Whiteness as Giftedness: Racial Formation at an Urban High School

ANNEGRET STAIGER, *Clarkson University*

By examining a gifted magnet of an urban California high school as a racial project, this study contributes to our understanding of racial formation. The study analyzes the organizational and representational practices of this voluntary desegregation tool—a partial-site magnet program for "gifted" students—and its impact on students inside and outside the program. In doing so, the study reveals how, in contrast to its stated mission, this form of voluntary desegregation actually constitutes a form of resegregation. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this research reveals a series of practices that have produced exclusionary access to the gifted program, limited the interaction between magnet and non-magnet students, and instituted an apparently color-blind discourse of the gifted as in need of protection, all contributing to a widespread though complex and contradictory notion of whiteness as giftedness. Such notions run counter to the original intent of the desegregation ruling in Brown v. Board of Education. *Revealing the processes by which a desegregation instrument facilitates such contradictory outcomes provides critical insights into the dynamic nature of racial formation.*

This article excavates one facet of racial formation by examining a magnet program for gifted students at an urban high school in California as a racial project. By uncovering the organizational and interactive processes of the gifted magnet as a racial project, this study shows how giftedness becomes equated with whiteness, and how whiteness becomes equated with giftedness. The irony is that magnet programs are devices in the arsenal of school desegregation. Designed to attract students through an enriched educational curriculum, they provide school choice and thus have been a favored and widely institutionalized instrument for facilitating voluntary desegregation (Goldring and Smrekar 2000; West 1994). However, several studies have shown that desegregation based solely on physically mixing racialized bodies often falls short of meaningful integration, which also involves a social and intellectual engagement across race (Fine, Weis, and Powell 1997). This is particularly the case when schools avoid discussions about race, do not target the racial achievement gap, fail to make clear and decisive interventions against racial discrimination (Fine, Weis, and Powell 1997; Metz 2003; Schofield 1989), or do not include teachers' beliefs and status in the reorganization process (Lipman 1998). In such cases, desegregation can lead to an intensification of racial conflict and resegregation (Fine, Weis, and Powell 1997) and to a perpetuation of negative stereotypes about non-white students (Lipman 1998; Metz 2003; Schofield 1989).

Partial-site magnet programs, where the magnet part constitutes only one segment of a school's students, exacerbate this effect. As Kimberley West (1994) has pointed out: "Racial segregation within partial-site magnet schools is particularly damaging to the minority students who constitute the non-magnet portion of the school, because it labels them as inferior to the white transfer students who constitute the bulk of the magnet students within the program" (p. 2567). Such schools-within-schools are therefore likely to intensify the psychological damage

The author wishes to thank Mary Hancock, Faye Harrison, and Donna Ford for their comments on earlier versions, and James Holstein and the anonymous reviewers of *Social Problems* for their insightful suggestions and encouragements. Direct correspondence to: Annegret Staiger, Division of Liberal Arts, School of Arts and Sciences, P.O. Box 5750, Clarkson University, Potsdam, NY 13699. E-mail: staiger@clarkson.edu.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS, Vol. 51, No. 2, pages 161–181. ISSN: 0037-7791; online ISSN: 1533-8533

that segregated schools had on minority children and that *Brown v. Board of Education* was supposed to overcome.

This study extends our understanding of the racializing processes of desegregation by giving attention to one of these lesser understood partial-site magnet programs (West 1994)—a highly praised gifted magnet. It shows not only how this desegregation tool managed to benefit predominantly white students, but also, how a carefully orchestrated dual representation concealed segregation within the school, and how the day-to-day interactions it engendered facilitated the notion that giftedness was equivalent to whiteness.

To understand the processes leading to such a conflation of whiteness and giftedness, I am adopting Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (1994) concept of racial formation, which emphasizes the fluid nature of race and racial categories. Racial formation, they argue, continuously "creates, inhabits, transforms, and destroys" racial categories through "a process of historically situated projects" (p. 55). Together, these racial projects form an interrelated web that constitutes racial formation. Racial projects, thus, are the "building blocks" of racial formation, specific to a particular historical and societal context.

As building blocks of racial formation, racial projects are "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics and an effort to organize and distribute resources along particular racial lines" (Omi and Winant 1994:56). The concept of racial project thus helps to show how the gifted magnet GROW[1] at Roosevelt High School (RHS) produces a set of structures that disproportionately provides educational resources to white students, and simultaneously explains and represents this racial dynamic on the basis of the construct of giftedness, evident in the everyday interaction between students, teachers, and administrators and the various audiences that constitute the RHS community. Thus, treating the gifted magnet as a racial project helps to identify it as one facet of the construction of whiteness and the co-construction of its racial others in the post-civil rights era.

Following the theory of racial formation, I first examine the historical circumstances in which this project is embedded, and then show how the school produces and organizes the categories "white" and "gifted." I then show how these categories are represented, first, in the public discourses of the school and school district; and second, in teachers', administrators', and students' interactions with and discourses about each other. This approach illustrates the institutional orchestration of whiteness as giftedness, as well as the multiple and often contradictory interpretations of this conflation by different actors.

Methodology

I collected data as part of an 18-month ethnographic study. Using participant observation, I regularly visited classes from a broad academic spectrum and spent time with students during breaks and after school. I also went to student-related meetings, such as student clubs, student government, or sports events, and I attended parent-focused events, such as parent-teacher associations, open houses, or school performances. I conducted 65 semi-structured, open-ended interviews with approximately equal numbers of students from all racial backgrounds about the racial climate at RHS and its neighborhood. Nine of these interviews were conducted with focus groups. I also conducted formal interviews with five key administrators and ten teachers. These interviews, which lasted from 30 to 90 minutes, were audio-taped and later transcribed. In addition to these formal interviews, I engaged in numerous conversations with students, teachers, administrators, counselors, security personnel, and other school staff throughout the course of participant observation, which I recorded daily in fieldnotes.

1. GROW is a pseudonym, as are all the other names used in this text for people, city, school district, and other institutions.

As a white woman ethnographer in a predominantly non-white school, I was concerned about how being white would affect my ability to establish rapport. As expected, white teachers and students sometimes treated me as a racial confidante. Others, particularly African American students, tended to be more reserved. Yet, some students told me that my foreign accent made it difficult to classify me as white. While such reservations were more problematic during participant observations, it was my impression that during the course of the interview, apprehensive students often warmed up, and the more informed I became about the dynamics of race at Roosevelt High School, the more interested students from all racial backgrounds were in expressing their own views.[2]

The question of how the gifted program produced a notion of whiteness as being synonymous with giftedness emerged gradually during the course of my fieldwork: after I noticed students' frequent references to the gifted program as "a program for white students only," after I observed the racial imbalance in the educational programs, and most of all, after I noticed the growing wall of institutional silence when I asked questions about the gifted magnet and race. To avoid jeopardizing my larger research project altogether, I turned to more indirect and open-ended questions. As a consequence, most of the interview material I provide here derives from unsolicited comments that emerged from broader discussions with students and school personnel about academic programs at RHS. The institutional evasiveness about race and the gifted magnet also forced me to turn to public discourses: pamphlets with program descriptions, the school and district's websites, and statistics and reports from the California Department of Education.

Although this study of whiteness as giftedness is lodged within a multi-racial context, the voices of Asian American students, who were a large part of the school's population, are less incorporated in this article than are those of others. This is due to various reasons. Given my original focus on masculinity and race, the bulk of my interview materials concern Asian American students from middle and lower tier educational programs. In contrast to their overrepresentation in gifted programs nationwide (Ford and Grantham 1998), Asian Americans at Roosevelt High were actually slightly underrepresented in GROW, possibly due to the large proportion of poor, recent immigrants from Southeast Asia. They and their families' relative unfamiliarity with American culture and its contradictions might also be the reason why—unlike African Americans and Latinos—they did not have a clear position and discourse about GROW and issues of racial disparity. In addition, teachers and administrators volunteered few comments about Asian American students in regard to giftedness. Given the paucity of ethnographic information on Asian American students, future research in this area is needed.

Organizing the Categories Whiteness and Giftedness

As Omi and Winant (1994) argue, racial projects are "never invented out of the air, but exist in a definite historical context, having descended from previous conflicts" (p. 58). The history of the racial project GROW has its origin in the "Great Transformation" of the 1950s and 60s: the social movement for desegregation that was won—in theory, if not in practice—with *Brown v. Board of Education*. But the long legal struggle of putting *Brown* into practice and the often hostile reactions desegregation efforts encountered from whites made school boards and policy makers look for more palatable alternatives.

2. It appeared to me that when students realized I was not raised in the United States and had not gone to an American high school, they provided more exhaustive answers. However, as one reviewer suggested, hearing the interviewer talk in a foreign accent might merely lead to longer and more repetitive, but not necessarily more in-depth and reflective answers. Since I conducted all interviews myself, I don't have materials for comparison. However, the extent to which a foreign accent of an interviewer influences the answers of the interviewees raises interesting methodological questions that deserve further attention, particularly in comparison to other identity features such as race, ethnicity, and gender.

History of Newtown Unified School District and Mandate for Desegregation

By the mid 1960s, the time desegregation efforts were discussed in Newtown, the school district comprised about 70,000 students, of whom more than 80 percent were white. African Americans and Latinos each constituted less than 10 percent. But while Latinos were spread out across many schools, African Americans were heavily concentrated in five of the district's 80 schools, where they made up more than 50 percent of the student body. At the secondary school level, Roosevelt High School alone, which was one of five large high schools in the district, served 80 percent of the district's African Americans and 30 percent of the district's Latinos.[3]

The growing black and Latino population in the 1960s and their residential concentration in a small area of the city had produced highly segregated schools. Newtown was therefore faced with the mandate to integrate its schools. During the late 1960s, a multi-racial citizen committee was organized, which decided to adopt magnet programs as a means for "voluntary" desegregation: rather than forcing students to be bused to other schools, magnet programs were to draw students through specific curricular programs and thereby ensure greater racial diversity.[4] Studies of gifted magnets elsewhere had proven to be very attractive to white parents (Rossell 1990). By adopting this voluntary desegregation tool, the committee avoided the racial tensions that desegregation through state-ordered busing had caused in neighboring school districts. As the school with the highest concentration of non-white students, Roosevelt High was the one most urgently in need of becoming desegregated, and by the mid 1970s, the gifted magnet GROW was established.

By 1980, the percentage of the district's African Americans served at RHS had dropped from 75 percent in 1970 to less than 30 percent, and the number of Latinos had dropped from 45 percent to 20 percent. By 1992, the number of whites at RHS had become comparable to the percentage of whites in the district overall (see Figure 2). Thus, within fifteen years of its inception, GROW had helped to stabilize the percentage of white students at the school at a rate comparable to the representation of whites in the district overall. Thus, in terms of desegregation and racial balancing, the gifted magnet had achieved what it was intended to do.

Giftedness in Newtown and Its Intersection with Race

Like most other school districts (Ford et al. 2002; Robinson 1998), Newtown used IQ scores and standardized tests to determine whether a student was gifted. However, as even scholars advocating gifted programs have pointed out, this is not an unproblematic practice, because IQ tests tend to be racially and culturally biased (Margolin 1994; Peterson and Margolin 1997; Sapon-Shevin 1993, 1994; Stephens and Karnes 2000:219ff.). Further, before students in the Newtown School District could be tested for giftedness, they needed to have a referral from a parent or teacher. But before parents can request that their child be tested, they need to be aware of the concept of giftedness and the educational advantages associated with this label. Amy Stuart Wells and Irene Serna (1996) and Mara Sapon-Shevin (1993) argue, however, that many African American parents tend to be less informed about school matters and often are suspicious of the educational system generally (Lareau and McNamara 1999). In addition to these issues, Latino and Asian American parents who do not speak English face language obstacles in gaining access to this cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). Teachers can constitute yet another obstacle, in so far as they have been found to be poor judges of their students' intellectual ability (Oakes 1985; Peterson and Margolin 1997). Teachers' ability to judge students might be further compromised if the students come from

3. Statistics for the racial make-up of the NUSD school district are based on "Racial and Ethnic Background of NUSD Students, Grades K–12," for 1966, 1970, 1980, 1992, 1996, 2001; Newtown Unified School District (pseudonym).

4. This information was confirmed in a telephone interview on September 25, 2003 with the Public Relations Officer for the NUSD district.

cultural backgrounds unfamiliar to them (Spindler and Spindler 1983), a frequent situation in Newtown's classrooms, where teachers and counselors were predominantly white.[5] With parents ill-informed about gifted programs and teachers less perceptive of exceptional talent in African American, Latino, and Asian children (see also Bernal 2002), these children's chances of being tested in the first place were lowered.

Yet another structural inequality in the identification process was the fact that students who were identified as gifted retained this label throughout their school career, and with it, preferential access to enriched and accelerated programs. This privilege remained in effect even when the student's performance did not correspond to the gifted label. For example, acceptance into the gifted magnet at RHS was based on grade point averages and entrance test scores. However, the gifted label automatically took priority over these two criteria. As the outgoing director of the gifted magnet explained, "Complications arise if a gifted student wants to get into the gifted program but does not meet the entrance requirements. So, [out of 185 admitted] every year there are thirty to forty students because of their label but who do not actually perform so well." This meant that roughly 15–20 percent of the students admitted to GROW were admitted over students who performed better academically, but were not identified as gifted. Thus, while identification procedures provided an uneven playing field for non-white students and those with less cultural capital, the entitlement associated with the gifted label and the retaining of the label throughout one's school career intensified the inequities in access to gifted education and cemented the link between whiteness and giftedness.

To explain how the label "gifted" became a convenient magnet to attract white students, it is crucial to understand also how giftedness has historically been correlated with whiteness. Tracking practices generally have been linked to class, ethnicity, and race (Lucas and Berends 2002; Margolin 1994; Oakes 1985; Persell 1977). In Newtown, a district still predominantly white by 1970, only a negligible number of non-white students (less than 5 percent) were in gifted programs district-wide. Thus, when GROW was established in the mid-70s, giftedness district-wide was an almost exclusively white category. Even the high representation of Asian Americans was hardly noticeable, because their population overall was very small. But by 1980, white students had dropped to half of the district's population, while Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans comprised the other half. By 2001, whites had dropped to less than one-fifth of the student population in the district. During this time period, the percentage of African Americans and Latinos in gifted programs increased from a half percent to 3 percent. It was followed by Asian Americans who increased their proportion from 6 to 10 percent. In contrast, the percentage of white students in gifted programs increased from 4 to almost 14 percent. This means that during the rapid decline of white students in the district from more than 80 percent in 1970 to less than 20 percent in 2001, their percentage in the gifted programs had climbed dramatically (see Figure 1).

Roosevelt High School and Its Gifted Magnet

Poverty, overcrowding, high crime rates, and gangs were widespread in Roosevelt High School's neighborhood. According to the local newspaper, the city generally was plagued by frequent incidents of violence. Alarmed by their frequency and intensity, school officials launched a number of efforts to secure the schools.[6] Against this backdrop, RHS was an urban success story of racial harmony and academic success and was awarded the label "California Distinguished School." To the public, racial integration at Roosevelt High School had been successful. But it became so only through a magnet program that had effectively produced

5. According to "Racial and Ethnic Survey of Employees, 1993," Newtown Unified School District.

6. Official crime statistics were inconclusive. According to California Safe Schools Assessment (California Department of Education 2001), Newtown's crime rates were comparable to statewide crime rates. However, in a recent telephone interview, the NUSD's Chief of School Safety described this report as highly unreliable and disregarded by educational policy makers because of its underreporting.

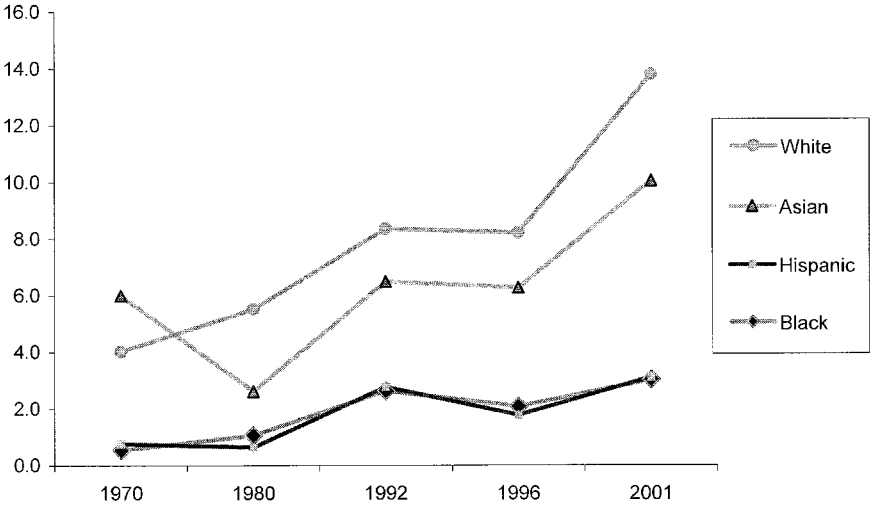

Figure 1 • ***Gifted Students as Percentage of Racial/Ethnic Group in Newtown Unified School District (pseudonym). Source: "Racial and Ethnic Background of NUSD Students, Grades K–12" of 1970, 1980, 1992, 1996, and 2001; Newtown Unified School District.*** *Percentages were calculated by dividing the number of gifted students from each racial category by the number of total students from this category. Explanations: Data compiled from category "Asian" includes Filipinos and Pacific Islanders; category "Hispanic" replaced category "Spanish Surname" (1970); I excluded the category "American Indian" from this chart because it was less than 1%, but included it in the total population; category "Other Non-White" from 1970, which is less than 1%, is also omitted in this chart.*

within-school segregation. This paradoxical outcome was concealed from the public. The school and district websites emphasized the school's successful integration and overall academic excellence to a general audience, while websites dedicated to prospective gifted students and their parents emphasized the exclusive nature of the gifted magnet.

Representation of Whiteness as Giftedness: A Dual Agenda

The district's website described Roosevelt High School as one of "the top ten schools in the U.S. in the number of students taking and passing AP college tests." It boasted that at RHS 600 AP (Advanced Placement) exams were passed every year, compared to 57 exams passed per year at schools nationwide. But the gifted magnet's web page told a slightly different story to parents interested in the program: There, it was stated that "academic excellence is proven each year as GROW students take more than 700 Advanced Placement tests with a pass rate averaging between 70 and 80 percent."

Comparing the two statements shows that of 600 AP exams passed every year at Roosevelt High, between 490 to 570 exams are passed by GROW students alone, leaving only 30–110 for non-GROW students. Considering that, with over 4,000 students, RHS was unusually large, this number was not dramatically different from the national average of 57 exams passed per school.

Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, often used as a college admission requirement, were another subject for dual representation. The figures in Table 1, published by the California Department of Education (1995), show that 43 percent of the students at Roosevelt High took the SAT. This was almost twice the percentage of students taking the SAT at two comparable neighboring schools, Keppler (25 percent) and City High (25 percent). In contrast, the scores

Table 1 • *1994/95 High School Performance Report*

	California	*NUSD*	*Keppler*	*Roosevelt*	*City*	*Whitney*
LEP	16.0	21.4	23.4	14.5	22.8	0.4
AFDC	15.4	26.7	34.8	48.9	27.5	0.0
SAT T	902	784	729	921	881	1233
SAT%	41	30.3	24.9	42.7	24.6	100

Source: California Department of Education, Research, Evaluation and Technology Division, 1995.
LEP = Limited English Proficiency (non-native English speakers); AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children; SAT T = Scholastic Aptitude Test Total; SAT % = Scholastic Aptitude Tests in Percent.

of Roosevelt High's students were closer to the suburban school Whitney High, a school without students on "Aid to Families with Dependent Children" (AFDC), and with hardly any students classified as having "limited English proficiency" (LEP). This again appeared to confirm Roosevelt High School's academic excellence. However, if one assumes that all students in the gifted program—18 percent of the total population—were going on to college and therefore took the SAT, this number can be subtracted from the 43 percent of Roosevelt High students taking the SAT. The remaining 25 percent represents a number comparable to Keppler and City High, which are both significantly lower than the average for California. Thus, the features of academic excellence the websites had used to describe Roosevelt High as an outstanding school occurred in large part due to the gifted magnet, the disproportionately white enclave in this "minority" school, while students outside the magnet program performed at the same low level as in comparable schools elsewhere.

The most guarded statistic in the school, however, was the racial distribution of students within the magnet. While a school counselor generously provided me with statistics for various educational programs, she grew suspicious when I asked her for the racial breakdown of GROW. She wanted to know why that should be of interest to anyone. When I asked the director of the gifted program this question, he answered in a similar fashion: "We don't have statistics about the racial breakdown of the GROW Program. Why would we collect that? [. . .] Maybe other programs have these statistics because they use it for their selection criteria. We don't."

After a yearlong odyssey of trying to obtain these data from the magnet counselor, the secretaries, the principal, and various representatives in the district office, who assured me repeatedly that those data did not exist or were no longer traceable, I circumvented official venues and asked the school's data analyst for the information directly. He provided the information without hesitation. The numbers in Figure 2 confirm the racial imbalance I had observed in the classrooms all the while. White students, who accounted for less than one fifth of the total student population, made up more than half of the students in GROW; Hispanic and Asian American students were slightly underrepresented, numbers that differed significantly from the general pattern of Latinos and Asian Americans represented in gifted programs state and nationwide.[7] In contrast, African American students, accounting for about

7. The reasons for these atypical representations have to be seen in the specific demographics of the city and the school. State and nationwide, Latinos are as underrepresented as blacks, while Asian Americans tend to be more overrepresented than whites. As I have shown elsewhere (Staiger 1999), a large percentage of Asian Americans at RHS were first or 1.5 generation immigrants from Southeast Asia, who generally were poor, often associated with gangs, and who identified themselves as the "Blacks of the Asians." Thus, they did not fit the image of the model minority. Latinos' relatively low representation at RHS was due to entrenched gang warfare between Latinos and Cambodians, where Cambodians had established dominance. This led to high transfer rates of Latinos, particularly those more likely to be living in gang territories. The resulting representation of Latinos was skewed towards middle and upper-middle class and those who tended to live outside the neighborhood. This skewed class distribution was also likely the reason that Latinos were only slightly underrepresented in GROW.

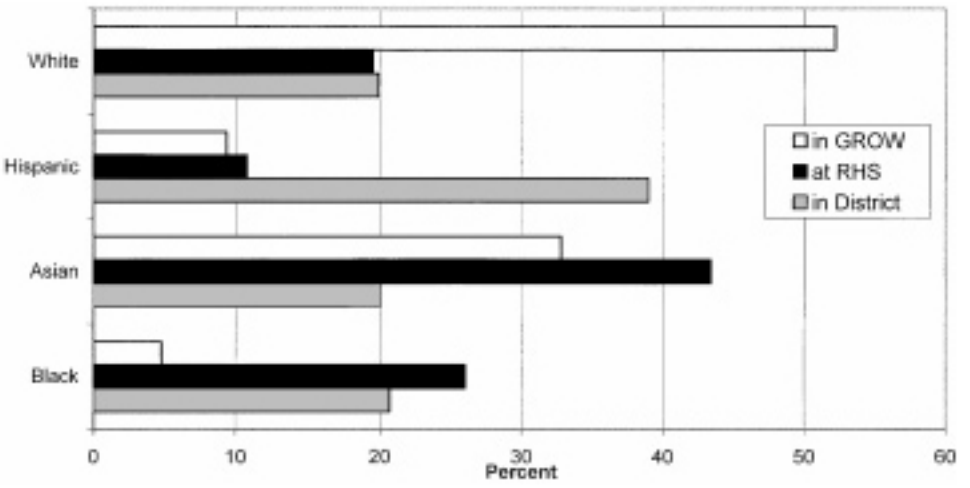

Figure 2 • *Comparison of Racial Distribution of Students in GROW, RHS, and Newtown Unified School District (pseudonym). Source: Racial Statistics of Roosevelt High School Programs, 1996.*

one quarter of the total student population, made up less than one-twentieth of the students in GROW.

These representations of GROW at the district and the school level revealed the balancing act of two contradictory messages: one highlighting for a general audience the success of the school's desegregation strategies as inclusive and beneficial, the other highlighting for a more specific GROW audience the GROW program's exclusive status. Thus, the contradictions between the original mission of desegregation—to offer improved education for all—and the factual within-school segregation were made invisible, and the conflation of whiteness and giftedness had become eclipsed from the public view, but was emphasized to a selective GROW audience. When this image was threatened, as when I asked for the racial breakdown of GROW or about students' portfolios, information suddenly became unavailable. Such an interpretation is consistent with research that shows the political resistance to desegregation and the inordinate pressure that politically powerful—usually white and wealthier—parents exert on schools (Oakes, Wells, and Jones 1997; Wells and Oakes 1998; Wells and Serna 1996). It is also likely that school officials were trying to avoid the criticism they would get if it became public that the beneficiaries of desegregation were primarily white students.

Securing Physical Segregation

The magnet program's web page and information brochure for parents of prospective students explicitly stated that the program would ensure physical integration of GROW students with non-GROW students, an issue particularly relevant to the gifted magnet as a desegregation instrument. It stated:

> GROW students are not isolated from other students on the Roosevelt High campus. Some of the classes (notably Physical Education, Drivers' Education, and some electives) are mixed classes with both GROW and non-GROW students. This increases the number of students that GROW students interact with, and friendships often form between GROW and non-GROW students. The classes themselves are spread throughout the campus. There is no GROW building on campus.

While the paragraph directly addressed the issue of within-school segregation, it also assured parents of prospective GROW students that integration "notably" took place in such non-academic classes as "Physical Education" and "Drivers' Education." Thus, while promising integration on one level, the subtext of this paragraph was that integration took place in non-academic courses and thus did not interfere with the academic opportunities of GROW students. As I found throughout my fieldwork, many of the electives which gifted students had to take as non-GROW classes often turned out to be Advanced Placement, Honors, or other accelerated classes that consisted predominantly or entirely of gifted students.

Finally, until 1995, a separate bell schedule was in effect. While magnet students were taught in blocks of 80 minutes, regular students were taught in 55 minute periods. This resulted in different passing periods and breaks, which kept both groups of students further apart. Moreover, it made it difficult for non-magnet students to enroll in Advanced Placement classes, although AP classes theoretically had to be open to any qualified student. Only after increasing pressure from the high school accreditation team to teach in a unified schedule did RHS finally comply in the mid-90s. Yet, gifted students still ended up having one additional hour of instruction and classrooms that had five-to-seven students less than regular classes.

Thus, Newtown's decision to establish a partial-site magnet program for gifted students at Roosevelt High School managed to balance student numbers across the schools, but it had done so by using a criterion in which whites were historically overrepresented, and then used this criterion to justify segregation of students within the school. Through the tools of desegregation, it had effectively organized the meritocratic label "gifted" to coincide with the racial label white.

Whiteness as Giftedness in Discourse and Interaction

The contradictions in the institutional organization were hidden through careful orchestration of public information. But how was this duality expressed within the school, inside and outside the gifted magnet? How did teachers, administrators, and students, "gifted" and "non-gifted," white and non-white, enact whiteness as giftedness? To understand this aspect of this racial project, it is helpful to consider Omi and Winant's (1994) concept of "common sense." They argue that racial meaning and structure are embedded in the "common sense" which organizes and underlies everyday interactions and discourses (p. 60).

The emerging literature of critical white studies has theorized whiteness as privilege and as made invisible due to its normalizing function (Fine 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Harris 1991). As the dominant racial category, white identity is different from others: it is the norm, the largely invisible background against which non-white others are visible and judged (McIntosh 1990). Thus, whites have often been found more likely to refer to their own identity in ethnic rather than racial terms (Berbrier 1998; Waters 1990).

The following interactions and narratives illustrate how the magnet program as a racial project produced a multivalent notion of whiteness/giftedness. Given the invisibility of whiteness in conjunction with the discourse of "colorblindness" that marks the post-civil rights era (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Brown 2003; Omi and Winant 1994), it comes as no surprise that teachers of the gifted magnet and their students made few explicit statements about race. Therefore, the means by which giftedness was identified as whiteness was often hidden or indirect. One way through which teachers and administrators as "people makers" (Margolin 1994) created this conflation was through the ubiquitous narrative of "having to be protective" of their students. While teachers presented this as a colorblind statement, GROW students were aware that those from whom they supposedly needed protection were the "non-whites" outside the gifted magnet. Nevertheless, these students did not question the privileges that their whiteness enabled, but justified the privilege of gaining a first-rate education as something to which their giftedness entitled them.

Teachers and Administrators: A Discourse of Protection

The discourse of "protection" was so deeply entrenched in the everyday interactions of the magnet teachers and students that there was no need to define the source of the danger, or from whom or what gifted students had to be protected.

The first time I became aware of the concept of "protection" was when I tried to locate Joe, one of few African Americans in GROW, through the counselor's office. The GROW counselor told me that he could not give me Joe's whereabouts. He said: "I am very protective of my students" and asked instead that I leave a note for Joe so he could contact me on his own. I was puzzled about the counselor's sudden concern, because he had given me this information for white, Latino, and Asian American students many times before, without any concerns, as had the GROW director. When I saw Joe again much later, at his graduation, he told me he had wondered why I never asked him for an interview and that he had never received a note from his counselor.

The second example of a GROW teacher portraying gifted students as "in need of protection" occurred one day when I joined teachers in the lunchroom. I sat down next to Ms. Murray, a GROW English teacher, who was engaged in a conversation with three other colleagues about an incident in which one of her gifted students was threatened by a regular student in the hallway. But it was worse, she said: "Staff assistants are supposed to protect students and teachers. But they often do not even show up when they are called. I mean, the staff assistants, they hide." As it so happened, most of the staff assistants were African Americans. At this point in the conversation one African American staff assistant cheerfully entered the room and sat down at the table. The conversation ended abruptly, but not without Ms. Murray's final comment: "Someone ought to alert the parents about that situation. Or just tell the kids that they should tell their parents. I talked with the GROW director about that. At least they should be warned that no one is policing the hallway."

The discourse of protection also came to the foreground when Roger, a tall, white GROW student with a strong and broad build decided to enroll in a Business English course. This class ranked in the lowest academic tier and was attended mostly by African American students. Mrs. Darren, the teacher, told me that a magnet student had been placed in her class and that his counselor became very upset when she found out. As Mrs. Darren described it, he "almost fainted." Mrs. Darren explained the counselor had assumed that Roger was enrolled in the class because of an error in the student registration and immediately tried to get him out. But, Mrs. Darren said, Roger wanted to stay and apparently enjoyed the class very much because he found that the students knew better how to think in this class than in his GROW classes. The student was one of my key informants. Meeting with Roger after his Business English class one day, he explained: "[This class] is something different. It's something that I wanted to do, actually, because, GROW students are sheltered, they are boring too, and I always wanted to have classes like this [. . .]. GROW is this ivory tower, but life is not an ivory tower." He confirmed Mrs. Darren's account about his counselor and told me that before he permitted him to stay in the class, he had to convince him that he had deliberately signed up for this class, that his classmates did not threaten him, and that, in fact, he was not in need of any protection.

The common sense notion underlying this discourse of protection used by the teachers and the counselor was that of a generalized threat as well as a racialized threat. In the case of Joe, I as researcher was cast as a potential threat to gifted students, or specifically, to an African American gifted student. But should the counselor not have welcomed the opportunity to showcase one of the few African American gifted students? The selective concern with protecting some gifted students, i.e., one of the few African Americans, from an interview with me but not protecting others was reminiscent of the difficulties I had in obtaining racial statistics for the gifted magnet. Considering that several African American students criticized GROW for treating them with less consideration than their white classmates, it seemed likely

that the "protection" the GROW counselor had in mind was the magnet's public image of integration and racial impartiality, not Joe's privacy.

In Ms. Murray's conversation with her GROW colleagues about the incident in the hallway, and in the case of Roger, who decided to escape "protection" by enrolling in a predominantly African American class, the threat emanated from the non-gifted, who were cast as endangering the safety of gifted students. Whiteness was not explicit, but implicit because those doing the alleged harassing were not white. In these examples, the non-white students in the hallways and the black classmates in the English class produced the contours of whiteness. In a process similar to what Leslie Margolin (1994) has referred to as a Wittgensteinian "double cross" (p. 109), the outlines of blackness or non-whiteness/non-giftedness brought into view the contours of the previously invisible whiteness/giftedness, without the latter needing to be named. Latinos and Asian Americans were absent in this discourse of protection, leaving it unclear whether they were cast as "honorary whites" (Tuan 1999), an exception to their race, or whether they were aligned with blacks and predators.

In the context of RHS, where it would not have not been appropriate for teachers to talk about white students' need for protection, protection of gifted students allowed teachers to communicate a selective concern for gifted students that at once whitened those inside against a backdrop of non-whiteness, non-giftedness on the outside. The common sense notion of "protection" thus served as a rationalization for limitations on unwanted access and contact, for maintaining privilege, and ultimately, for segregation, all the while allowing those who adhered to it to maintain a "colorblind" language.

GROW teachers' use of protection was also reminiscent of an earlier discourse about the gifted, used to mobilize recognition and support for this emerging, privileged social category in the 1950s (Margolin 1994), as it was indicative of other racial projects in the post-civil rights era that adopted a minority discourse to portray whites as victims: California's Proposition 209, which cast affirmative action as reverse racism; Proposition 187, which portrayed undocumented immigrants as causing undue strain on the social budget; or the anti-busing movements nationwide. As such, teachers and administrators served as the intellectuals that produced a "rearticulation" (Omi and Winant 1994) of the meaning of whiteness. In this rearticulation, "protection" as well as "giftedness" itself had become code words that indicated race, but without confronting "popular democratic or egalitarian ideals" (p. 123). Similarly, using James Holstein and Gale Miller's (1990) analysis of victimization as "interactionally constituted" and the victim's ability to "deflect responsibility," Mitch Berbrier (2000) has shown how white supremacists use a victim rhetoric to abdicate responsibility for any repercussions of their own discriminatory practices. Although the gifted magnet is far removed from self-identified white supremacists and securely lodged in mainstream institutions, one could argue that by using the discourse of giftedness as an endangered and victimized status in need of protection—rather than referring to whiteness explicitly—teachers at RHS were "deflecting" from their own discriminatory practices of privileging a selected group of students, which might have otherwise raised the ire of those excluded from this privilege. Thus, the common sense underlying the notion of gifted students in need of protection reflects a peculiar junction: it is situated on the one hand within a generalized discourse of reverse discrimination in California of the mid-1990s, which casts whites as victims of civil rights legislation, and, on the other, within desegregation and a discourse of racial equality itself. This constellation of contradictory discourses made the earlier concept of the "gifted as victim" (Margolin 1994) a convenient and effective concept with which to conceal the prominent whiteness of the gifted.

GROW teachers' apparently colorblind language of protection was supplemented by their general attitudes about gifted students, which naturalized their predominant whiteness. "Naturalized whiteness," Pamela Perry (2001) writes, "is securely grounded in and validated by the normal way of things in the present" (p. 73). Such a naturalization of whiteness was evident in teachers' casual comments about their gifted students. For example, after observing a

ninth grade English class in the gifted magnet, I asked the teacher to describe her students. She said, "There are many Filipino students in this program. But they are pushed in here by their parents, not because they are gifted. Asians generally leave their children little space. White parents leave their kids more space. For African Americans, sports is a big issue. And Mexicans, particularly first generation Mexican kids, have no interest in education. Their parents don't even know what's going on." Similarly, in an interview with the director of the gifted magnet about the relative lack of Latino and African American students, he said: "Among African Americans the idea rubs off that as a minority you will get into college on an affirmative action program, so they fall behind."

In both cases, the teacher and the GROW director described giftedness in a context where whites were a majority. In both cases, whites were the unmarked, whose giftedness was naturalized. In contrast, blacks, Latinos, and Asians were the marked. Their giftedness was questioned when they were in GROW, and their lack of giftedness was naturalized when they were not; Asians were in the gifted programs because their parents pushed them, not because they were gifted; and Latinos and blacks were not in GROW because of their cultural preferences or affirmative action.

But more common than explicit references naturalizing white giftedness were what Perry (2001) describes as the non-discursive practices of "collective consensus, reinforcement, and approval" (p. 69) of whiteness. This was evident when teachers described themselves as their students' coaches—an idea echoed by the GROW director—whose interest was for their students not only to pass, but to "become winners." For example, one math teacher had covered his classroom with inspirational posters that compared math to a sport and to winning a contest. Another GROW teacher gave her student a supportive hug after she could not solve a math problem. GROW teachers generally respected and trusted their students and gave them considerably more freedom than regular teachers gave to their students. In one case, the GROW French teacher had left her class without supervision for an entire period, explaining proudly to me that she could trust her students. Another magnet teacher described her students as "more precocious in many ways, not just academically and intellectually, but also otherwise. I wonder whether it has to do with their home environment."

Such practices of "collective consensus, reinforcement, and approval" (p. 69) in GROW classes were most noticeable because they were absent in the regular classes. Here, teachers were more likely to see themselves not as coaches but as disciplinarians; instead of posters encouraging students to become "winners," walls were covered with fliers stating discipline rules; instead of getting supportive hugs when they failed to do an assignment, students were more likely to be reprimanded. Often, the classroom atmosphere was not one of trust and respect but crowd control, and students were not regarded as "precocious" but more likely as "immature" and as potential trouble makers.

Not all teachers engaged equally in such a bifurcated perception of students. There were also teachers who were critical of GROW and the "protective" attitude many of their GROW colleagues had towards their students. There was Mrs. Darren, who mockingly told me of the GROW counselor's shock to find out that a gifted student was in her lower tier English class. There was the African American teacher who argued: "If you have a magnet program for the gifted in the inner city, intended to attract white people, but you don't make room for the inclusion of black and Latino people, your assumption is that the academically smart people come only from the white population." There was the white psychology teacher, who openly disapproved of what he described as pampering gifted students into dependency. And finally, there were the two white teachers who criticized the magnet program for merely using giftedness as a pretext to give white students a superior education. Such counter discourses underscored the pervasive notion of giftedness as whiteness.

Voices from Students Inside GROW

GROW students frequently discussed the meaning of "protection" and of "being sheltered." In contrast to their teachers and counselors, who used it to conceal their notion of whiteness as giftedness, students made the connections explicit. Although they fell short of reflecting on their own whiteness, they clearly realized that those from whom they were sheltered were non-GROW and non-white students. Their association of non-giftedness with non-whiteness became evident during an open-ended group interview with four white and one biracial student. All of them were in GROW, except for Bruce and Ted, who had been forced to leave GROW for disciplinary reasons.

Jenny: He used a new term that he called "jockin," or whatever.
Bruce: That's not new. I've been jocked for two years by Ashley Putnam.
Jenny: But see, I have never heard that term.
Ted: It's cause you are sheltered in GROW.
[. . .]
Jenny: We are sheltered in GROW, but it is not that big a deal.
Bruce: I swear to God, I swear to God, it is pretty bad, cause—
Jenny: Well, it's not . . . . our fault.
Anne: I think we are sheltered, cause I was thinking, the people I hear all the new expressions from, aren't, they aren't in GROW.
Jenny: I don't feel like I want to be sheltered. But then, I don't hang out with the people that I am learning those things from. And, if I feel comfortable hanging out with people that are in GROW, then that's my life. I don't. . . .
Bruce: [interrupts] That's really big, that's really big cause that's how I was. Cause, when I transferred from GROW out to regular, I didn't talk to anybody for six months, I thought everybody was, like, a gun-slinging ghetto baby talking shit. Cause I was white, I wouldn't talk to anybody there.

The debate was not about whether they were sheltered or not—they all agreed on that. Nor was the question from whom they were sheltered—they all knew that it was their non-GROW, non-white schoolmates, and in this case, African American students and their language. What they did debate, however, was whether this protection was "a big deal" or not. Here again, the discourse of protection in the form of "being sheltered" implied a notion of the non-gifted as racial others, who here were clearly identifiable as blacks and black language. The strongest critic of "protection" and the most explicit about the non-whiteness of the non-gifted was Bruce, who was forced to leave GROW because of disciplinary reasons and since then, in his daily interactions with his classmates, had been confronted with the handicapping consequences of his former protection.

Another illustration of how giftedness was linked to whiteness emerged around the question of how Bruce and Ted could have been forced to leave GROW.

Jenny: The thing is that GROW is an educational thing and I don't understand why they kick people out, with disciplinary actions. [. . .]
Anne: It should be done for grades, yeah, unless you are getting in fights in all your classes.
Bruce: Right, the idea is that you are there, because that is what you need to know. Because you are above the regular classes. [. . .] So why shouldn't they leave you there?
Jenny: And if you got into GROW, why should they just kick you out [. . .] Cause if you got into it being smart, why should you . . .
Anne: They expect us, because we are smart, we should be like, tiny, little Yuppies.

Their friends wondered why and how their giftedness and the educational resources to which it entitled them could be withheld, not on the basis of failing grades—which several of them readily admitted they had received—but on the basis of discipline problems. This apparent contradiction suggested that not failing grades, but failing behavior was antithetical to giftedness: if white meant good, and giftedness meant "goodness personified" (Margolin

1994), then less-than-virtuous behavior disrupted the frame of whiteness/giftedness. The consequences for disciplinary problems were to be kicked out of the gifted program and to be thrown into the ocean of the non-white and non-gifted predators.

Although whites at Roosevelt High School were a minority, in GROW they were the absolute majority. For GROW students that meant that the contours of white identity were most clearly linked to giftedness, which provided a seemingly race-neutral and positive identity. Thus, within GROW, whiteness was the naturalized norm that did not need to be rationalized vis-à-vis others.

But in the second tier of academic programs, whites were no longer an absolute majority. Thus, when confronted with the 3,400 non-gifted students outside the magnet, white students' marginal status made it more important for them to negotiate their whiteness in different ways.

Perry (2001) suggests that whites' construction of their own whiteness varies depending on their environment: While whites tend to engage in more passive constructions of whiteness when in the majority, a process she describes as naturalizing whiteness, "it may be that when naturalization processes are not possible because of close interracial associations, then rationalization processes must come into play to preserve white hegemony" (p. 85). At the basis of this rationalization of whiteness, she argues, is the notion that white identity is anchored in reason and rationality, while non-white identities are seen as being steeped in culture and tradition.

In the racially more exposed environment outside GROW, some white students were explicit about their own race and their presumed intellectual superiority. As one of these students put it: "If you're Caucasian, you are either in GROW or in the second tier, but you won't be in the bottom programs." It was also outside GROW that several white students expressed the strongest critique about GROW as a racially exclusive institution that reproduced class and racial privileges.

But how did non-white GROW students situate themselves vis-à-vis this notion of giftedness/whiteness? Latinos were not noticeably underrepresented in GROW as compared to the school overall. Many of the Latinos in the magnet program did not speak Spanish, nor did they have an accent, and sometimes they did not have a Spanish surname. They often were second or third generation Mexican immigrants and had parents who were college educated. This combination of class status and lack of identifying racializing markers made them blend in easily with white students. Richard, a senior in GROW who was also the Latino Ambassador for the school, was a third generation Mexican American. He said of his identity: "To be accurate, I would have to say that I am Latino or Chicano, but I call myself American. Most of my friends are white. This has to do with my parents, how they brought me up. Since I am from the upper class in terms of income, my friends tend to be predominantly white, and this continued in GROW." A similar idea of Mexicanness as a selective identity was evident in Sarah's answer to my question about her racial background. She answered: "My parents are Mexicans, but I don't really know much culturally about it. I am familiar with the holidays and stuff, but it's not really my thing." For both Richard and Sarah, their Mexican identity was optional. Jorge was even more explicit about his white identity and his notion of what it takes to be successful: While active in Latino politics at the school and demanding his name be pronounced the Spanish way, he also described himself as hanging out with the "rower crowd," which, he said, represented another aspect of his identity. "Considering how expensive it is to row," he said, it represents an identity of "being upper class—and white." Jorge explained, "In order to succeed, you really have to conform to white standards, and that just seems like a natural process of assimilation. This is the group that, when we come here we're shown that we wanna be like, rich white people. This, of course will get you to the finish line the fastest."

If being identified as gifted can be reckoned as success, then this strategy of conforming seemed to have worked well for these students. Whether they assumed a whitened identity as a rational choice, a haphazard outcome, or a consequence of class status, these students chose a white identity over their Mexican or Latino identities, and clearly saw that their class

background helped or enabled this selective appropriation of whiteness. In so far as these students rationalized their giftedness as whiteness, Perry's concept of rationalizing whiteness can also be applied here. By being, at least technically, Latinos, they needed to rationalize why they were considering themselves white. At the same time, by positioning themselves as white, they embraced the rationalizing aspects of whiteness epitomized by their giftedness, while clearly distancing themselves from the non-rational, tradition- and culture-steeped Mexican or Latino identity implied in Sarah's reference to Mexican culture as involving "holidays and stuff."

The comments of those who left GROW, on their own or because they were forced to, were also illustrative of the magnet-specific discourse of giftedness as being synonymous with whiteness. Although Bruce was the most explicit about considering "being sheltered" as "a big deal" and about the non-whiteness of the students outside GROW, there were other ex-GROW students who shared his views. Vicky, who left GROW of her own accord, described her experience as "too protected; lots of GROW students are really immature, and people treat them as if they're better. If they come late, they just say they're in GROW and teachers let them go. GROW students just live in their wealthy white neighborhoods, but don't really see what's going on." And finally, there was Dan, who was forced to leave due to a serious illness, and criticized the magnet students as being privileged and the program as "racially exclusive." In their critique of the gifted magnet's racial exclusion, these students confirmed the prevailing discourse that constructed giftedness as whiteness and vice versa.

Voices from Students Outside the Gifted Magnet

Students outside the magnet program were not always aware that there was a gifted magnet at their school, and those who were, did not always resent it. For example, during interviews about racial images, none of the Asian American—predominantly Cambodian—students volunteered any references to GROW at all. Some white students in the regular programs were equally unconcerned about GROW. One of the few white students placed in the lowest tier academy described his predominantly African American academy disgustedly as a "moron academy." Yet, when I interviewed African Americans and Latinos about their images of different racial groups, one of the most commonly invoked topics was that GROW was "a program for white students only."

José, a senior in his last days at the school, described himself as "a Mexican born in America." He was from a working-class family and he took turns with his older sisters in watching over his younger siblings while his mother worked. José was outspoken and had taken on a leading role in the school's Latino Club. During the interview about images of different racial groups he expressed criticism about "excuses all the minorities are using" that "the white man keeps [them] down." He said: "I don't buy it. The only person who keeps me down is myself." When I asked him which program he was in, he explained:

> I was in the regular program. This school, when I came here, they had academies, but they don't give you an option where you want to be. So sometimes, you still don't know what's going on, don't really know the difference. [. . .] The gifted program is traditionally for rich kids, who happen to be mostly white, kids that usually go to schools in the suburbs or to a private school. There are some Asian American, some black kids in the gifted program. But the image right here is, "If you're white, you're in the gifted program." [. . .] If you're in there, you can have a good education. If you are in regular, you're right where everybody's at. [. . .] I think they should have a good education for everybody. [. . .] I sort of got a second rate education, not the best.

José's skepticism about "minority excuses" was regularly voiced by other Latino students at RHS, perhaps because they felt it necessary to clear themselves of the stereotype of Latinos as lazy. Yet, notwithstanding this caveat, José was firm in his assessment that he was not given a fair chance, because he was not given the option of joining GROW, which was "traditionally

for white kids." This he thought had less to do with ability and merit than with wealth and knowing the value of giftedness.

Discussing whether he thought he himself could have been in GROW, he continued:

> I think I could have [been in GROW]. Maybe I wouldn't have scored a 4.0. [But] I think I could have done like everybody else. [. . .] I don't think being a [gifted student] really has to do with IQ. [. . .] 'Cause, you look at the gifted kids, you look at their parents, most of them are doctors, teachers, they have a high skilled profession [. . .]. They gonna show them how to read [. . . and] all the things they know as soon as possible. [. . .] So, those kids that are supposed to be gifted just learnt how to read at an early age. I don't think they have superior brains. That's how I think.

For José, the association of whiteness with giftedness was a reality he faced daily. But he refused the notion of "superior brains" or meritocracy, and instead saw giftedness as the product of white privilege. The common sense assumption he appealed to was that "everybody should be given a fair chance." Yet, this clashed with his personal experience of how educational choice and access were practiced at RHS.

JuanJo was another first generation Mexican-American. He was in tenth grade, in one of the lower tier academies. His father had recently died, and after having lived with his aunt for a while, he had now returned to his mother. Like José, he was from a working-class family, but his family life was more unpredictable than José's. He did not participate in official school organizations. Like José, he described GROW as giving whites preferential access. When our conversation turned to his own experience at RHS, he responded:

> J: The white man, the white people that come here, they get better classes. I don't know why. They're getting to GROW or the next tier, and, if a Latino gets in, he won't see no more Latinos.
> I: Why do you think that is?
> J: Most classes, they're easy for us. That's why we become lazy, and we don't work hard. It's boring. Most of us are getting Cs and Ds.
> I: Why don't you work harder, towards an A and try to get into GROW or the second tier?
> J: I wouldn't see no Hispanics there. I wouldn't relate to nobody out there.
> I: But once you would be there, wouldn't more Latinos feel like wanting to be there?
> J: Yeah, but most of them don't get in. If they wanna be in it, they won't get in. One of the black girls, in my English class wanted to take an AP English class, and they wouldn't give it to her. She gets straight As and they wouldn't give it to her.

JuanJo regarded whites as having preferential access to GROW and thought it would be difficult for Latinos to deal with the racial isolation in GROW. But his fatalistic explanations also sounded like excuses: that Latinos were under-challenged, and, referring to the experiences of one African American student, even with good grades would likely not be accepted. With his low grades, JuanJo certainly was not a prime candidate for GROW. Yet, his explanation of his low grades echoed the words of Dave, another Latino. Dave had moved to Newtown specifically to enroll in GROW. Once he was in GROW, his grades soared, he said, because his classes were so much more interesting. Unlike JuanJo, however, Dave had college-educated parents with advanced degrees.

But since Latinos were technically only slightly underrepresented in GROW, why was there such a widespread sense among Latinos that they were excluded from it on the basis of their race? In contrast to the discussion earlier about Latino GROW students, whose parents were middle to upper class and college educated, the working-class Latinos outside GROW did not regard whitening as an option. José, JuanJo, and others, then, did not identify with Latinos in GROW. Rather, they perceived themselves as blue collar, first generation, poor immigrants, who had no choice but be excluded from whiteness and thus underrepresented in GROW.

It was less surprising that African Americans expressed a sense of GROW as a program for whites only. Gary was an African American freshman in the second tier program. When I asked him about his image of whites, he described them as "intelligent, are treated better

than other students." When our conversation turned to his own school experience in the second tier program, he answered:

> G: I was turned down from GROW, and I know that I had higher math scores than most people.
> I: And they still got in? [. . .]
> G: I need to keep applying and applying, until spaces are open.
> I: So you would rather be in GROW!
> G: Too many goobers in GROW, too many people that got on my nerves, people that don't see it my way. I can't communicate with them [. . .] I can't talk to them [interrupted] It's not integrated at all [. . .] More, more ah. . . . whites, it's not mixed at all, [there are too many] people that just can't try to relate. They do try to relate, but it's just so horrible.

Gary was explicit about the widespread notion of whites as supposedly more intelligent and as being treated preferentially. But unlike JuanJo, Gary claimed to have had the math scores to get into GROW—although not the gifted label—and felt unfairly excluded. Like JuanJo, though, he cited the costs of white prominence and the racial isolation in GROW as too high. This again could also be read as a protective, face-saving device for his rejection.

Eduardo, also first generation Mexican-American and a senior, was tall and heavy-set. He had been an All-Star Player on the school's varsity football team, where he spent much time with African Americans. But Eduardo also had intimate exposure to gifted students because his AP course in Spanish consisted predominantly of magnet students. During our interview, I asked him in which particular program he was enrolled. He explained:

> It was during my freshman year. I got accepted to a special program, the gifted program, but I was dropped too. I was accepted and dropped before I came. [GROW] students think that they are the best part of the whole school, I guess. [. . .] I have gifted students in some of my classes. Some of them are not as bright as the regular students. [. . .] But they are still in the gifted magnet [laughs]. They still get through. I don't know, but one of my teachers told me that the gifted magnet was kind of originally brought up so they can bring white people into the school, cause this is a minor . . ., it's an inner city school, and there are not many white neighborhoods around here. And they decided to set up a gifted program to make it more attractive to them. [. . .] So in there, it's mostly Asian and white, and that's why it is that way. [. . .] a lot of the regular students they really hate the students in the gifted magnet. Because of the way they act. [. . .] They act so much superior to the rest of the students. That's how they are treated too, that's how the teachers treat them, the counselors treat them, and that's how they believe they are. [. . .] They feel they are better than the rest of the school.

Eduardo, like José, was explicit about the privilege of gifted students, and the prominence of white students in the magnet. His experiences with GROW, though, were more personal. In retrospect, he said, he believed he benefited from not having been accepted to GROW because it had allowed him to concentrate on his football career. But he criticized the presumed intellectual superiority of gifted students and the preferential treatment their teachers gave them. According to him, GROW students were not as gifted as their teachers made them out to be. Eduardo understood the politics behind GROW and resisted the school's construction of giftedness as synonymous with being white.

In contrast to the unsolicited comments about GROW discussed so far, the following observations were solicited during a follow-up visit to RHS, where I asked students to write down their experiences with the gifted magnet. J. R., an African American senior from a mid-level academy, expressed his disappointment with his education and the school's hypocrisy.

> I was withdrawn from my Intermediate Algebra class because I wasn't a magnet student. A person, no matter what academy they are in should be able to have the same classes as any other student. It's weird how in school and in life we are taught not to discriminate or to segregate, but yet we are going through this everyday at school.

J. R.'s response expresses his view of the gifted magnet's racial exclusion. He does not complain about selective admissions, or about not having the cultural capital to get into GROW,

but about having to give up his place in an advanced math course—not a gifted course—to a gifted student. Thus, he exposes the contradiction between what he is supposed to learn in school as opposed to what he experiences the school doing to him. This shows that the cost of the gifted magnet might be greatest for those who are academically ambitious. The experience of exclusion fosters a sense of distrust and resignation towards the school, an institution that also claims to teach them civic virtues and fairness.

As these cases illustrate, while the notion of whiteness as giftedness was ubiquitous, its interpretation varied with the position of the actors. GROW teachers' colorblind discourse of "protection" reflected their equation of giftedness with whiteness and their construction of the non-gifted as non-white. This discourse, though, did not go uncontested among teachers, particularly teachers of the non-gifted. Magnet students recognized that their teachers' discourse of protection was a racial code word that signified the non-whiteness of those from whom they supposedly needed protection, although they were less explicit about their own whiteness. The one most explicit about the whiteness of "protection" was the former GROW student, who had to confront his "protected"—i.e., racially exclusive—status in GROW after he was forced to transfer into regular classes. Latino GROW students stressed a whitened identity, which they were able to claim because of their class background. White students outside GROW were in the minority, thus their awareness of whiteness was increased. It was white students there who expressed a belief that whites at RHS were supposed to be in GROW, and it was white students in the bottom program who expressed the strongest resentment about their "mis"-placed positions.

Another meaning of whiteness as giftedness emerged from the testimony of Latino and African American students. While they were explicit in their assessment of whites receiving privileged access to GROW, they resisted the implicit assumption of white giftedness and non-white non-giftedness. They noted the inconsistencies between what they were taught to be quintessential American values of equality and fairness on one hand, and their own experience of inequality and unfairness on the other. Considering that most of the non-GROW students discussed above were academically ambitious and had personal experiences with GROW, it becomes evident that it is they who are harmed the most by what they perceive as the gifted magnet's exclusion.

Conclusions

The concept of racial formation generally, and of racial project specifically, has provided a lens through which we can see the making of race, and particularly of the equation of whiteness with giftedness, as it emerges from one particular point of production, that of a gifted magnet. Like a prism that refracts light into its different components, the concept of racial project helped to break down this racial project into both structure and representations, and into the various and conflicting interests of its constituents. By treating the gifted magnet at RHS as a racial project, this study has revealed the processes by which a desegregation program functioned to produce a system that conflated being white with being gifted. It has illustrated how a school could portray itself as a showcase of integration and academic excellence while at the same time perpetuating a system of racial inequality. The magnet program for gifted students made the racial category "white" disappear in its public discourse behind an alleged system of meritocracy, but not without producing a widespread conflation of whiteness with giftedness. Whereas the goal of desegregation was to raise the educational opportunities for non-white students, the beneficiaries of integration at Roosevelt High School were disproportionately white students in the gifted program. Integration and academic excellence was advertised in the school's public discourse, but white exclusivity via giftedness was assured to the predominantly white audience of prospective magnet students.

While whiteness as giftedness was effectively concealed in the image of RHS as a successful, integrated school, it was constructed in everyday interactions of GROW personnel through a pervasive discourse of gifted students as in need of "protection," a colorblind codeword that cloaked whiteness/giftedness in victim status, but not without being transparent to students. Students inside and outside GROW, white and non-white, produced a variety of responses to the prevailing discourse of whiteness as giftedness. Whereas white students inside the gifted magnet tended to normalize or naturalize it, Latino GROW students rationalized their giftedness by emphasizing a whitened identity. White students outside GROW used the notion of whiteness as giftedness as a point of reference to judge their own position in the racial hierarchy: of being naturally in the top tier, or of not belonging in the bottom tier. Latinos' and black students' understanding of the discourse of whiteness as giftedness was a critique of the gifted magnet as exclusive, unfair, and implying non-white inferiority, while Asian Americans—inside and outside GROW—were comparatively silent on the issue. Reflecting Omi and Winant's (1994) contention of racial formation as an uneven and contradictory process, whiteness as giftedness, then, was not a monolithic reality, but one that varied with the different actors' point of insertion into this racial project.

The sense of exclusion, unfairness, and implied inferiority expressed by a segment of the non-gifted and non-white exacerbates the conditions of what Claude Steele (1997) calls the "negative stereotype threat," which is the difficulty of performing to one's potential when facing stereotypes of inferiority attributed to one's own group. The impact of this effect is compounded by the trend to abolish affirmative action in higher education. Thus, while scholars disagree about whether or not gifted programs per se are justified in a democratic society (Margolin 1994; Sapon-Shevin 1993, 1994), gifted programs as partial-site gifted magnets, as exemplified in this case study, are clearly counterproductive to the goals of desegregation.

Omi and Winant (1994) use the concept of "trajectory" to describe the dynamic relationship between social movements and the state, where a social movement emerges in response to racial issues, confronts the state, and then, to various degrees, becomes incorporated, absorbed, or insulated into the state's institutions and policies. This produces a dynamic relationship between state and movement that shifts between "unstable equilibrium" and "disruption." Racial projects such as the magnet program can be seen as having embedded in their organization the history of this pattern of conflict and accommodation between racial movements and the state. The social movement at the root of the magnet program, at RHS as well as elsewhere, was the Civil Rights Movement and its demand for desegregation, while the state was represented by the practice and legality of segregation. *Brown* forced the state to begin instituting desegregation. But the roots of this project also lie in the historical construction of giftedness as a predominantly white and upper-middle class phenomenon (Ford et al. 2002; Margolin 1994), and of intelligence as linked to whiteness (see for example Herrnstein and Murray 1994). Through the inherent racial bias evident in the implementation, if not the definition and identification, of giftedness and the ongoing entitlements conferred through this label, it appears that the school as a state institution has offered to address demands for desegregation through a practice of "insulation" (Omi and Winant 1994), where "the state confines demands to terrains that, if not entirely symbolic, are at least not crucial to the operation of the racial order" (p. 86). Thus, the study of the gifted magnet at RHS illustrates the characteristics of an unstable equilibrium between social movement and the state, where different constituents and their interests are aligned with different aspects of this desegregation instrument.

Accommodating demands for desegregation constituted a progressive move by the schools. However, using gifted programs to lure white students into a predominantly non-white school and retaining practices and policies that continue to exclude non-whites "insulated" the original demands of integration in a way that did little to disrupt the pre-existing

racial order. In fact, both practices may have exacerbated the "badge of inferiority"[8] that was the mark of segregation. It is not surprising that the gifted magnet would end up as a tool for preserving white privilege rather than for attaining racial equality. This raises the question of whether the compromise of enticing white and wealthier parents with the carrot of giftedness was acceptable in the first place, and whether the assumption that changing people's behavior will ultimately lead to changed attitudes is valid.[9] Furthermore, given the linkages of this racial project to other projects of white privilege, the question can be raised whether giftedness can ever be institutionalized without lending itself to racial exclusion and social control.

References

Berbrier, Mitch. 1998. "White Supremacists and the (Pan) Ethnic Imperative: On 'European-Americans' and 'White Student Unions.'" *Sociological Inquiry* 68:498–516.

———. 2000. "The Victim Ideology of White Supremacists and White Separatists in the United States." *Sociological Focus* 33:175–91.

Bernal, Ernesto M. 2002. "Three Ways to Achieve a More Equitable Representation of Culturally and Linguistically Different Students in GT Programs." *Roeper Review* 24(2):82–8.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2003. *Racism Without Racists*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." Pp. 241–60 in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. Richardson. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Brown, Michael. 2003. *Whitewashing Race*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

California Department of Education. 1995. "High School Performance Report, 1994–95." Research, Evaluation and Technology Division. Retrieved April 15, 1996 (http://goldmine.cde.ca.gov).

———. 2001. "California Safe Schools Assessment: 1999–2000 Results." Retrieved November 4, 2003 (http://www.cde.ca.gov/spbranch/safety/cssa/99-00results.pdf).

Fine, Michelle. 1997. "Witnessing Whiteness." Pp. 57–65 in *Off White*, edited by M. Fine, L. Weis, L. Powell, and L. M. Wong. New York: Routledge.

Fine, Michelle, Lois Weis, and Linda Powell. 1997. "Communities of Difference: A Critical Look at Desegregated Spaces Created for and by Youth." *Harvard Educational Review* 67:247–84.

Ford, Donna Y. and Tarek C. Grantham. 1998. "A Case Study of the Social Needs of Danisha: An Underachieving Gifted African American Female." *Roeper Review* 21(2):96–101.

Ford, Donna Y., J. John Harris, III, Cynthia A. Tyson, and Michelle F. Trotman. 2002. "Beyond Deficit Thinking: Providing Access for Gifted African American Students." *Roeper Review* 24(2):52–8.

Frankenberg, Ruth. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Goldring, Ellen and Claire Smrekar. 2000. "Magnet Schools and the Pursuit of Racial Balance." *Education and Urban Society* 33:17–35.

Harris, Cheryl. 1991. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106:1709–791.

Herrnstein, Richard J. and Charles Murray. 1994. *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. New York: Free Press.

Holstein, James A. and Gale Miller. 1990. "Rethinking Victimization: An Interactional Approach to Victimology." *Symbolic Interaction* 13:103–22.

Lareau, Annette and Erin McNamara. 1999. "Moments of Social Inclusion and Exclusion: Race, Class, and Cultural Capital in Family-School Relationships." *Sociology of Education* 72:37–53.

Lipman, Pauline. 1998. *Race, Class, and Power in School Restructuring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Lucas, Samuel R. and Mark Berends. 2002. "Sociodemographic Diversity, Correlated Achievement, and de Facto Tracking." *Sociology of Education* 75:328–48.

8. This term, used in *Brown v. Board of Education*, was suggested by an anonymous reviewer of *Social Problems.*

9. This point was also suggested by an anonymous reviewer of *Social Problems.*

Margolin, Leslie. 1994. *Goodness Personified*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
McIntosh, Peggy. 1990. "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." *Independent School* 49:31–6.
Metz, Mary H. 2003. *Different by Design*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Oakes, Jeannie. 1985. *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Oakes, Jeannie, Amy Stuart Wells, and Makeba Jones. 1997. "Detracking: The Social Construction of Ability, Cultural Politics, and Resistance to Reform." *Teachers College Record* 98:482–510.
Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*. New York: Routledge & Kegan.
Perry, Pamela. 2001. "White Means Never Having to Say You're Ethnic: White Youth and the Construction of 'Cultureless' Identities." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 30:56–91.
Persell, Caroline Hodges. 1977. *Education and Inequality*. New York: The Free Press.
Peterson, Jean S. and Leslie Margolin. 1997. "Naming Gifted Children: An Example of Unintended 'Reproduction.'" *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* 21:82–100.
Robinson, Ann. 1998. "Giftedness: An Exceptionality Examined." *Annual Review of Psychology* 49:117–41
Rossell, Christine. 1990. *The Carrot or the Stick for School Desegregation Policy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
Sapon-Shevin, Mara. 1993. "Gifted Education and the Protection of Privilege: Breaking the Silence, Opening the Discourse." Pp. 25–44 in *Beyond Silenced Voices*, edited by Michelle Fine and Lois Weis. Albany: State University of New York.
———. 1994. *Playing Favorites: Gifted Education and the Disruption of Community*. Albany: State University of New York.
Schofield, Janet Ward. 1989. *Black and White in School*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Spindler, George and Louise Spindler. 1983. "Roger Harker and Schoenhausen: From the Familiar to the Strange and Back Again." Pp. 20–47 in *Doing the Ethnography of Schooling*, edited by George Spindler. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
Staiger, Annegret. 1999. "The Production of Race at a California High School: Unentangling Discourses of Urban Space, Education and Masculinity." Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Barbara.
Steele, Claude. 1997. "A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance." *American Psychologist* 52:613–29.
Stephens, Kristen R. and Frances Karnes. 2000. "State Definitions for the Gifted and Talented Revisited." *Exceptional Children* 66:613–29.
Tuan, Mia. 1999. *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
Waters, Mary. 1990. *Ethnic Options*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Wells, Amy Stuart and Jeannie Oakes. 1998. "Tracking, Detracking, and the Politics of Educational Reform: A Sociological Perspective." Pp. 155–80 in *Sociology of Education: Emerging Perspectives*, SUNY Series on Public Policy, edited by C. A. Torres and T. R. Mitchell. Albany: State University of New York.
Wells, Amy Stuart and Irene Serna. 1996. "The Politics of Culture: Understanding Local and Political Resistance to Detracking in Racially Mixed Schools." *Harvard Educational Review* 66:691–706.
West, Kimberley C. 1994. "A Desegregation Tool That Backfired: Magnet Schools and Class Room Segregation." *Yale Law Journal* 103:2567–592.