ONE

Welcome to Rolling Acres

Rolling Acres is a promised land.[1] It is a manicured suburb nestled in the midwestern United States that features a well-run and -resourced school district. Rolling Acres is the type of school district that families move to because of its strong reputation for nurturing student learners. In any given year the district receives national academic accolades by graduating National Merit Scholars and extracurricular praise when its bands are invited to perform on the national stage; its schools showcase their ethnic diversity by hosting "International Nights" to which families bring foods from their ancestral homelands. To most eyes, Rolling Acres and its public schools are what many U.S. schools—both urban and suburban—desire to be. However, this is not the full reality of Rolling Acres and its schools.

In the early 2000s, I attended the commencement ceremony at one of the high schools in the Rolling Acres Public Schools (RAPS) district. During the ceremony I heard white families cheering loudly as the college destinations of the graduates were announced from the dais: they ranged from Harvard to Bates to the University of Michigan. These cheers for white graduating seniors at times drowned out the announcements of their black classmates' next steps. Those included local community colleges, work

plans, military service, and less-selective colleges. Just as the cheers served to cover up the divergent lives of black and white youth, many of the mechanisms that breed inequality in Rolling Acres remain concealed. Although considerable attention has been paid to gross inequalities between inner-city and suburban schools, too little research has interrogated inequality in suburban areas.[2] As suburban school districts become more racially and economically diverse, understanding how they respond to diverse families is essential to understanding future paths to equality.

Districts like Rolling Acres are consistently confronted with questions such as: How can we provide a quality education to racially and economically diverse families? If we have ample financial resources, why do we still see educational disparities? What programmatic or policy changes will reduce observable disparities in our students' educational experiences? How do differences in family background relate to observed disparities? And how can we respond to demographic changes in ways that accommodate long-time residents and new arrivals? These questions remain inadequately addressed both by current discussions in education policy and by sociological theorizing about educational inequality. With this book I offer some answers based on a careful ethnography of education in a desegregated suburban setting.

Although Rolling Acres contains many of the resources that are typically associated with positive student achievement, these resources seldom trickle down to the district's economic and racial minorities. Through multiple mechanisms (e.g., social networks, school-to-home communication, teacher beliefs, and others) the resources of Rolling Acres are not only funneled away from minorities; they are leveraged by affluent white families to gain greater educational advantages for their children. By building on and challenging past work on educational inequality, I hope to clarify why the presence or availability of resources does not necessarily mean that those resources are accessible to everyone, and why we must look beyond individual or group orientations and instead look at the relations *between* groups and within schools. I explore the micro-level interactions between school staff, teachers, parents, and students and link them to broader macro issues such as racial ideologies and the formation of contemporary equal opportunity policies. The result is an intricate web of relations and dynamics that weaves together race and social class and reproduces disparities in student educational experiences in both subtle and overt ways.

SUBURBAN SCHOOL INEQUALITY

While researchers debate whether resources matter and to what extent they influence school achievement, laypeople are at near consensus that resources matter.[3] Over the past forty years, many African-Americans have migrated to suburban locations with the hope of sending their children to higher-quality schools. Historically, suburban schools have been better resourced than their inner-city peers and have become known for their diverse offerings and college preparatory curriculums. All of these features have made districts like Rolling Acres highly desirable among families who want to give their children an early life advantage. Despite these opportunities, gaining access to the educational resources of a district is not always straightforward, particularly for black families.

In Rolling Acres, different social worlds collide, and the puzzle of educational equality remains unsolved. For decades, Rolling Acres has spent increasing amounts of money in the hope of reducing educational inequality and improving the educational experiences of all families; but there remain seemingly intransigent race and social-class gaps. Although RAPS is a land of plenty, Rolling Acres residents engage in stiff competition to get their children the best teachers, sign them up for extracurricular activities, and glean insider information with the goal of creating an idyllic educational experience for them. On its face, the same resources are readily available to all students, but upon closer examination one sees that access to these resources is not equal, particularly for racial and economic minorities. These differences in resource access are not based simply on disparities in provision; access is influenced by differences in family backgrounds, institutional reception (how schools receive families and their requests), and interactions between families.

To illustrate, imagine that a school's science scores on the state standardized test arrive and the scores of black students are lower than those of white students. While the gap in average scores might not be not surprising, the district notes that the gap between black and white students had declined for nearly ten years, but for the past three years that progress has stalled. There are mounting pressures from local, state, and federal authorities to "close the gap." In response, some proactive school district members propose creating a "Saturday Science Academy" that will target both black and white students, with the goal of raising science scores. It will be an extracurricular program

designed to increase access to science and technology and provide hands-on instruction in a small-classroom environment. An announcement about the creation of the Saturday Science Academy is then sent to all families in the target school. Parents are invited to sign up online or to mail program attendance requests back to the school. After the final enrollment is tallied, it is discovered that the enrollees come disproportionately from white families, particularly middle-class and affluent families. This is a common dilemma among schools and districts that have attempted to close achievement gaps, particularly in racially and economically diverse settings. District staffs are often left wondering why and how some families take advantage of the available resources and other families do not.

SOCIAL-CLASS-BASED EXPLANATIONS

Researchers Annette Lareau and John Ogbu have offered two influential theories of processes that influence educational inequality in suburban districts like Rolling Acres; however, I do not believe that either approach adequately explains the processes that occur in such places.[4] Social reproduction theorists such as Lareau may explain the observed disparities in program enrollees as directly tied to social class, particularly the role of cultural capital and the alignment of norms between families and schools. Lareau suggested in *Home Advantage* that differences in parental participation were driven by differences in families' social class.[5] Based on an ethnographic analysis of white families in two predominantly white schools, Lareau applied Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and argued that middle-class families possessed cultural repertoires that aligned with the norms of schools and thus contributed to favorable social relations and higher levels of school engagement. This middle-class cultural capital was the foil to low-income and working-class cultural capital, which did not align with school norms and led to tense social relations and low levels of parental engagement at their schools. Lareau's work importantly argues that differences in parental engagement are not based in differences in familial desire; instead they are rooted in mismatches between cultural toolkits and institutional arrangements.

Later, Lareau extended her social-class-based arguments in the now seminal book *Unequal Childhoods.* She continued to examine the role of

cultural capital, not only in connection to schools but also in other formal institutions. Based on observations of twelve families—six white, five black, and one interracial—she argues that two coherent patterns of class-based child-rearing strategies were observable: "concerted cultivation" and "natural growth." These two patterns of child rearing, in her view, demonstrate the significance of social class, which she believes eclipses the power of race to explain current and future inequalities between groups. She observed these social-class-based differences at three junctures: the investment of parents in extracurricular activities for youth, parental engagement with school professionals, and communication between parents and children at home.

"Concerted cultivation" is practiced by middle-class families and is often characterized by the enrollment of children in structured extracurricular activities with adult supervision. These organized activities then assist in the development of positive experiences, dispositions, and networks with adult authority figures and formal institutions. In addition, Lareau argues that parents who practice concerted cultivation have generally positive and strong relationships with authority figures and formal institutions.[6] As a result, those parents are able to engage institutions and often achieve their desired results. These socialization experiences serve as fields of learning where their children develop cultural capital that proves to be advantageous in school, at the doctor's office, and in any number of other formal spaces, allowing those with middle-class standing to ultimately replicate or even advance their position.

In contrast, says Lareau, families that practice the "natural growth" method of child rearing are working class or poor and have children who are less engaged in formal extracurricular activities and have less favorable relationships with formal institutions and authority figures. Children reared in this way tend to engage in unstructured play after school and often do not participate in formal organized activities like sports; they thus have fewer opportunities than children reared by concerted cultivation to develop positive rapport with adult authority figures. Lareau also argues that, because parents who practice the natural growth method of child rearing also often do not have positive relations with authority figures, they are likely to socialize their children to replicate a contrarian or non-empowered engagement of authority. As a result, these children and families have fewer positive experiences engaging schools, medical facilities,

and other institutions than their concerted cultivation counterparts. Lareau argues that natural growth families thus do not actualize their putative stocks of cultural capital in the form of favorable institutional returns, thus replicating their lower position in the social hierarchy.

If one applies Lareau's theory to the case of the Saturday Science Academy, one might assume those who signed up for the Academy were concerted cultivators, but this would likely not be fully accurate. First, while Lareau's concepts of concerted cultivation and natural growth are parsimonious illustrations of how cultural capital operates, they are dispositional—meaning that people's actions are based on their attitudes and orientations and not necessarily determined by the dynamics of social interaction—and thus overlook the importance of relations between groups. Charles Tilly argues, "Dispositional accounts similarly posit coherent entities—in this case more often individuals than any others—but explain the action of those entities by means of their orientations just before the point of action."[7] While dispositions toward child rearing and institutions matter, interactions with institutions, and between families, are critical to understanding why some families are oversubscribed to the Saturday Academy and others are undersubscribed.

Second, for Lareau's model to account for the observed disparities, race and social class would need to be nearly perfectly correlated. However, this is not the case nationally or in Rolling Acres. The majority of white families are middle class or above, but there are also middle-class black families and working-class white families. It is important to note that Lareau does have black middle-class families in her sample, but these families are drawn from a private school using a snowball sample—a type of sample based on families referring other families—which tends to make responses non-random and representative. As I discuss in chapter 4, this likely misrepresents the role of race and eliminates relational analysis possibilities. The overlap between social-class and racial categories problematizes a parsimonious tale of engagement based simply on social class. The inclusion in her model of black and white middle-class families who send their children to the same schools would help elucidate the tensions in—or limits of—her model in a setting like Rolling Acres.

Third, Lareau underestimates the role of race in her explanations of differences in institutional engagement. She argues that race plays a small secondary role to social class. She writes, "While race did have situational

consequences for some youths, the power of social class was striking for all."[8] She categorizes race as situationally relevant and therefore meaningful only in moments of interracial conflict. In further examples in *Unequal Childhoods* and other work, she identifies these moments of situational relevance as occasions when black families perceive racial discrimination.[9] Lareau's constellation does not consider how white families' whiteness serves as an advantage, which makes her identification of race selective and misspecified. Social constructionist perspectives on race have stressed its importance not only for racial minorities but also for racial majorities.[10] Ultimately, Lareau's scholarship and model under-theorize the role of race and over-privilege the role of social class.

RACE-BASED EXPLANATIONS

John Ogbu's Cultural Ecological Model (CEM) is a widely popular explanation for differences in educational engagement and could be applied to the case of the Saturday Science Academy.[11] The CEM was developed from Ogbu's work with Signithia Fordham in a predominantly black high school in Washington, D.C.[12] Ogbu argued that black youth took on an oppositional culture characterized by academic disengagement and heightened attempts to gain peer acceptance. Ogbu would likely explain the lack of black enrollment in the Saturday Science Academy through two mechanisms: perceived barriers to mobility and racial allegiance. Ogbu argues that black children see the race-related barriers that black adults have faced and that these barriers signal to the children that the traditional opportunity system is not open to blacks. In response, youth increase their sense of racial allegiance and solidarity and disengage from school because they identify domains like schooling as a pathway for white mobility, not black mobility. He argues that this cumulatively leads to disengagement from schooling.

In the late 1990s, Ogbu was invited to the suburb of Shaker Heights, Ohio, by concerned black middle-class parents. The parents had observed disparities in their children's treatment at school and academic performance between blacks and whites and enlisted his scholarship to generate answers. The results of his research in Shaker Heights were published posthumously in the book *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb*,

Ogbu concludes that the CEM, which he originally observed in a segregated poor school, is in operation in the wealthy diverse suburb and that academic disengagement among black students and their families is the reason for black underachievement relative to that of white families. However, in order for the CEM to hold, the black families in suburban areas must convey to their children that the opportunity structure is not open or accessible to blacks. This runs counter to the observed reality in Shaker Heights, as in most suburban areas; the children of the black middle class are, in part, the product of increased educational access.[13] The narrative that education is the domain of whites runs counter to the experience of the students' parents, their friends' parents, and other suburban residents who compose an expanding black middle class.

Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb is a phenomenological study, but it suffers from the lack of a comparison group, which is troubling given that Ogbu is interested in understanding educational disparity. He infers, but fails to demonstrate, that the white families have a greater investment in education, stronger study habits, and more positive schooling experiences than black families in Shaker Heights. Ogbu's work and that of others rely on a deficit model of race, which locates educational failure with blacks only, and does not consider race relations to be an important feature of racial inequality. In this way, he commits a similar error to Lareau, who sees race as meaningful for black families but does not consider how the contrasting relationships between black and white families and schools matter for differences in educational experience.

Neither Lareau nor Ogbu offers a model that can adequately account for the types of unequal suburban educational experiences represented by the Science Academy example. Lareau's emphasis on disposition and overemphasis on social class obscures the ways that race intersects and affects the experiences of both the black middle class and lower-income whites. Ogbu's overemphasis on race relies on phenomenological individualism, which he steeps in assumptions of black deficiency and a monolithic, inescapable group identity, giving little credence to the social-class positions and identities that members of the black middle class have achieved. In both of these scholars' works, the role of race is not portrayed *relationally* because neither one seriously investigates the influence of race on black *and* white families, or how this shapes the educational access of those families. The dilemma of suburban school inequality necessitates a consideration of the intersections

of race and social class that looks carefully at the relationships of diverse families in the same space and how they jockey for, and ultimately stratify, educational resources. In the next section, I propose and describe such a model that responds to the analytic/theoretical challenge of explaining unequal outcomes among presumptively equal families.

THE MISSING LINK—RELATIONAL RESOURCE ANALYSIS

In this book I offer a relational resource analysis model for studying suburban education. My analytic framework draws heavily from Charles Tilly's work on categorical inequality. Tilly described the project of relational analysis in the following way:

> Relational analysts characteristically conceive of culture as shared understandings that intertwine closely with social relations, serving as their tools and constraints instead of constituting an autonomous sphere. Strongly relational analysis remains a minority movement in social science as a whole; individualisms and holisms continue to reign. In the choice between essences and bonds, nevertheless, I want to hold high the banner of bonds. I claim that an account of how transactions clump into social ties, social ties concatenate into networks, and existing networks constrain solutions of organizational problems clarifies the creation, maintenance, and change of categorical inequality.[14]

In my work I accept this challenge of relational analysis by using ethnographic data to look carefully at the role of bonds and how everyday processes over time lead to palpable categorical inequality. The shared meanings between black and white residents, as well as competition between them for valued educational resources, provide fertile ground for locating levers of change. It is important to note that my work not only extends Tilly's, but also challenges aspects of his arguments in several ways.

First, I argue that ideology and structural features are equally important mechanisms for perpetuating inequality between groups and over time. Tilly's commitment to explicating structural mechanisms ultimately gives short shrift to the role of ideology, particularly achievement ideology and racial ideology. Tilly argues that ideology plays a secondary role to structure: "Feelings of identity, on one side, and intergroup hostility, on the

other, may well accompany, promote, or result from the use of categorical differences to solve organizational problems. But the relative prevalence of such attitudes plays a secondary part in inequality's extent and form."[15] I disagree. I believe that ideology necessarily operates in the service of categorical inequality and is not oppositional to relational analysis. Instead, when considered—often on equal terms—it only further highlights the critical need to examine the nexus between belief, policy, and praxis. For example, in chapters 2, 5, and 6, I discuss the role of colorblind racial ideology in shaping education policy, everyday (mis)understandings of the role of race in Rolling Acres, and how race talk and silence shape social and academic experiences.

Second, this book advances the method of using naturally occurring samples to conduct relational analyses within education. Influenced by ecological considerations of schooling, I draw the empirical data here mainly from three fourth-grade classrooms in two schools and examine how the actions of individuals and groups affect others in the same classroom or school. As noted previously, studies emphasizing parents' or children's dispositions and phenomenological individualism have come to dominate qualitative studies of educational inequality. With this small-scale study, my goal is not to generate grand generalizations; rather it is to capture the processes at play in Rolling Acres that can potentially shed insight on mechanisms operating in other classrooms, schools, and districts in similar predicaments.

The application of a relational resource perspective to the example of the Saturday Science Academy uncovers a more complete reckoning of how race and social class simultaneously influence the pathways of resources. To better understand these resource pathways, I employ Tilly's concept of opportunity hoarding. In *Durable Inequality*, Tilly argues that opportunity hoarding "operates when members of a categorically bounded network acquire access to a resource that is valuable, renewable, subject to monopoly, supportive of network activities, and enhanced by the network's modus operandi."[16] In Rolling Acres, the race and class categories that families belonged to were meaningful for shaping access to education-related resources like information, proposed policy changes, and influence, as evidenced by the schools' accommodation of parents' requests. I argue that, via subtle and overt processes, the educational resources that were provided in Rolling Acres were often hoarded by the privileged, and made inaccessible to the families that most needed them.

In looking at the path of resources relationally, I identify three key junctures: resource provision, resource valuation, and resource uptake. Consider again the aforementioned example of the Saturday Science Academy. Funding for this resource was provided by the district and was originally intended to reduce the racial gap in exposure to a science curriculum and ultimately in science test scores. However, it is important to note that the Academy was offered to all families in order to comply with race-neutral civil rights laws, which no longer allow race-considerate policies. Districts like Rolling Acres are often able to locate money for programming, but how those programs are implemented is subject to local, state, and national constraints. Their implementation often betrays or compromises the original intentions of the programs and provides limited traction for redressing educational inequality. In chapter 2, I explore how such equal opportunity programming emerges as a product of the national policy environment, local legacies of racial discrimination, and aggressive lobbying from select residents.

Once a resource has been provided, a critical question is, "Do all families understand the value of that resource in the same way?" I would argue that the answer is no and that considering how differing individuals and groups understand the value of resources is critically important. Resource value involves an individual or a group's perception of a resource's worth for a desired outcome. Importantly, this not a binary distinction (i.e., valued, not valued), instead one must consider how social position and past experiences shape a resource's perceived value. While attending the Academy may provide benefit to children who enroll, it does not necessarily follow that those benefits will translate to immediate educational performance returns. Because families have differing levels of interest, time to dedicate, and past educational experiences, it should not be assumed that all families view a resource in a similar fashion. In Rolling Acres, minority families, including middle-class ones, routinely expressed concern that they had too little time to read through the voluminous school mailings and often considered extracurricular activities to be optional rather than educationally supplemental. In contrast, among white middle-class and affluent families, stay-at-home mothers often scoured the mailings for extracurricular activities and placed a premium on enrolling their children. The differences in financial, cultural, and social capital when coupled with limited resources (such as the number of spaces in the Academy) shape who considers the resource

meaningful and/or valuable. In chapters 3, 4, and 6, I further investigate how differences in family background, neighborhood, and the meanings of race serve to structure opportunities between groups.

The third critical juncture of resource utilization taps into an individual or group's ability to partake in the sustained use of a resource to achieve a desired outcome. Engaging a resource necessitates financial as well as cultural capital. For example, if the Science Academy is offered on Saturdays, providing transportation will often fall to individual families. Although publicly funded buses run during the school day, even after-school programming often requires individual families to transport their children between home and school. The costs of owning a car, fuel, and maintenance are significant, and while public transportation may be an option, it is also a time-consuming one: travel to and from school can take up to two hours round trip. For families with few economic resources, enrolling their children in extracurricular activities can be financially costly and time intensive, factors that often influence the uptake of these resources.[17] Middle-class and affluent families often have more financial resources, making car ownership more likely and transportation less of a barrier to participation. In chapter 4, I present a case study of how affluent and middle-class white families hoard opportunities such as critical information and how black families across class categories experience race-related barriers to parental engagement. In chapter 7, I examine the choice of black families to opt out of Rolling Acres Public Schools and send their children to schools of choice; many of them said that the uptake of resources was easier outside of RAPS.

In sum, we must look carefully at the relationships between black and white families as well as intersecting social-class positions to observe the subtle stratification of educational resources. To date, dominant theories of inequality and schooling such as the Cultural Ecological Model and Concerted Cultivation/Natural Growth have failed to deliver truly intersectional analyses that can adequately explain why districts like Rolling Acres suffer enduring educational inequality despite ample resources. Without considering how a resource is provided and valued, how people gain access to and use it, analyses will misidentify the mechanisms that lead to unequal schooling.

A relational resource perspective looks at the relations between groups, not simply dispositional orientations or phenomenological individualism,

in order to form a comprehensive portrait of how individual actions and social ties aggregate to group interests and networks, ultimately leading to phenomena like the achievement gap. In the following section I explain some central concepts that undergird this book's analysis to orient the reader for later discussions.

RETHINKING RESOURCES

The bulk of contemporary work on educational inequality has been framed around disparities in the furnishing of material resources (e.g., per pupil expenditures, classroom size). These discussions, in large part, emerge from the legacy of *Brown* v. *Board of Education I* (1954) and *Brown* v. *Board of Education II* (1955). The words of Justice Earl Warren, "separate facilities are inherently unequal facilities," set in motion a national movement toward equalizing access to educational facilities. Implicit in the argument of the cases was an assumption that unequal facilities contributed greatly to the observable educational disparities between white and black citizens. This assumption was more explicitly tested by James Coleman and colleagues in a report commonly referred to as the Coleman Report and further explored by Christopher Jencks and team in the book *Inequality*.[18] Both studies found that family background was more influential on student achievement than material resources such as school size or expenditures. This finding was largely counterintuitive given that the differences in school facilities were thought to be very influential in the educational racial disparities discussed in the *Brown* decisions. As a result, interventions in schools were curtailed and more discussions of family background emerged. Coupled with resistance to desegregation efforts, schools resegregated and funding disparities reentered the policy debate about educational opportunity.[19]

Contemporary discussions of educational inequality have assumed that racially separate schools offer different access to quantifiable material resources and thus lead to educational gaps; but this is not the case for a growing number of suburban schools where, although children of fast-food workers and doctors share classroom seats, inequality persists. This book examines less easily quantified, but I would argue equally valuable, resources in an affluent school district.

Throughout the book I examine the role of less formally recognized resources that are provided by local school systems—including equity policy, extracurricular access, information, race talk, culture, and the ability to customize education—and their implications for educational inequality. Although each of these aforementioned resources may not be easily quantified, their availability and subsequent manipulation make them the object of competition and subject to monopoly. Both these difficult-to-quantify resources and the material resources documented in quantitative studies on student achievement are useful for determining the degree of disparities between districts and states; and both are critical for shaping inequality within educational settings.

It is important to note that the competition for and attempted monopolization of resources are tied to differences in family background, as well as institutional reception. Within Rolling Acres, white families routinely took on a concerted cultivation orientation and then were extended latitude by schools, which assessed their presence as more valuable than that of black residents. As a result, white families were better able to exploit social networks and institutional relationships to create educational experiences that benefited their children, but their decisions often had collateral consequences for the children of black families enrolled in the same schools.

THE STUDY

Gaining access to and understanding the lives of black and white families is a difficult task. The data in this book are compiled from over 100 in-depth interviews with parents, children, teachers, community members, and school administrators. In particular, I observed fourth-grade classrooms in two public elementary schools, River Elementary and Cherry Elementary, and observed and interviewed the families whose children were enrolled in them, as well as the schools' administrators and teachers. At River Elementary, which served approximately 350 students, the classrooms of Mr. Marks and Ms. Reno were my study sites. During the 2005–2006 academic year, the school's student body was approximately 45 percent white, 7 percent Latino, 23 percent black, 11 percent Asian, and 8 percent multiracial. At Cherry Elementary, which served nearly 500 hundred students, Ms. Jackson's classroom was my study site. During the 2005–2006 academic year, the school's student

body was approximately 54 percent white, 1 percent Latino, 8 percent black, 30 percent Asian, and 7 percent multiracial. The Rolling Acres Public School system served nearly 18,000 students and expended more than $10,000 per student. White students constituted the largest racial group at 50 percent, and black students followed at 15 percent; 20 percent of students received free or reduced-price lunch. These percentages provide a cursory portrait of who attended the schools of study, but they tell us little about the lives of individual families. For this reason, I used multiple forms of qualitative inquiry—particularly in-depth interviews—to uncover the processes at play within schools and homes in Rolling Acres.

I interviewed, students, parents, teachers, support staff, principals, and educational advocates with the hope of hearing what mattered for education and social relationships in what was viewed by many as a suburban oasis. I had my own suspicions about why Rolling Acres schools remained so unequal, but as it turned out, my perspective was not always shared or right. I began by interviewing families in three classrooms—two in River Elementary and one in Cherry Elementary—but soon I realized they did not provide access to a significant portion of the Rolling Acres population in which I was also interested: affluent black families that opted to send their children to schools of choice—private, religious, and charter schools. So I added interviews with those families to my sample. In total, I interviewed and observed forty-one families in Rolling Acres over the course of four years. In addition, I hung out with and observed a subset of boys, both black and white, as they attended extracurricular activities and elsewhere in their out-of-school lives.

In talking with and observing community members, I was forced to widen my thinking and methodological approach. I delved into the city's historical and cultural archives by exploring newspapers, magazines, and websites. Each publication and opinion showed the diversity of thought and the stakes tied to schools. Each decade's records demonstrated that all Rolling Acres residents believed education was important, but few agreed on the best methods for producing an education that benefited everyone. The vigor with which differing factions fought over education demonstrated that it is one of the most politically contentious arenas both in Rolling Acres and nationally. All stakeholders believed that their actions were in the best interest of their constituents, which meant that each move by a school board or parents' group was scrutinized, rebuffed, and revisited in

public debate. While the city's promotional materials painted the picture of a utopia, its archives revealed deep racial and class fault lines that were established in the past and still divided the present. This book begins to unpack the contentious yet critical issue of educational opportunity in a space that has been too long overlooked by social science scholars and offers recommendations for addressing inequities.

RACE AND SOCIAL CLASS

Both social class and race are key considerations in this discussion of educational inequality. Although there are many ways to classify race and social class in this study of Rolling Acres, I employ a relational perspective. Rolling Acres is a city where the largest racial groups are still white and black, and while the city and school district have continued to diversify ethnically, race is still thought of largely in a binary fashion. I attempt to remain sensitive to the multiple levels of racial meaning throughout this book, and in chapter 5 I further discuss the contested significance of race, not simply racial labels.

In RAPS schools, teachers spoke about students as black or white and rarely used the labels "biracial," "multiracial," or "mixed." This was particularly meaningful for multiracial families, who were often pushed across the racial line into black or white classifications. Racial assignment typically followed the one-drop rule of hypo-descent, with multiracial children who had a black parent being identified as black. However, this was not always the case. For example, when I sat down with Ms. Thomas, a white mother in my sample, she identified her son Matt as biracial, while Matt's teacher identified him as white and Matt identified himself as white. As I watched interactions in classrooms, on the playground and in neighborhoods, I came to understand that each child's racial identification deeply affected his or her schooling and social world.

For these reasons I have analyzed the data predominantly along black-white racial lines, paying particular attention to when the experiences of multiracial students or families diverged from those of families that identified as black or white. The ability to draw distinct racial lines was less difficult than drawing social-class categories within the text. While I do not necessarily think the category of race is less socially meaningful or complex

than social class, there are few agreed upon measures of social class, and because income and wealth distributions are unequal along racial lines, the definition of middle class is not the same for white and black populations.

In the suburb of Rolling Acres, the most contested category was "middle class." In 2007, white households had a median income of $53,714; black households had a median income of $31,100.[20] Income disparities are only the tip of the iceberg. Scholars have found that there are even greater disparities in wealth than in income, and this is particularly important if it is true that wealth is a better predictor of educational achievement than income, as some have argued.[21] For purposes of parsimony, here I have followed the approach of scholars of the (black) middle class like Mary Pattillo, who uses two times the poverty line as the lower bound for middle-class status.[22] When I collected my data, this meant that families whose annual income exceeded $40,000 were considered middle class. In addition, I considered families in which at least one parent had a college education or above and worked in a white-collar profession to be middle class.[23]

However, none of these individual indicators can truly capture social class. I agree with John Jackson's assessment that "It is not just education or occupation, income or wealth but lifestyles—skills and cultural practices—that distinguish and determine classes."[24] The complexity of social class and its influence are seen in the divergent experience, desires, and reception within the schools of Rolling Acres. Race and class were entangled and often conflated in troubling ways. For example, black middle-class families often found their middle-class status under challenge, both subtly and explicitly. Ms. Towles, an African-American mother, recounted a story to me about her son Jeffrey and how peculiar she found it that he had suddenly stopped eating breakfast at home. When she prepared him breakfast he refused it. Perplexed, Ms. Towles asked him why, and Jeffrey replied, "I got it at school." Ms. Towles was surprised because she had not given Jeffrey money to buy breakfast. When she asked him how he received breakfast, he responded, "Well, they tell all the black kids to go down to the cafeteria to get it before school starts." Both astonished and concerned, Ms. Towles instructed her son to stop accepting the free breakfast and took the opportunity to talk to him about social class and perceptions of black wealth. In this case Jeffrey was casually "misidentified" as a student who should receive a free or reduced-price meal, which may appear benign (because he received a good, in this case, and was not barred from

receiving a good), but it signals a deeper set of issues and troubled relationships between school staff and families and demonstrates the permanence of race and class in structuring everyday life.

CONCLUSION

Within Rolling Acres, black families' experiences were significantly different from those of their white counterparts. While black families were often saddled with disadvantage on the opposite side of a racial line, white families enjoyed great levels of privilege. Past scholarship has suggested that race is not at the root of disparities or proffered social-class differences or black cultural dysfunction; but none of these explanations adequately explains what happens in Rolling Acres schools. A relational exploration and understanding of the mechanisms and processes that embed inequality is necessary in order to devise viable solutions.

This book analyzes relationships between families and those families' relationships to schools, because in these bonds inequalities are bred. Through a careful ethnography of suburban school inequality, I offer some conclusions about the importance of considering how groups are defined, how resources are hoarded, and whose voices animate policy. This book is not simply about what it means to be black or white in suburban schools; rather it is about how being white provides unearned and pervasive advantages that, in implicit and explicit ways, constrain the ability of black families to harvest the fruits of the suburban frontier. It is also about the voiced and unvoiced needs of black families that go untended and that have left the promises of the Promised Land unfulfilled. Until these relationships are disentangled, traction on the path to equity will remain difficult to achieve.