# NEGOTIATING OPPORTUNITIES

## How the Middle Class Secures Advantages in School

Jessica McCrory Calarco

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# Negotiating Opportunities

# Introduction

One sunny February morning, the students in Ms. Dunham's[1] fifth-grade class were taking a math test. The test included a number of questions involving the "distributive property" of multiplication (i.e., the idea that $a(b + c) = (a \times b) + (a \times c)$). Question 5, for example, read as follows:

> Susan has 3 boxes of pencils. Mark has 2 boxes of pencils. Each box contains 8 pencils. How many pencils do Susan and Mark have all together?

Jesse, a wiry-built, working-class, white student, wearing jeans and a striped T-shirt, was bent over his test. Jesse had a deep frown on his face, and he was tapping his pencil lightly on the desk. Ms. Dunham, meanwhile, weaved slowly around the room, glancing over students' shoulders. Ms. Dunham paused next to Jesse's desk. Sensing Jesse's frustration, she leaned down and whispered, "You okay?" Jesse looked up sheepishly. Pointing at Question 5, Jesse hesitated and then admitted quietly, "I don't get this one." Ms. Dunham nodded and gave Jesse a quick explanation, urging him to "add up the boxes and then use the distributive property." When Ms. Dunham finished explaining, Jesse was still frowning, but Ms. Dunham did not appear to notice.

Instead, Ms. Dunham was looking at Ellen, a tall, middle-class, white student wearing gray cotton pants and a purple sweater. Across the room, Ellen was waving her hand in the air and calling out in a loud whisper, "Ms. Dunham!" As Ms. Dunham moved toward her, Ellen let her shoulders fall in a dramatic slump, groaning "What does number five mean?"

Ms. Dunham gave Ellen the same brief answer she gave Jesse, but Ellen was not satisfied. Tilting her head thoughtfully, Ellen asked, "Wait, but does that mean we're supposed to multiply?" Hearing this, Ms. Dunham squatted beside Ellen. They began to whisper together, talking through a longer, more detailed explanation. Ms. Dunham watched as Ellen worked through the problem, nodding each time Ellen asked, "Is this right?" When Ellen finished the problem, Ms. Dunham gave her a big smile, saying "Looks good!"

From across the room, Jesse looked on as Ms. Dunham worked with Ellen. Sighing, he sank low in his chair. He continued to frown at his test. Eventually, Jesse skipped the problem and moved on. When time was up, Jesse turned in his test incomplete.

Let's unpack this example. Jesse and Ellen were both average students. They had similar scores on standardized tests. They were both placed in the same ability level for math. They were even struggling with the same math problem. And yet, their outcomes could not have been more different. Ellen, a middle-class student, got the question right. She finished the problem quickly and was able to move on to the rest of the test. Jesse, a working-class student, struggled with the question for a long time and eventually left it blank. He did not even get partial credit.

Situations such as this one were common at Maplewood Elementary, where I spent more than 2 years observing and interviewing middle-class and working-class students, their parents, and their teachers. In my fieldwork at Maplewood, I regularly saw middle-class students overcome problems that stymied their working-class peers.

Those patterns were not the patterns I set out to study—I was initially interested in cross-class friendships. And yet, I could not get those patterns, or the inequalities they produced, out of my head. Ultimately, then, I shifted my focus to ask: *How does the middle-class secure unequal advantages in school?*

## RESEARCH GOALS

My goal in this book is to answer that question and to understand how children, parents, and teachers collectively generate advantages for middle-class children. At the theoretical level, I draw insights from prior research on cultural capital, teacher bias, children's agency, student resistance, and teachers' authority. Empirically, I focus on students' strategies for managing challenges in school, on parents' efforts to teach those strategies, on teachers' responses to those strategies, and on the processes that translate students' strategies into unequal profits.[2] Specifically, I use my fieldwork at Maplewood to answer the following research questions:

1. How do children deal with challenges in the classroom?
2. How (and why) do those efforts vary along social class lines?
3. How do teachers respond to those efforts?
4. How (and why) do those responses contribute to inequalities?

## EXISTING THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS

Existing research provides clear evidence of middle-class advantage. We know, for example, that parents' education and income are the best predictors of a child's school performance (Duncan et al. 1998; Guo and Harris 2000; Reardon 2011; Sirin 2005). Children from more privileged backgrounds typically receive higher grades and test scores, go further in school, find more stable jobs, and earn higher incomes than do those from less privileged families (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Quillian 2012; Reardon 2011; Torche 2011; Walpole 2003).

Existing research also offers a number of theoretical reasons for that middle-class advantage. As I will discuss, however, those theories fall short of fully explaining the patterns I found.

Before delving into those theories, it is important to note that this is an ethnographic study—not a quantitative or experimental study. In the classroom, my goal was to observe real-life interactions (and their consequences) as they unfolded in context. That ethnographic approach has significant benefits, but it also has limitations. I could not, for example, subject middle-class and working-class students to the exact same challenges in the exact same situations and then compare their responses. Nor could I compare how a given teacher reacted to middle-class and working-class students exhibiting the exact same behavior in exactly the same circumstances. Finally, I could not hold constant teachers' treatment of students and then compare how those responses affected middle-class and working-class students over time. As a result, I cannot precisely estimate the effect of social class on student behaviors or tease apart the relative importance of different factors in explaining teachers' responses to those behaviors. Nevertheless, and as I hope my field notes and analyses make clear, an ethnographic approach is particularly useful for revealing the (often subtle and taken-for-granted) social processes that produce and maintain inequalities. Ethnography is also especially well-suited for linking those processes to larger social theories.

## Cultural Capital and the Hidden Curriculum

Along those lines, cultural capital theory offers one possible explanation for how the middle class secures unequal advantages. Building on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984), scholars such as Annette Lareau (2000, 2011) have argued that middle-class advantages in our society result, in large part, from the alignment between middle-class culture and institutional culture.[3] From that perspective, children's home lives vary along social class lines, and those variations lead children to develop class-based beliefs, habits, and preferences (Hart and Risley 1995; Heath 1983; Lareau 2011). Schools, while open to students of all backgrounds, are not neutral fields (Bourdieu 1996). Rather, schools are middle-class institutions, and teachers expect students (and parents) to behave in "middle-class" ways (Lareau 2000; Stephens et al. 2012).[4] Those expectations, however, are not explicitly taught. Instead, they remain part of the "hidden curriculum" (Anyon 1980; Apple 1980; Wren 1999). As a result, middle-class students—who learn at home to follow the hidden standards—are better able to meet teachers' expectations and reap the rewards for doing so.

Let's consider the Jesse and Ellen example through the lens of cultural matching. From that perspective, we might assume that Jesse and Ellen dealt with their struggles differently because of the class cultures they learned at home. We might also assume that Ms. Dunham gave Ellen more help because Ellen's behavior more closely aligned with the school's middle-class expectations for how struggling students should behave.

These are important possibilities, but they cannot fully account for the patterns I observed at Maplewood. Teachers, for example, did not always expect students to proactively seek support when they were struggling. As I explain in Chapter 2, there were times when teachers wanted students to work through difficult problems on their own rather than ask for help, to complete their assignments on time rather than seek extensions, and to wait patiently with their hands raised rather than call out.[5] In those moments, we might expect middle-class students to adjust their behavior to meet teachers' expectations. In reality, they rarely did so. Instead, middle-class students persisted in calling out and seeking support. Those efforts were also successful. In most cases, teachers granted middle-class students' requests, even when those requests went beyond what teachers intended to provide.

Scholars who study cultural capital have found somewhat similar patterns among middle-class parents. Those parents secure advantages for their children, at least in part, by pushing back against institutional expectations (i.e., by requesting that their children be placed in advanced tracks or classes, even when they do not explicitly qualify; see Baker and Stevenson

1986; Lareau 2000, 2011; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Useem 1992). Less clear, however, is whether those parental efforts "count" as cultural capital and (as I discuss in more detail later) whether middle-class children engage in similar efforts with similar success.[6] Thus, although cultural capital theory—at least in terms of its emphasis on cultural alignment and compliance with institutional expectations—might explain some of the advantages that middle-class students were able to secure in the classroom, it cannot fully explain their success in securing advantages in excess of what teachers were initially willing to provide.

## Bias in Student–Teacher Interactions

Research on teacher bias offers another explanation for middle-class advantage. From that perspective, stereotypes—including class, racial/ethnic, and gender stereotypes—influence how teachers perceive and interact with their students (Jussim and Harber 2005; Oakes 2005; Rist 1970).[7] Teachers, for example, systematically underestimate the capabilities of less privileged students (Kozlowski 2015; Oates 2003; Ready and Wright 2011), discipline them more harshly (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010; Kupchik 2009; Morris 2005), and provide them with fewer opportunities for high-quality learning (Eder 1981; Oakes 2005; Rist 1970).[8] Mismatches between teacher and student background characteristics typically exacerbate teachers' biases (Alexander, Entwisle, and Thompson 1987; Downey and Pribesh 2004; Ferguson 2003), and those biases have real consequences for students. Students internalize teachers' perceptions, and those evaluations then influence students' subsequent performance and thus become "self-fulfilling prophecies" (Brophy and Good 1972; Jussim and Harber 2005; Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968).[9]

Given such findings, let's now consider how teacher bias may have operated in the Jesse and Ellen example. From that perspective, we might assume that Ellen received more help because Ms. Dunham perceived her—consciously or subconsciously—as more deserving of support. We might also assume that Jesse was more reluctant to ask for help, at least in part, because of the way that Ms. Dunham and other teachers had treated him when he asked for support in the past.

These are key considerations, and it is certainly possible that subtle prejudices played some role in shaping interactions between students and teachers at Maplewood. However, I find reason to question the idea that teacher bias fully explains the advantages middle-class students were able to secure in school. For instance, when working-class students did seek support, teachers generally granted those requests. In the previous example, Ms. Dunham initially gave both Jesse and Ellen the same hint for Question 5.

It was only after Ellen pressed Ms. Dunham for more assistance that Ms. Dunham squatted beside Ellen and gave her more in-depth support. Furthermore, and as illustrated with Jesse and Ms. Dunham, many teachers went out of their way to provide unsolicited support to students who appeared to be struggling, even if those students did not actively seek help.

Thus, teacher bias might explain some of the advantages middle-class students were able to secure in the classroom, but it does not fully explain the patterns of support-seeking and support-giving I observed. At Maplewood, for example, teachers' responses to students seemed to vary more with students' behaviors than with students' background characteristics. Bias-based explanations for inequality cannot account for those patterns, as they rarely discuss how students' behaviors might prompt unequal responses from teachers.[10]

## Children as Active Agents

Studies of cultural capital and studies of teacher bias are also limited by their view of stratification as a top-down process. Both traditions have focused on the inequalities that result from differences in the resources that parents and teachers provide to children. However, as childhood scholars have argued, that top-down view underestimates the importance of children's role in social life (Corsaro 2005; Corsaro and Eder 1990; Eder 1995; Thorne 1993). In particular, it ignores how children guide parents' and teachers' decisions about which resources to provide (Chin and Phillips 2004; Pugh 2009; Valentine 1997; Williams 2006; Zelizer 2002).

Research on cultural capital, for example, acknowledges the possibility of strategic advantage-seeking but does so only in the case of middle-class *adults.* Those studies show that middle-class parents regularly intervene at school to secure advantages for their children (Brantlinger 2003; Cucchiara 2013; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003; Lareau 2000, 2011; Nelson 2010). They do so by challenging educators' decisions and demanding accommodations (e.g., changes in course placement) that they perceive as better meeting their children's needs (Sui-Chu and Willms 1996; Useem 1992).[11] Those studies clearly show middle-class parents shifting opportunities toward themselves (or their families) and away from others. Much less has been said, however, about *children's* efforts to secure advantages for themselves—how they prompt parents' interventions, how they learn to use similar strategies, how they activate those strategies, or how that activation contributes to inequalities in school.

Research on teacher bias also takes an adult-focused view of stratification in school. From that perspective, teachers are arbitrarily and unfairly biased against less privileged students, and those biases shape the expectations and opportunities that teachers provide (Brophy and Good 1972; Jussim and Harber 2005; Ready and Wright 2011; Rist 1970). Children are treated merely as the passive victims or beneficiaries of teachers' biases. Although children's behaviors and orientations might shape teachers' treatment of and responses to them, such possibilities have gone largely unexplored.

By underestimating children's agency in interactions with parents and teachers, research on cultural capital and teacher bias falls short of explaining the patterns that I find. Closely examining the previously discussed situation, for example, we see that Jesse and Ellen dealt with their struggles in different ways. Jesse was reluctant to ask for help—he acknowledged that he was struggling only after Ms. Dunham asked if he was okay. Jesse also did not ask for further clarification—he just accepted Ms. Dunham's initial response even though, as he told me later in an interview, he "didn't even understand what she said." Ellen, on the other hand, was eager to ask for help—she waved her hand in the air and called out to announce that she was struggling. Ellen also continued to press for support in excess of what Ms. Dunham intended to provide. Rather than accept Ms. Dunham's initial answer ("add up the boxes and then use the distributive property"), Ellen kept asking follow-up questions ("Does that mean we're supposed to multiply?" and "Is this right?") until she was sure she had the correct answer. Ms. Dunham, meanwhile, initially gave Ellen the same brief explanation she gave Jesse. Over time, however, and as Ellen kept asking more questions, Ms. Dunham gave Ellen additional help, walking her through the problem and even confirming that her answer was correct. Such patterns suggest that understanding educational inequalities requires keen recognition of the complexity of social interaction and the agency that individuals—and even young children—have in those exchanges.

## Student Resistance and Teacher Authority

Resistance theory does more to acknowledge children's (or at least adolescents') agency in the stratification process, but it is also limited in key ways. According to scholars such as Paul Willis (1981), Jay MacLeod (1995), and Julie Bettie (2014), working-class students, especially those struggling in school, come to view teachers and schools as full of false promises (see also McRobbie 2000). Repeated failures and frustrations lead them to reject the school's premise that success in life is determined by success in school. In doing so, working-class students also come to reject the authority of teachers and schools and to define success in alternative ways. Those findings are important, but they have only been tested in adolescent populations. With younger children, research has shown that positive feelings toward school run high, even among less privileged and minority students (Ford and Harris 1996; Tyson 2002). Classic work on social class and student resistance is also increasingly dated, predating the college-for-all era (Goyette 2008) and recent economic and social changes that have made it more difficult to achieve financial success without a college degree (Kalleberg 2011). Moreover, the recent work that has been done on student resistance raises questions about the idea that resistance is reserved for the working class (Diehl and McFarland 2012; McFarland 2001; Pace 2003; Pace and Hemmings 2006).[12] In a study of student–teacher interactions in high school, for example, McFarland (2001) found that the major challenges to teachers' authority came from popular middle-class students (often boys), who challenged teachers as a way to elicit laughter and approval from friends.

Resistance theory also falls short of fully explaining the patterns I observed. At Maplewood, the working-class students did not reject the authority structure of the school. Jesse, for example, loved school and loved his teachers. Most mornings he would sneak out of the cafeteria early so he could be the first one in the classroom, giving him an extra minute or two to tell Ms. Dunham stories about games he had made up with his cousins or things he had seen on TV the night before. As discussed in Chapter 1, working-class students such as Jesse did not always define success in purely academic terms, but they still viewed respect for the teacher's authority as a central part of that success. Furthermore, I found that when elementary students engaged in resistance, it was usually the middle-class students who did so—not the working-class students, as scholars such as Willis, MacLeod, and Bettie might predict. At Maplewood, middle-class students saw through a different facade of classroom life—that following teachers' rules and expectations is the only path to success. In doing so, those students seemed to recognize that by rejecting the authority structure of the classroom and pushing back against teachers' rules and expectations, they could actually improve their chances at success in school.

Overall, then, research on cultural capital, teacher bias, children's agency, and student resistance represents a useful tool for understanding some aspects of classroom inequality. At the same time, those traditions have limitations that make them incapable of independently explaining how middle-class students secured unequal advantages in school.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Building on the previously discussed findings, I argue that the middle-class advantage is, at least in part, a *negotiated advantage*. Middle-class students succeeded not just because they complied with teachers' expectations, and not just because they were perceived as more deserving of support, but also because they requested assistance, accommodations, and attention in excess of what was fair or required and because they pressured teachers to grant those requests, even when teachers were inclined to say "no." Fairness is a tricky concept because students differ in their individual needs, abilities, and circumstances. Legally, some students are entitled to more support than others (Shifrer, Muller, and Callahan 2011). Thus, in calling some of the middle-class students' requests "unfair," I mean that those requests would, if granted, provide advantages that could not reasonably be justified by the circumstances at hand.

Such negotiated advantages are the result of a complex chain of interactions that begins with parents and children at home and culminates with children and teachers at school. The working-class parents taught their children to take responsibility for their own success in school and to avoid burdening teachers with requests for support. As a result, working-class students at Maplewood tried to deal with problems on their own. Although they were sometimes successful in doing so, they often spent more time struggling, got more problems wrong, and got more frustrated in the process. The middle-class parents, on the other hand, taught their children that it was the teachers' job to help them succeed. As a result, middle-class students asked, asked loudly, and kept asking until they got the support they desired. Teachers, meanwhile, could have denied those requests. As in the case with Ms. Dunham, however, they rarely said "no," even when saying "yes" meant granting requests in excess of what was fair or required. As a result, middle-class students typically got more support from teachers and were better able to overcome challenges in school.

These findings are important because they expand and clarify our understanding of the processes that produce inequalities in school. With respect to cultural capital theory, at least as it is most commonly applied, these patterns support the idea of cultural matching but also suggest that the middle class can negotiate advantages beyond those that teachers intend to provide.[13] With respect to research on teacher bias, these patterns confirm that schools are not neutral institutions, but they also highlight the importance of considering both sides of teacher–student interactions and acknowledging the role that children's behaviors and orientations might play in prompting teachers to respond in unequal ways. Similarly, and with respect to resistance theory, these patterns suggest that overt resistance to teacher authority is not limited to the working class. Rather, challenges to teachers' authority are central to middle-class students' and parents' efforts to negotiate additional advantages in school.

That is not to say, however, that working-class students or working-class parents should be blamed for failing to secure their own negotiated advantages. Compared to their more privileged peers, less privileged families have limited resources to use for leverage in their interactions with schools (Bennett, Lutz, and Jayaram 2012; Horvat et al. 2003). As a result, schools often treat less privileged families as second-class citizens, and they can be easily swayed to meet the interests of more privileged families at the expense of their working-class peers (Cucchiara 2013; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Lewis-McCoy 2014).[14] Given those patterns, it seems reasonable for working-class parents and children to distrust institutions and to assume that schools may not be responsive to their needs. It also seems unfair to expect working-class students to achieve equality by demonstrating a set of skills that they are not explicitly taught in school. Even teaching those skills more explicitly—as Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools and programs such as Prep for Prep have tried to do (Lack 2009; Tough 2012)—may not be enough to help working-class students catch up to their middle-class peers. By virtue of their intimate familiarity with the system (as cultural capital research has shown) and their power and status in society (as research on bias and stereotypes has shown), middle-class students (and their parents) will likely just find new ways to stay one step ahead.

Thus, as I argue in the Conclusion, a better solution would put responsibility for equality in the hands of educators, middle-class parents, and middle-class students—those who have the authority and the resources to make real change. If we really want a more level playing field for students, we need middle-class families to be mindful of the consequences of wielding their privilege, and we need teachers to say "no" and deny the requests that exceed what is fair or required.

## DIFFICULT CHOICES

I base the previously presented arguments on a longitudinal, ethnographic study of middle-class and working-class students in one suburban, public elementary school. Before describing the study in detail, it is important to recognize that ethnography, like all research methods, involves difficult choices. I had to choose which school (or schools) to study, who to observe, when to observe, and what to include in my field notes.[15] I had to decide what to wear, what to say, and how to build trust in the field. Those choices have consequences, and I did not take them lightly.

## Design Decisions

Much of the research on social class and schooling compares middle-class students in middle-class schools to working-class students in working-class schools (Heath 1983; Lareau 2000, 2011; Nelson and Schutz 2007; Pugh 2009).[16] That approach, however, has a number of limitations. Research suggests, for example, that school composition is correlated both with teachers' instructional practice (Anyon 1981; Camburn and Han 2011; Gamoran, Secada, and Marrett 2000) and with teachers' treatment of students (Oakes 2005; Ready and Wright 2011). As a result, comparing middle-class students in middle-class schools to working-class students in working-class schools would make it difficult to determine whether inequalities in students' experiences result from differences at the school level or from differences in the resources, experiences, and skills students bring from home.[17] To avoid those pitfalls, and to better understand how students' own class backgrounds matter at school, I wanted a research site that would allow me to compare middle-class students and working-class students as they interacted in the same classrooms and with the same teachers and peers.

Although I designed this study to focus on social class, I recognize that class is not the only cause of classroom inequalities. Rather, gender, race, and ethnicity intersect with class in important ways and also matter independently for students and their outcomes.

With respect to gender, we know that despite men's historical advantages, female students now outperform male students on most measures of educational achievement and attainment (Buchmann and DiPrete 2013; Buchmann, DiPrete, and McDaniel 2008). Those differences appear to stem, at least in part, from gender differences in behavior. Boys are generally louder and more disruptive (Younger, Warrington, and Williams 1999); they may even pride themselves on their lack of effort and achievement (Morris 2008; Willis 1981). Given those differences, teachers set higher expectations for girls, rate their behavior more favorably, and punish them less harshly than they do boys (Bertrand and Pan 2011; Jones and Myhill 2004; Morris 2005).

Despite these differences, there is also reason to believe that gender is not always so salient in school. Gender differences in student behavior and achievement, for example, are less pronounced in elementary school than in the later grades (Buchmann et al. 2008; Willingham and Cole 1997). Gender also seems to matter less for students from more privileged backgrounds (Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson 2007). That may be, in part, because boys are more sensitive than girls to peer attitudes regarding academics. Research shows that when boys attend schools with stronger cultures of achievement (common in more privileged schools), their attitudes, behaviors, and achievement levels are more on par with those of girls (Legewie and DiPrete 2012).

With respect to race and ethnicity, we know that the face of education is changing[18] and that non-white students face real challenges in school (Kao and Thompson 2003; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999). Black and Latino students, for example, benefit tremendously from teacher support, but they often struggle to form close connections to educators (Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder 2004; Stanton-Salazar 2001). Teachers also rate black and Latino students as less well behaved than their white and Asian American peers (McGrady and Reynolds 2013; Riegle-Crumb and Humphries 2012).[19]

The previously mentioned differences are clearly important, but there is also reason to question whether race alone can explain inequalities in schooling. In terms of home lives, middle-class black students are often more similar to middle-class white students than they are to working-class black students (Hardie 2015; Lareau 2011; Tyson 2002). This similarity extends to schooling as well, where middle-class black students report attitudes toward schooling that are similar to those of their middle-class white peers (Hardie 2015; Tyson 2002). Middle-class black students may also face lower levels of teacher bias than do poor and working-class black students, especially if they attend whiter and more affluent schools (Ready and Wright 2011).

The "perfect" research site would allow me to explore those racial/ethnic and gender differences and their intersections with social class. Unfortunately, such a field site proved extremely difficult to find. In this case, the perfect field site would have had even number of middle-class and working-class students, and those groups would have been equally divided not only by gender but also across different racial and ethnic groups (e.g., ⅛ white working-class students, ⅛ white middle-class students, ⅛ black working-class students, ⅛ black middle-class students, ⅛ Latino working-class students, ⅛ Latino middle-class students, ⅛ Asian American working-class students, and ⅛ Asian American middle-class students). Unfortunately, because schools and neighborhoods are highly segregated by class and race/ethnicity (Logan, Minca, and Adar 2012), that "perfect" school did not exist. Thus, because I wanted to strategically compare students from different social class backgrounds in the same school setting, I opted to prioritize class diversity and work with the "natural" racial/ethnic composition of the school.

## Research Site and Participants

The decisions I made in designing this study ultimately led me to Maplewood Elementary. Maplewood is a public elementary school (not a charter or magnet school)[20] in Fair Hills, a suburb of a large, Eastern city. The low brick building sits back from the road, surrounded by trees and playing fields and a large playground with swings, slides, monkey bars, and other playground equipment. The long, brightly lit hallways are adorned with inspirational posters and colorful displays showcasing students' projects and artwork. Teachers generally arrive early and stay late, and the school is often buzzing with activities—band concerts, craft fairs, carnivals, bake sales, PTA meetings, and so on—well into the evening.

With respect to academics, Maplewood is not the highest performing school in the region, but it does have a strong focus on achievement. The students score well above state averages on standardized tests. Teachers are required to participate in continuing education classes (many have master's degrees), and turnover is very low. Parents also praise Maplewood—in interviews and on public web forums such as GreatSchools.org—for the quality instruction their children receive.

Demographically, Maplewood serves approximately 500 students in Kindergarten through fifth grade. The school population is predominantly white (82%), but it includes a growing number of (middle-class) Asian American students (6%) and (poor and working-class) Latino students (9%). Although the majority of Maplewood's families are middle class, a substantial minority are from working-class backgrounds.

That socioeconomic diversity is possible because of Maplewood's suburban location.[21] The school draws students from a variety of neighborhoods across a large geographic area. Some students walk to school; others ride the bus for 30 minutes or more. Some students live in mobile home communities or rented apartments. Others live in modest one- or two-story tract homes built in the 1940s and 1950s. Still others live in million-dollar homes with sprawling lawns in fancy, new housing developments.

Social class is a taboo term in American society and one that has countless meanings and definitions (Lareau and Conley 2008). Building on prior research on social class, families, and schools, I opted to identify students' social class backgrounds based on their parents' educational and occupational status (Condron 2009; Lareau 2000, 2011; Quinn 2015). I initially planned to compare four groups: poor, working class, middle class, and upper middle class. My observations revealed, however, that although some aspects of family life varied across those four groups,[22] the primary differences in problem-solving and student–teacher interactions were between students from middle- and upper-middle-class families, on the one hand, and those from poor and working-class families, on the other hand. Thus, in the interest of clarity and brevity, and consistent with prior research on social class and family life (Lareau 2011), I condensed the four categories into two, which I label "middle class" and "working class."