transition from high school to college:

Yeah, it’s very different. It’s more work. (laughs) You know, you need to do everything by yourself now. But in high school, the teacher does everything for you. But now, you need to do everything by yourself. It’s really hard. Sometimes I’m too … I don’t know, I took sometimes a lot of subjects, and I can’t do it again so I drop off. But it’s very different than high school. It’s hard, it’s really hard.

Akash, now one year from finishing his Bachelor’s Degree in Cyber Security at Parkside State, described the challenges of transitioning from high school to college and from community college to a four-year school. Though Akash had attended a prestigious school in Dhaka where he had attained a high level of proficiency in English, he – like many other students – had a difficult time transitioning to college. “High school doesn’t really prepare you for college,” he told me. “High school was really, really easy, but after coming to college it’s totally the opposite – it’s really, really hard. I think high school should be harder,” he explained. Yet, like other students, it
was not only the classes and academic rigor which created challenges for Akash, but also the unfamiliarity with the college process. “I didn’t know anything about college, like how the credits work, how it transfers, or anything,” he said. Akash first began studying at VVCC since it was close to home and allowed him to maintain his work schedule. Describing VVCC, he said “the professors were cool, but I didn’t really like the campus and the environment.” Akash applied several times to Parkside State before getting accepted and decided that he would continue the major of Computer Science that he had begun at VVCC. However, at Parkside State, Akash struggled with his new classes: “I had to take a programming class. It was really overwhelming. Throughout the class, I drank a whole cup of black coffee. After getting out of class, I was totally messy. The semester was terrible only because of that class. Then I decided that programming is just something that’s not for me.” He then decided to change his major to Cyber Security and focus on Digital Forensics. “It’s all stuff with computers, but it’s more likely in the investigative side which I used to like as law enforcement… then I researched what I can do with it, and I heard that I can either work for the private sector or I can work for the government agency,” he explained excitedly. Although Akash admitted he lacked knowledge regarding the college process as he first entered school, his ability to transfer from VVCC and, when overwhelmed with the challenges of programming, to change his major, demonstrated a sophisticated capacity to navigate educational institutions, a trademark of middle-class cultural capital (Brantlinger 2003; Lareau 2003).

Soe Rah, one of the few students attending a four-year college outside of Parkside, told me that he experienced a “very big jump” during his freshman year, yet his experience in International Baccalaureate (IB) classes prepared him for the level of rigor expected at the college level:
I mean I took classes that were pretty similar to college classes but grading-wise, you have more room in high school, of course. There are many assignments, so you have more grades. There’s wiggle room. But in college, your grade is based on like three exams. So if you fail one, that’s a B or a C… So you have to study more in college, I feel like definitely. And you have to use your time well. It’s very different from high school. College is a higher level in education and academics.”

Though spending his first nine years in a refugee camp, Soe Rah – the first of his family to earn a high school diploma – spent his next nine years “soaking up” as much education as possible in preparation for his ideal career: a doctor.

Khadijah, who recently graduated of Parkside State with a B.S. in Biology, also struggled with the transition to college despite, like Akash, having high levels of education before coming to the United States and excelling at Parkside High School. Khadijah first began her college career at Williamson College, a small, private college in Parkside but switched to Parkside State after the tuition cost became too high. Unlike Parkside High School and Williamson College, she found her new college to be unwilling to accommodate her by providing extra time on exams: “I brought documentation from my guidance counselor, and I explained to them, ‘I’m not asking for answers, I’m not asking you even for a dictionary. I don’t even need that. I’m just asking you for more time because it takes me longer to read a book than it takes an average American person.’ Other students understand the words, but I struggle to understand one word.” She explained exasperatedly, “How am I supposed to take a 95-question exam in an hour when I don’t understand that much?” In addition to the challenges of test-taking, Khadijah felt overwhelmed trying to balance her course load and work schedule. She continued, “I even put a blanket and pillow in my car, and instead of going home, I would go sleep in my car for a little bit and then go to the library and study for a little more. And so all my time was spent studying, and yet I couldn’t do as well as I hoped,” she said. Feeling frustrated and fed up with her experiences at Parkside State, Khadijah criticized the college system and her professors:
And I feel like a lot of it is that marketing thing – because professors don’t care how good you do. They don’t care how well the student does, they only care about coming to class and then putting the information and whether you understand it or not, that’s not their problem. And then you expect you to do well on the exam by teaching yourself. But you can’t teach yourself physics or chemistry, you need someone to explain it to you. Otherwise, why am I paying for a class, and why am I paying that much money? I may as well find online schools where I can take online classes and then teach myself that way.

The increasing rigor and English-language demands of college were especially apparent in Khadijah’s narratives. An otherwise highly-achieving student and incredibly articulate young woman, Khadijah nonetheless struggled with the academic register of English required in her college classes, and felt exasperated at the lack of support given to her by her instructors at Parkside State. Compared to the accommodations provided to students in high school, college instructors seemed neglectful and uncaring. As the high remediation rate for immigrant students entering college suggests, it can be assumed that such difficulties are not uncommon (Conway 2010). While community colleges, due to the high number of immigrant students enrolled, may be better suited to provide ELLs and former ELLs with English language-support, the language demands of four-year institutions may be yet another barrier with which non-native English speakers must grapple.

Furthermore, although research seems divided on whether working while in college put students at risk for dropout or provided a foundation for a strong work ethic needed to excel (Louie 2004; Newman 1999; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez Orozco, and Todorova 2008), immigrant and refugee students often support their families economically as well as through forms of interpretive labor which can conflict with the academic demands of a college education (Gándara 1995; Orellana 2009). Mahmoud, for example, in anticipating the problems that might occur if he continued to work, told me that he planned to quit his job at a local restaurant after he graduated high school so he could focus on college. “You have to work 24 hours a day here in
“the U.S.,” he told me, “but I want to have time for school.” His boss, a family friend and uncle of another student at Parkside High was supportive of his decision, and even told him that it was a “good idea.”

However, many other students could not afford to quit their jobs and reported struggling in their first years of college, especially as they struggled to balance the wage-earning responsibility crucial to their families with the academic challenges of college (Gándara 1995). Shi Wah, for one, described her exhausting schedule which required her to take busses to and from school and work, leaving her little time to study for her classes:

Yeah, I work at another place at the hospital now. I go to VVCC to study the English class... I worked and go to school. It’s very hard because I don’t get enough sleep. I finish school and take the bus. Valley View to Parkside is a very long bus ride. It takes one and a half hours. After I finish school and come home, I have to go directly to work. I [used to work] at a factory job in Westfield [five miles north of Parkside]. After a few months, I applied to Parkside Med. I like my job there. I have to float. I don’t work in the main hospital, I work at the doctor’s office and other places. I work alone – nobody is there. I like that, it’s quiet. If you finish your job, you can relax. I can do my schoolwork after I finish. I finish at 12:30 and then go to school.

Although Shi Wah is still enrolled at VVCC, she is only taking English classes after dropping other courses. “I want to be a social worker,” she explained, “but I went to the class and it’s very hard. You have to speak English a lot. You have to talk a lot. So I dropped that class.”

Nevertheless, Shi Wah remained optimistic after receiving an A in her English class and hopes to return to taking other courses in the next year.

Sadiq, who had just been hired as a housing coordinator by the resettlement agency of Parkside, told me he was taking time off from his studies at VVCC due to the responsibilities of his new job: “I’m working on the Criminal Justice, but this semester I dropped off because of my new job. I had four classes but I really couldn’t keep up with it. It was so hard for me, and it was like a new job – a lot of papers, a lot of new stuff that I need to learn. So I was like, ‘I’ll take a
break this semester and go back to it next semester.’’ Ana’s experience in college produced a similar struggle to balance work, college, and high aspirations. When asked what her goal for after college was, Ana first asserted, “I want to be a doctor.” But after a moment of hesitation, she added, “Well if I don’t go to medical school, then I want to be a physician’s assistant – it’s kind of the same thing, but it’s not. But hopefully I can be a doctor.” Like Shi Wah and Sadiq, Ana, too, worked to help support her family. In addition to working for her mother’s cleaning service, Ana held down a work-study position which she said allowed her to study. “But when finals week comes, I can’t.” she explained, “It’s too much.”

Family obligations remained a crucial factor in not only maintaining a job, but also in choosing which college to attend. Akash told me that “his only choice” was to stay in Parkside and live with parents. “They came here for us, and we just don’t want to leave them alone,” he told me. Soe Rah expressed a similar obligation to his family and contrasted it with the American ideal of individualism and independence, Though he had decided to attend a four-year, public university several hours west of Parkside, Soe Rah felt that it was close enough to home and a worthwhile tradeoff which could improve his family’s situation after he graduated: “But I feel like in American communities, it’s less, you know what I mean? They go to college and then they raise their own family, and they forget about their parents. But for us, for me, what I’m trying is…hopefully after college I’m able to support my parents and come back and help them out.” For these students, the obligations to family outweighed individual pursuits and highly influenced academic and career choices (Louie 2004; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez Orozco, and Todorova 2008). The ongoing responsibility to family, in the eyes of Akash and Soe Rah, highlighted the differences between their identities and the American expectation to establish a nuclear family apart from their parents. While the desire to create a new home and family apart
from one’s parents is embedded in the American middle-class imaginary (Ehrenreich 1989; Lamont 2000; Ortner 2006), the obligation to support family members remained constant for participants across class backgrounds.

The demands of college also had negative effects on student attitudes, as several students who had entered college with high aspirations soon became somewhat doubtful of their ability to achieve their lofty goals. Carmen, for example, told me that a demanding professor had caused her to rethink her major of early childhood education. Recently, she applied to work at Parkside Medical Center and thought she this might lead to her pursue a nursing degree instead:

I feel like it’s too stressful. I like to work with kids, but it’s just that I have this teacher – she thinks like we don’t have anything to do, like we don’t have problems. She expects from us too much, and I actually don’t like that. From that teacher, I’m feeling like I don’t like that major anymore – early childhood education. But if I get the job at Parkside Med, I hope so, I will become a nurse. I’ll get a nursing degree instead.

Some students were dissuaded by peers from pursuing what they saw as unrealistically high career goals. Lily’s coworkers at Parkside Medical Center, for instance, tried to steer her towards a career in nursing as opposed to her stated goal of being a perfusionist:

[When] I said that I want to be a perfusionist – some people told me, “Why don’t you just go into Nursing? If you’re a perfusionist you’re going to work in the O.R. and you’re the only Asian. Maybe you’re working in the O.R. and you’ll interact with the doctor, and you’re Asian, and you don’t speak English very well. So the doctor will look down on you, they will not understand what you’re saying. So it’s really hard to get a job. And you’ll get lots of stress.” That’s what they told me.

These comments portrayed Lily’s identity as an Asian immigrant and English learner as liabilities which could jeopardize her ability to become a perfusionist. Furthermore, the idea that one’s identity could limit their ability to attain social mobility conflicted sharply with the notions of meritocracy and optimism articulated by many high school students regarding the United States’ opportunity structure. Though Lily asserted that she would still try and reach her goal,
she noted that the comments were made by Asian coworkers who had lived in the United States and experienced more than she had. Such cautionary tales undoubtedly leveled Lily’s aspirations, but also provided her with a source of experiential knowledge which yielded valuable insights into the barriers faced by immigrants in the field of medicine (Fernández-Kelly 2008).

Even students who had completed their Bachelor’s Degrees or were nearing graduation felt limited by their English ability or identity as foreigners in the United States. Akash, for example, told me that he decided against Criminal Justice because he was “from a different country.” And Miriam, despite her strong beliefs in meritocracy, said she wanted to be a surgeon but didn’t know “how far [she] could make it to that goal.” Marie, too, was persuaded to level her aspirations to become a lawyer but friends and family. Though she now was on her way to becoming a CPA, she explained:

Since I was a kid, I wanted to be a lawyer. Even when I was in high school, I wanted to be a lawyer. But the discouragement that I faced was that people told me, “You’re coming from a different country. Your English is not good. So in order to be a lawyer, you must be able to speak very good English. You must have a very good understanding of the laws and the history in order to be successful.” They kind of discouraged me but I think I should not have listened to them.

These narratives again display how the demands of English served as a gatekeeper to social mobility. In addition, the cautionary advice of peers and co-workers often resulted in lowered aspirations and self-doubt for immigrants pursuing prestigious career paths.

Several prospective college students also expressed self-doubt and declining aspirations as they worried about their transition to the postsecondary level. Mo, for example, said in class one day that he had been trying to do more reading to help prepare him for college. When I told him that it was a great idea, he quickly responded, “Well I want to get a job in a medical field, but many of my friends and family have been telling me it’s too hard. Do you think I should quit?” I was a bit surprised by his question and wasn’t sure how I should reply. After hesitating, I
told him it is a difficult path but that he shouldn’t give up. Leila also told me she wanted to be a heart surgeon, but was told by “a lot of people” to try become a nurse first and then maybe continue on to become a surgeon.

Karim, who had expressed a strong belief in meritocracy, doubted that he could fulfill his parents’ desires for him to become a doctor and instead decided to pursue a Nursing degree. “My father wants me to be a doctor, but I think it’s impossible,” he told me. “If you want to be a doctor, I have my cousin… he graduated in Iraq to be a doctor, and he took him like 12 years to pass. It’s just too hard. It’s harder than there, over there it’s my language, Arabic. And also as a doctor, you have to know English very well.” Akash also offered a caveat to his otherwise high aspirations for working in the field of Cyber Security: “But I don’t know where [my degree] will take me though, because it’s really hard to get into government agencies. About eighty percent are in the private sectors and you get a lot of applicants. It’s really competitive.”

As this section has argued, college students across class backgrounds struggled with the transition to college and reported feeling overwhelmed by the demands of family, work, and college. These students also felt that they had less support in college compared to high school and were increasingly troubled by the daunting level of the academic rigor at the postsecondary level. Class did, however, play a factor in these narratives. Students like Akash and Khadijah came from middle-class backgrounds, had high levels of education before coming to the United States, and articulated high aspirations to attend college in order to attain a good career – factors which made them excellent candidates to complete a four year degree (Lareau and Weininger 2003; Louie 2007) – yet they struggled with the transition to college not only from an academic perspective, but also due to the enrollment and admissions process. At the same time, these students also had already completed or were close to completing degrees at four-year colleges,
and despite the leveling-off of their high aspirations, continued to hold some optimism about their opportunities in the job market. Additionally, the ability for Akash to research a new major, change fields, as well as Khadijah’s determination for self-advocacy at Parkside State both demonstrate the use of cultural capital as well as a middle-class orientation towards institutional authority (Bourdieu 1984; Lareau 2003). Yet, even Miriam, praised by several teachers as one of the most highly-achieving and perspicacious students at Parkside High, struggled with the academic content of college instruction and returned every few weeks to Parkside High to ask for tutoring help from her former teachers.

Marie and Soe Rah did not come from middle-class backgrounds nor were their parents highly educated, yet the fact that they came to the United States at younger ages proved crucial in allowing them more time to develop English-language skills and educational proficiencies that allowed them to excel in high school (Cummins 1999; Hakuta, Butler and Witt 2000; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez Orozco, and Todorova 2008). Marie’s ability to attain a graduate degree and a high-paying professional position as an accountant demonstrates both aspiration and determination to realize such lofty goals as well as the significance of social capital because her first position was acquired, in part, through connections at her local church. Other students such as Shi Wah and Lily came to the U.S. with lower levels of English proficiency and cultural capital, yet successfully navigated the American educational system and worked their way into community colleges. Despite their tenacity, they reported more struggles to complete their degrees and articulated significantly leveled aspirations. Thus, while high aspirations and persistence may have gotten these students from disadvantaged class backgrounds through high school, they felt constrained by the high demands of college and struggled to complete their four-year degrees.
Conclusion

College degrees have become a near-prerequisite for entry into the middle-class, yet the distribution of these credentials is highly unequal thus creating uneven potentials for social mobility and for disparities across class and race (Fine and Weis 1998; Mishel et al. 2012). Even in an age of “college education for all” (Feliciano and Lanuza 2016), many disadvantaged students are locked out of postsecondary education, while those from higher class backgrounds are continuing to outpace those from lower echelons by accumulating postgraduate degrees (Gamoran 2008). As Louie writes, “Those individuals who have the greatest need of the returns to higher education today are often the ones who have the fewest opportunities to tap into them” (2007, 2224).

The data discussed above demonstrate not only stratification within the ELL population but also between ELLs and native-born students. Because community colleges have high attrition rates and lower returns on degrees, the concentration of ELLs in two-year institutions is a cause for concern. Even those who do transfer to a four-year institution are unlikely to attend a prestigious private college which offers opportunities for social capital building (Ho 2009; Louie 2007). Like many students of color, ELLs are often constrained by the academic and financial demands of college (Ma and Baum 2016; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco 2011).

Although nearly all of the high school students in this study aspired to attend college in order to pursue prestigious and lucrative careers, most felt frustrated by their lack of knowledge about the college process and anxious about the academic challenges that college classes presented. While students from highly-educated, middle-class backgrounds were more likely to attend college, their class advantages did not shelter them from the difficult transitions to college
with which all participants seemed to struggle: the college process, the academic rigor of higher education, and the increasingly demanding levels of English required at college. These challenges were compounded by growing doubts about the ability to fulfill their family’s high expectations set out for them. In many cases, such doubts were sowed by peers and friends who warned students of the challenges which await them in college and career. For students with lower levels of cultural capital, whose optimism and persistence may have helped them graduate high school, the difficulties they faced in college seemed to be more insurmountable.

The leveled aspirations articulated by the current college students and recent college graduates interviewed in this study shed light on the bumpy transitions experienced by ELLs as they exit high school. Many of these students exhibited declining aspirations as they came up against the challenges of postsecondary education and the limited opportunities in a two-tier job market (Stiglitz 2012; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2000). As mentioned in Chapter Two, the leveled aspirations and decline in performance of ELLs after several years spent in the U.S. has been a cause for concern among many academics who have struggled to understand the factors behind the drop-off (Feliciano and Lanuza 2016; North 2009; Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes, and Milburn 2009). Much like the Regents Exam which presented a challenge for high-aspiring students to graduate, the college process and the academic rigor of postsecondary education can hamper the attainment of even the most optimistic and determined immigrant and refugee students. Such gatekeepers can serve to reproduce the former class positions of immigrants and refugees who believed that education would provide them with social mobility (Feliciano and Lanuza 2017; Portes and Zhou 1993). Nonetheless, many participants, in addition to anxiety and uncertainty, also exuded pride and excitement in discussing college, and several former high school students provided inspiring examples by working hard and attaining college degrees.
Chapter 7
Conclusion

In 2011, over 150 years after Horace Mann’s famous proclamation, Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education under President Obama, echoed Mann’s claim of the democratizing promise of schools: “In America, education is still the great equalizer.” Indeed today education is seen as one of the few tools for promoting equality in a society where inequality has rapidly grown over the last several decades (Mishel and Rothstein 2007). Immigrants have played an important role in this narrative as the academic success of newcomers is often used as irrefutable evidence of the American Dream and that education provides opportunity to all who are willing to work hard (Hochschild 1995). However widespread Mann’s narrative remains, the unequal outcomes across class groups as well as between and among immigrant groups demonstrates a need for a critical view of the roles which schools play in social stratification.

In order to investigate these questions, this dissertation has engaged with the theoretical tradition of Social Reproduction which views schools as institutional sites tasked with preparing youngsters for their respective positions in the industrial order (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976). In direct contradiction with Mann’s lofty claim, these theorists argued that schools, rather than challenging social hierarchy, in fact served to preserve it. Though a robust literature emerged examining the disparities between middle- and working-class youth, little attention was paid to the experiences of immigrant students from various class and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, theories of Social Reproduction did little to attend to the ways in which teachers and students transform, resist, and challenge stratifying forces (Collins 2009; Giroux 1983).
The preceding chapters have sought to address these gaps through an ethnographic analysis of the educational experiences of new arrivals thus shedding light on their academic and social trajectories in the United States. Schools are a crucial site to examine Social Reproduction and assimilation as they may provide or restrict access to the credentials which individuals rely on for social mobility. Although the optimism and high aspirations of new arrivals has been identified as a primary cause of such students’ overachievement, this study has documented the ways in which such positive attitudes are constrained by the challenges posed by high-stakes testing, assimilation pressures, and an hourglass-shaped economic landscape. The cultural and social capital brought by immigrants and their families, their class position before arrival, the context of reception in which they arrive, and their racial identities all played a role in addressing this issue. In addition, this study strove to situate the analysis of Social Reproduction in a sociopolitical context characterized by increasing nativism and neoliberal hegemony as well as an hourglass-shaped economic climate offering little opportunities to undereducated youth.

Chapter One reviewed the existing literature on Social Reproduction and situated this study within previous scholarship. Though drawing heavily on early scholarly work in the tradition of Social Reproduction, this study sought to improve on these works by drawing attention to the intersections between class and racial stratification and highlighting student and teacher agency in the face of structural constraints. Chapter Two discussed the context in which this study took place, and described the methodologies used in this study. Specifically, I argued that ethnographic research provides a valuable tool to explore the process Social Reproduction and assimilation as it is grounded in the day-to-day experiences of individuals over time and provides a space to include the voices of participants themselves. In addition to more traditional ethnographic approaches, this dissertation made use of applied methods which provided firsthand
insight into the structural constraints experienced by students as well as the strategies they
implemented in hopes of overcoming them.

Chapter Three explored the aspirations and optimistic outlook of immigrant and refugee
students at Parkside High. Coinciding with previous scholarship, high aspirations and optimistic
attitudes were found across class and cultural groupings among participants (Kao and Tienda
1995; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez Orozco, and Todorova 2008). These sentiments were buttressed by
a strong belief in meritocracy and dual-frame of reference which portrayed the U.S. as a fairer
and more open society than the previous countries in which students lived (Ogbu 1987; Suárez-
Orozco 1987). These positive attitudes helped motivate students to achieve highly in school
despite the challenges of learning a new language and culture. On the other hand, strong beliefs
in meritocracy a dual frame of reference also limited students’ abilities to develop class critiques
of schools and equality in the U.S. and individualist explanations were often used to understand
differential success at school, leading many to blame less successful students for their lack of
personal ambition or motivation.

Notably, the students with strongly held beliefs in meritocracy and individualism were
typically those who were from relatively well-educated, middle-class backgrounds. Yet many of
these students articulated nascent critiques of the U.S. educational system when referencing
friends and relatives whose foreign credentials were deemed insufficient by employers. Those
from working-class and agrarian backgrounds were more likely to interpret educational
inequality in class terms though they most still acknowledged individual determination and
ability as a cause for success and failure. Although high aspirations and optimism may provide
an initial advantage to newcomers, it is doubtful that these attitudes alone can offset the linguistic
demands required by high-stakes exams (Jaffe-Walter and Lee 2011).
As argued in Chapter Four, assimilation pressures tested the high aspirations of many students at Parkside High. While some students felt the U.S. guaranteed them the right to openly practice their culture and religion, most felt that “becoming American” was a necessary prerequisite to integration and social mobility in the United States (Lee 2005; Portes and Zhou 1993). Such tensions were evident in students who chastised peers that withdrew into ethnic communities and did not try hard enough to integrate themselves into the wider community. The same students, however, also expressed concern that their younger siblings would eventually lose the ability to speak their native languages and forget their cultural heritage. The process of “Americanization,” these students worried, could alienate them from their parents and ethnic communities and cause them to “forget who they are.” Such comments recalled the long history of forced assimilation in the U.S. and the difficulty for ethnic minorities to retain their distinctive cultural identities while still accessing social mobility (Waters 1990).

Race also played a significant role in the lives of participants in this study. Many of the young Muslim men and women at Parkside High emphasized their beliefs in the freedom to practice their religion openly in the United States but were confronted by the resurgence of xenophobia coinciding with the election of Donald Trump. These youth, by emphasizing their middle- and upper-class backgrounds, sought to distance themselves from their African American peers with whom they associated poverty and social stagnation. Such tensions brought into relief the racial dimensions of class reproduction and the ideological links between Whiteness and middle-class membership, however, the question remains whether class mobility can mitigate incorporation into the racial hierarchy of the U.S (Bettie 2003; Urcuioli 1996). Furthermore, several scholars have claimed that awareness of racial stigma among immigrants increases over generations and may harm the high aspirations and optimism espoused by
newcomers (Garcia Coll and Marks 2012; Waters 1999). As Kao, Vaquera, and Goyette write, “While being in an immigrant family is a temporary condition, and its effects will likely diminish over generations, being classified in a particular racial category has effects that persist across generations” (2013,176). These factors highlight the need to understand the intersections of race and class in the analysis of Social Reproduction.

Chapter Five explored the influence of high-stakes exams on teachers and students at Parkside High. The data presented demonstrated that tests – specifically the Regents Exams which were needed to graduate from high school – served to restructure class time, curricula, and pedagogy (Menken 2008). When up against the challenges of high-stakes exams, the high aspirations and optimism articulated by many students were put to the test, although notably it was students with higher levels of education and more years spent in the U.S. who were at a distinct advantage over their peers who had less formal education or arrived to the U.S. at a late age. For some students, high aspirations translated into persistence and motivated them to re-take their exams several times and eventually pass. Yet overall the Regents served as a powerful gatekeeper and mechanism of stratification implicated in the precipitous decline in ELL attainment rates since it was made a graduation requirement in 2010 (NYSED 2016).

Teachers, despite the constraints on their curriculum and pedagogy, endeavored to facilitate critical views in their students and extend lessons beyond the mere requirements of the Regents. However, the Regents Exams proved a powerful force in reorganizing class time and educational priorities (Lipman 2004; McNeil 2000). This chapter also situated the growth in influence of high-stakes exams within the wider ideological landscape of neoliberalism which has worked to redefine education as a market commodity. In this framework, high-stakes exams
not only provided data for “consumers,” but also were used to foster competition between students, teachers, and schools (Apple 2001; Hursh 2008).

Chapter Six explored the postsecondary aspirations and experiences of students at Parkside High as well as several former students of Parkside High who were current college students or recent graduates. In keeping with national trends, the majority of students in this study attended community college rather than four-year institutions (Conway 2010). The concentration of ELLs in two-year institutions was also analyzed as a potential gatekeeping considering that attrition rates and low attrition rates at such institutions (Brint and Karabel 1989; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco 2011). Although two-year institutions provided students with a cheaper alternative to four-year colleges and additional academic supports not often available at universities, many students worried over the quality of these institutions and recognized the significance of attending a four-year, private college.

As in Chapter Three, families and peers played a significant role in the construction of aspirations and attitudes. For many students who had already graduated high school, the experiences and advice relayed by peers and coworkers served to temper participants’ lofty college and career goals. Many students thus began to doubt whether they could fulfill the expectations set out for them by parents. Current and former college students also reflected on the academic challenges and linguistic demands required by postsecondary education. The combination of these factors posed challenges to the high aspirations and optimistic attitudes articulated by students in previous chapters. As attaining a four-year degree has become a near prerequisite to social mobility in a postindustrial economic climate, the transition to college is a crucial process for new arrivals (Mishel et al. 2012; Reich 2010).
Significance

This dissertation study has added to the scholarly literature exploring the education and assimilation of newcomer immigrant and refugee youth. The need for research on the schooling of these populations has never been more critical as currently the number of foreign-born individuals in the United States now exceeds 13 million, and one out of every ten students in public school was born in a different country (Alba and Holdaway 2013; Iceland 2017). Because education is the primary mode in which these individuals can attain social mobility and become integrated into the culture and economy of the United States, a focus on their experiences at school is crucial to understanding the future immigrants and their families (Holdaway and Alba 2009).

In a broad, theoretical sense, this study has attempted to address the relevance of the perspective of Social Reproduction to immigrants and refugees in the United States. Although immigrants arrive with varied class backgrounds and reserves of cultural capital from which to draw, their experiences of downward mobility can obscure the class-based resources which middle-class students can leverage in their pursuit of social mobility (Fernandez-Kelly 2008; Li 2008). Indeed disparities in social class were significant to the participants of this study who, despite articulating high aspirations and optimism, differed in their capacities to fulfill their goals. This research study therefore argues for the persistent significance of class in creating and maintaining school-based inequalities even as mainstream explanations of educational disparities often make use of theories of cultural deprivation and the failings of individuals and their families (e.g. Chua 2011; Huntington 1996).

Although this study has documented the structural constraints and barriers to academic attainment for English Language Learners, it has also sought to explore the ways in which
students struggle to overcome such challenges. Indeed the perseverance and success of lower- and working-class immigrant and refugee students refutes any simplistic notion that schools seamlessly reproduce class hierarchies (Apple 1982; Giroux 1983). Research has consistently shown the importance of class position to school success, yet the process of social reproduction is never achieved seamlessly. For example, many students at Parkside High, though generally accepting of meritocratic ideology, developed nascent class critiques regarding the differing resources which students brought to school. Other students questioned the narrative of equal opportunities for all students by pointing to the advantages of native-born Americans. And though constrained by the demands of high-stakes exams, teachers, too, found ways to facilitate critical views among their students. Such critical perspectives and forms of agency illustrate the incompleteness of any ideological configuration and force researchers to grapple with both subtle and overt forms of agency (Gramsci 1971; Ortner 2006; Scott 1990; Willis 1977).

Furthermore, this study has argued that reproductive models must understand the ways in which class necessarily intersects with race and language. The interrelationship between racialization and class mobility was apparent in the tensions articulated by students between the desire for Americanization and fear of assimilation. For racialized participants especially, the threat of discrimination dampened the optimistic views articulated in Chapter Three. Though mainstream integration is often seen as a goal for minority students, assimilation into middle-class norms can also breed its own set of challenges. Middle-class youth have been found to be harried by overwhelming schedules, more likely to develop conflict-ridden relationships with parents and siblings than their working-class peers, and express anxieties over downward mobility (Ehrenreich 1989; Heiman 2015; Lareau 2003). These findings call into question the assumption that marginalized youth must assimilate into middle-class ways of life, and instead
throws support behind efforts for minority and immigrant youth to maintain their distinctive cultural identities (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

This dissertation has also sought to ground the abstracted process of Social Reproduction in the on-the-ground experiences and emic explanations of the students themselves. Although numerous large-scale, quantitative studies have explored the relation of education to social mobility, this study has provided a platform for participants to describe their experiences and attitudes in their own words. Ethnographic studies such as this dissertation can complement quantitative studies of social reproduction and assimilation by showing what the process of reproduction looks like rather than simply listing differential outcomes. Lastly, this study has also argued that any analysis of social reproduction must also be situated in the wider sociopolitical and economic context in which participants strive for academic success and manage their identities. In this study, participants’ attitudes, opportunities, and responses were influenced to varying degrees by a two-tier job market in which those without higher education are likely to be confined to low-wage service work as well as nativist sentiments which encouraged cultural assimilation.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study which must be mentioned. First, as with any ethnographic study, the relatively small sample size of the participants means that these findings are not wholly generalizable to the entire population of which these members represent only a small segment. In this case, I sought to focus on class distinctions rather than ethnonational identity (though these categories overlap) and was limited by the demographic makeup of the school in which I chose to work. If this study had been conducted at another school or in a
different region, the population surely would have been different. In particular, the dearth of Latin Americans in this study stands in contrast with the macro-demographic picture of immigrants in the United States in which Mexicans are, by far, the largest nationality represented (Iceland 2017). Their relative absence in this study should be noted, but it does not discount the validity of the findings since my primary focus was to understand the ways in which educational aspirations are constructed along class and racial lines and work to stratify immigrant student populations.

Secondly, the relative absence of gender should also be mentioned as a limitation to this study. Numerous scholars have elucidated the intersections between class, race, and gender and the pertinence of gender inequality to the process of Social Reproduction (e.g. Gillies 2005; McRobbie 1978; Skeggs 2004; Weis 1990). Schools serve as an important site not just for class reproduction, but for the contestation and construction of gender ideologies as well (Bettie 2003; Weis 1990). As girls are now outpacing boys in primary and secondary school and are completing college at a higher rate, scholarly work must attend to the question of gender-based disparities in education (Fortin, Oreopoulos, and Phipps 2015).

Lastly, it should be asked whether the attitudes and experiences of immigrant and refugee students in this study were influenced by wider trends also affecting native-born students or if their distinct condition as newcomers were more influential. An additional “native-born” control group was outside the scope of this study, however, it is worth expanding and expanding on several points. First, as mentioned in Chapters Two and Five, aspirations to attend college have increased dramatically across all student groups though wide disparities exist in regards to the ability to realize such aspirations (Louie 2007). The recognition by all students of the need for higher education could suggest that immigrant and refugee students are not necessarily
exceptional in their high aspirations, despite recent scholarship which maintains that immigrants and refugees still set out slightly higher goals than the native-born (Feliciano and Lanuza 2016).

As the ideological impact of neoliberalism on the native-born working- and middle-classes in the U.S. has galvanized beliefs in meritocracy and individualism (Lamont 2000; Silva 2013), it is also worth wondering whether the meritocratic attitudes expressed by many of the Parkside students would be matched by their native-born counterparts. Recent explorations demonstrate that ardent beliefs in meritocracy are widespread among all segments of the U.S. population (save for older individuals of color) (Reynolds and Xian 2014). Though immigrant populations often exhibit strong beliefs in meritocracy, some have argued that these beliefs weaken as youth become more critical and less optimistic of the U.S. opportunity structure by the second generation (Deaux et al. 2007; Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes, and Milburn 2009). Despite the likely overlap between attitudes and aspirations held by newcomers and native-born students, this study maintains that their distinctive status as first-generation immigrant or refugee heavily influences the experiences and beliefs held by participants in this study (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez Orozco, and Todorova 2008).

**Future Directions**

Additional research can help explore the ways in which new arrivals pursue social mobility in a climate of high-stakes exams, an hourglass-shaped job market, and increasing xenophobia. The critical importance of class resources upon arrival provide credence to the theory of Social Reproduction, yet as I have argued, future work in this paradigm must work to understand the intersections between class, race, and language as well as gender.
More longitudinal research on immigrant populations is needed to help address the questions explored out in this dissertation as there is currently little consensus among researchers who have studied intergenerational mobility among immigrants. Several prominent researchers have concluded that contemporary immigrant groups are following a similar assimilatory path as those 20\textsuperscript{th} century immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe (Alba and Nee 2003; Alba, Kasinitz, and Waters 2011; Hirschman 2014). According to these scholars, contemporary immigrants have benefitted from gains made during the Civil Rights Era and made use of programs such as affirmative action. Furthermore, they argue that the bifurcated labor market is less dire than the aforementioned authors claim, and that immigrants and their children may be able to fill the places of the aging baby boomer generation. In contrast, others have argued that a “sizable minority” of immigrants and their children are “at risk of downward assimilation” due to a lack of human capital upon arrival and a negative mode of incorporation into the U.S. (Haller, Portes and Lynch 2011, 780; Portes and Zhou 1993).

Educational outcomes have complicated the matter as scholars have found been that the better-than-expected performance of new arrivals is short-lived as the achievement of these students seems to drop-off after several years spent in the U.S. (Garcia Coll and Marks 2012; Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes, and Milburn 2009). The paradoxical pattern of declining achievement has been explained by leveled aspirations, increased experiences of racialization, and a realization of limited opportunities in the U.S. Such findings were supported by a study by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (2015) which found that first generation have better health indicators, lower crime rates, and higher rates of two-parent households than do native-born individuals. Yet, over the course of two generations, immigrants assimilate into the U.S. – becoming more proficient in English and reaping higher wages, yet
incurring worse health and higher crime rates (NASEM 2015). Further research must continue to investigate the long-term incorporation of immigrant groups in the United States and provide additional answers to these questions.

Future scholarship must also address the ways in which immigrants’ racial identity intersects with their integration into the class structure of the U.S. Bonilla-Silva (2004) has argued that the U.S. is becoming a “tri-racial” society with Whites on the top of the racial hierarchy with “honorary Whites” and “collective Blacks” making up the bottom two categories. Phenotype and social class are intimately bound in this hierarchy. For example, is it a fair complexion or middle-class status which provides East Asians and Argentinian immigrants with a position of “honorary Whites”? Although these factors are likely mutually-reinforcing, the effects of phenotype cannot be eliminated by social class; the declining mobility of highly-educated African and Caribbean immigrants across generations suggests that racial identity may be more influential than class (Wiley, Deaux, and Hagelskamp 2012). These findings call into question the potential for class mobility to shield racialized immigrants from downward assimilation.

Despite the suggestion by some that class position has become a more significant predictor of social standing than race (Lareau 2003; Wilson 1987), in regards to immigrants, this study has argued that the question of social mobility cannot be analyzed without taking into account racial politics. This study offers some insight into the influence of racial identity on assimilation by demonstrating the effects of Islamophobia on the Muslim youth of this study, and additional scholarship can help to address the long-term effects of discrimination on academic achievement among other populations.
Although the debates over immigrant social mobility, assimilation, and education are sure to continue, the complicated social trajectories of immigrants and the numerous factors which influence these trajectories must remain a high research priority for scholars across fields. The potential for intergenerational decline in aspiration and achievement as well as the complementary rise in oppositional attitudes and threat of downward mobility should concern both educators and researchers who are interested in the wellbeing of immigrant populations. It is my hope that this dissertation has contributed some understanding to the experiences of new arrivals and the importance of education in their lives. The immigrant population of the U.S. stands to grow even as the voices of nativism increase in their volume. It remains crucial that educators, researchers, and advocates pay close attention to the ways in which newcomers and their families are incorporated into the country. Schools will undoubtedly play an integral role in this process.
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