

# Marketing Diversity and the 'New' Politics of Desegregation: Insights from An Urban Education Ethnography

Pamela Anne Quiroz and Vernon Lindsay

Great Cities Institute  
College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs  
University of Illinois at Chicago

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Please direct all correspondence to Pamela Anne Quiroz, Professor of  
Educational Policy Studies & Sociology, University of Illinois-Chicago, 1040 W.  
Harrison St. (MC147), Chicago, IL 60607, paquiroz@uic.edu, 708 769-2890

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Abstract

Situating ethnographic methods within a framework of engaged research we offer a window into the adoption, implementation, and sociopolitical dilemmas of 15 African American males participating in an Initiative designed to maintain diversity at one of Chicago's most successful and elite public high schools. The paper presents a four- year study (2007-2011) of an explicitly class-based and implicitly race-based attempt to engage the 'new' politics of desegregation and the microprocesses of integration. Promoted as reaching across geographic, race, and class boundaries, the Black Male Achievement Initiative [BMAI] at Selective Preparatory Academy [SPA] is just one of many attempts to satisfy stakeholders in a political environment that promotes school choice and voluntary initiatives to desegregate schools. Situated within the local context of Chicago school reform, the BMAI provides opportunities and builds relationships even as it raises questions about racial formation, the appropriation of space, the meaning of diversity, and how such educational

programs are part of the broader processes of gentrification.

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In the wake of celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown versus the Board of Education*, students, parents, educators, and policymakers are confronted with the equally profound ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court declaring voluntary race-conscious student assignment in K-12 public school districts, unconstitutional (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education -Louisville, KY 2007*). Research cited by social scientists reveals how African American and Latino students are more segregated today than ever before, a situation likely to be exacerbated by the ruling (Orfield 2006; Kozol 2005; Clotfelder 2004; Amicus Brief, American Educational Research Association 2006). Recent termination of desegregation consent decrees in urban areas allows school systems to abandon voluntary desegregation plans. These political and social realities make continuing efforts to promote better educational opportunities for students of color all the more important to highlight, particularly in urban areas where large numbers of underrepresented students attend school. However, such efforts also occur at the intersections of major shifts in educational policy, the privatization of public education, urban planning initiatives, and one of their defining components, gentrification. In such contexts macro social policy collides and colludes with state and local policies

to obfuscate the consequences for groups and individual stakeholders in public education.

Situating ethnographic methods within a framework of engaged research we offer an overview of the adoption, implementation, and sociopolitical dilemmas of a diversity initiative, in what is perhaps *the* urban model of privatization of public education, the city of Chicago. Our paper focuses on the microprocesses of integration in a selective enrollment high school that sought to maintain diversity in a segregated landscape Selective Preparatory Academy [SPA]. Diversity was a significant element of SPA's success and according to its principal, served as its primary attraction listed by applicants to the school. Paradoxically, what attracted increasing numbers of white middle and upper middle class students to the school also threatened its diversity, as performance thresholds increased simultaneous to gentrification. The narrative of diversity also fluctuated between stakeholders as participants varied in their interpretations and procedures for maintaining it.

We focus on the evolution of this initiative and the experiences of 15 African American males at SPA who comprised the program's initial cohorts, to offer a look at the role of selective enrollment schools in the urban education agenda of Chicago. We begin with a brief review of the shifts in education, racial and geographic boundaries and trace Chicago's responses to these changes. Next, we describe the context within which this initiative takes place, how different actors confronted each other politically and sociologically, and

changes in both the initiative and its participants during their tenure at SPA. We illustrate how a program promoted as reaching across geographic, class and racial boundaries, provided opportunity and built relationships, even as it raised questions about academic performance, identity, and the meaning of diversity.

### The Intersections of Educational Policy, Urban Planning & Selective Enrollment Schools

Scholars have written extensively about the increasing privatization of education and its relationship to urban planning and gentrification (Torres 2002; Burbules and Torres 2000; Whitty 2000; Davies and Bansel 2007). Embedded within new physical designs are the social goals of urban planners that include rebuilding “community”, achieving equity, and preserving the ecology (Brain 2005; Day 2003; Talen 2002; Katz). From housing to parks, neighborhoods and schools, these planning initiatives redesign and reconstitute public spaces and are accompanied by a positive if somewhat pragmatic narrative of regeneration, transformation, and integration into utopian communities. Touting “human-scaled” neighborhoods, diversity of communities, and efficient use of infrastructure (e.g., providing alternative sources of transportation, maintaining urban sprawl) the mission of these urban planning initiatives is to reclaim and restore urban spaces. Because people already occupy these targeted spaces, however, this movement, which is not just an urban planning movement but also a political movement, requires a



process whereby occupants, along with their geographic spaces, are reinscribed with images of threat or danger and relocated or dispersed to other locations. It is through such discursive practices that those already in spaces desired by planners can be purged from their neighborhoods, homes, and schools.

Researchers have also posited the restructuring of education as directly linked to urban planning and corporate activism (Hirsch and Martina 2003; Rosenbaum, DeLuca and Zuberi 2009; DeLuca and Rosenbaum 2009; Schipp 1997). Focused specifically on Chicago, Lipman and Haines (2007) argued that educational accountability, a function of corporate-driven school reform, is the lynchpin for privatization of Chicago's public schools, and is directly connected to the global urban strategy of gentrification. In this framework, high stakes testing, implemented in Chicago in 1995, laid the foundation for subsequent reform initiatives such as Renaissance 2010. Renaissance 2010 was designed to overhaul a large segment of the CPS by closing schools labeled as underperforming (an outcome of the accountability system) and reopen new schools as part of the plan to develop mixed-income communities. The corporate elites said to have assisted in evaluating, selecting and funding new schools in this reform are also the same corporate elites that have been a part of planning initiatives designed to remake the city (Schipp 1997). Whether the impetus for Chicago's creation of a high performance infrastructure was originally or explicitly articulated to school transformation, it is clear that success of Chicago schools is a necessary component for this initiative to

succeed. Like most urban planning initiatives, where mixed-income developments are argued to generate multiple benefits for the poor by living among higher income residents, the discourse surrounding transformation of schools is also part of the Chicago urban agenda. Indeed, the 'new' politics of desegregation relies upon school choice and voluntary strategies that include transfers, vouchers, magnet and selective enrollment schools, and diversity initiatives such as the one at SPA [see also, Smith, Kedrowski, Ellis and Longshaw 2008].

A partial explanation of the 'new' politics of desegregation is that conflicts over approaches to desegregate are no longer supported at the federal level (Frankenberg & Debray 2011). Indeed, political scientist and school desegregation expert Gary Orfield, cites the Supreme Court as the leading engine of resegregation. At the same time, others argue that local arenas may be more receptive to desegregation initiatives as part of either a value or perceived necessity of learning to cope in an increasingly diverse society. Local electoral politics may also be more congenial to desegregation efforts. For example, theoretically, in the case of Chicago, greater numbers of African American and Latino aldermen could exert pressure on the Chicago Public School District to attend to desegregation, or at least alternatives to balance student enrollments by race and ethnicity. Nevertheless, as various districts illustrate, there remains an unpredictability to the outcomes of local politics (Frankenberg and Debray 2011).

In the same way that urban planning initiatives control mixed-income developments by carefully selecting who can live in these spaces, *filtered permeability* was also a feature of the diversity initiative at SPA, as a comparatively small group of carefully selected African American male students were admitted into SPA and monitored for success. Once a largely African American school, the academic focus of SPA shifted to a selective enrollment school, and raised admissions thresholds resulted in a significant decline of African American students. Even as the school continued to increase its admissions thresholds to compete with other selective enrollment schools, the shift away from voluntary race-based student assignment was also occurring. SPA's Black Male Achievement Initiative was designed to convey its attempt to maintain a critical mass of African American students. No doubt, supported the image of diversity for potential educational consumers who were increasingly white.

At a time when the discourse of choice coalesces with discourses of merit and color-blindness, this restorative process had to be carefully packaged and presented to a variety of constituencies to achieve acceptance, or at least minimal resistance. We have chosen to highlight the micro processes involved in this explicitly class-based and implicitly race-based initiative as one of Chicago's selective enrollment high schools attempted to fit within the larger framework of urban planning initiatives and their impact on Chicago school reform-- by marketing diversity to different populations, one it was trying to

maintain and another it was trying to attract.

Where you go to school matters...more and more

Like most urban areas, where you attend high school in Chicago matters. Created to alter public perception regarding the CPS's failing schools, and to attract professionals and their families to the CPS, Chicago's selective enrollment high schools do an impressive job of preparing their students for higher education. However, it is fair to say that the local neighborhood high schools do not, and the verdict is still out on the city's charter schools. More than 90% of selective enrollment students attend college, whereas, less than 50% of neighborhood high school students even graduate, let alone go to college (<http://www.cps.k12.il.us/schools/scorecard/> 09/13/2005; [www.wpcp.org](http://www.wpcp.org), 02/09/09). Admitting policies employed by selective enrollment high schools mirror those of private colleges and universities, with standardized tests and entrance exams, attendance records, and application statements that combine to make the process of selection a highly competitive one. And while there are those who argue that such measures do not accurately determine student performance, literally thousands of students apply for a limited number of openings each year.<sup>1</sup> In addition, as gentrification of the city has increased, so too does the difficulty for underrepresented students to attend selective enrollment schools where academic performance thresholds continued to increase (i.e., minimum test scores), at least until 2011.

### Selective Enrollment Schools

School	Area	%AP	Ave EE score	Size
S1	S	17	874	808
S2	C/S	6	838	698
SPA	C/S	21	923	807
S4	N	9	909	4,412
S5	S	--	832	----
S6	N	23	985	1,112
S7	N	27	962	800
S8	C/S	20	965	2102
S9			861	

\*\* The selective enrollment composite score is 1000 and consists of:

- Nationally normed 7<sup>th</sup> grade test = 300 pts
- Seventh grade final grades = 300 pts
- Seventh grade attendance = 100 pts
- Entrance Examination = 300 pts

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1000 pts

Until recently, selective enrollment and other magnet schools in Chicago maintained racial/ethnic and income diversity, due in large part to a federal desegregation mandate that required CPS to keep enrollments balanced with the district's racial/ethnic composition. In 2008, more than 50% of students attended what the CPS defined as 'racially isolated' schools, meaning that 80-100% of students in the school were of the same race or ethnicity (i.e., Black or Latino). However, by 2009, a U.S. District Court judge declared that the last

vestiges of past discrimination in the CPS had been eliminated, and thus, terminated the consent decree to desegregate its schools. With the shift of judicial support for court mandated desegregation, the abolishing of voluntary race-conscious assignment plans, and increasing performance thresholds, we have witnessed significant declines in the racial/ethnic balance of these schools as greater numbers of white, middle class, and female students have replaced low-income and underrepresented students. One selective enrollment school, Selective Preparatory Academy, responded to these changes by creating the Black Male Achievement Initiative to address a growing student imbalance and ensure continued diversity of the school.

#### Selective Preparatory Academy (SPA)

A relatively modern multilevel building, Selective Preparatory Academy is easily accessed by a train station located nearby. Before, during, and after school, one can always find students congregating outside of the school. The building is meticulously maintained and surrounded by large glass windows that allow light to flow in on all sides. Walls are painted pastel colors and are decorated by both student and local artists. When entering through the school's main entrance, which consists of four glass doors, visitors can view posters of universities such as Harvard, Stanford and Princeton, along with other prestigious colleges that visit SPA to recruit students.

Ranked one of the top public high schools in the country, SPA is also known for its racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. Nevertheless, SPA has

seen a significant change in its student population in the past few years that illustrates an inverse relationship between its growing white ethnic population and its declining African American student enrollment. While this pattern is also seen in other selective enrollment high schools, in 2000-2001, less student representation at SPA mirrored its representation in the district and more than 65% of students were low income. But by 2009, nearly 30% of SPA's students were white and the percentage of low-income students had dropped to 51%.<sup>2</sup> The number of teachers from underrepresented groups at SPA had also changed, and by the time our study began, had dropped to 4. Given that only 8% of students in the Chicago Public School District are white, and nearly half of the teaching force in the CPS is comprised of Black and Latino teachers, these changes are striking.

This changing landscape presented challenges to the school to compete with other top selective enrollment schools and to market its diversity. As a consequence, and based on the sharpest decline in student enrollment having occurred for African American males, SPA's principal developed the Black Male Achievement Initiative (BMAI).

#### The Black Male Achievement Initiative [BMAI]

The stated goals of the BMAI were to identify a cohort of students from targeted low-income communities in Chicago and establish a system of support to serve as "safety net" for students as they transitioned from elementary school to the selective high school environment. In its pilot year (2007-2008)

the Initiative was to provide students with an orientation to the school, teacher mentors, tutoring, and social activities designed to promote academic success at SPA. The school targeted 10 African American males for its first year cohort and 7 African American males for its second year cohort.<sup>3</sup> Admission of both cohorts subscribed to the typical application process but also included elementary counselor and teacher recommendations, interviews with the BMAI Director, and a host of preliminary filters (e.g., attendance of SPA school functions). These students were credible candidates for a college prep high school. To put this in perspective, five years earlier, the test scores of most, if not all of these students, would have been adequate to gain acceptance at SPA. However, as competition for limited student slots increased, minimal scores on admissions tests also increased. Therefore, these students were no longer eligible without the support of the Initiative. This paper focuses primarily on members of the first cohort.

Creation of the BMAI was seen by many as validating its commitment to maintaining diversity in the face of a rapidly gentrifying city where high rise condominiums, university campuses, and corporate headquarters provided the landscape for the school. At the same time, Black educators criticized the Initiative as “creaming of the crop” and another impediment to the improvement of neighborhood schools in Chicago (Morris 2006). To these educators, selective enrollment high schools and programs like the BMAI were direct reflections of educational policy as an act of white supremacy, importing



just enough students to maintain an illusion of opportunity for students of color but leaving the vast majority of them without such opportunities or hope for educational improvement.

### Research Methods

Using a framework of engaged research we began in the spring of 2007 and were expected to provide ongoing feedback to stakeholders. In addition, we worked with the BMAI cohort as homework tutors and activity facilitators, meeting with the boys twice a month after the school day ended. Our research team included what Frances Winddance Twine (2004) called “insider” and “outsider” perspectives, with an African American male, African American female, and Latina researcher. As we struggled to balance our roles as participatory researchers we maintained ongoing weekly discussions with one another and kept “notes-on-notes” to include in our project (Kleinmen, Copp and Hendersen 1997). Beyond our participation as facilitators in activities with BMAI participants, we also gathered all of the traditional data associated with ethnographies: newspaper articles, school documents and histories, informal conversations and formal interviews with school personnel, students, parents, and others associated with the BMAI and the school. Our formal interviews are modified from the Harvard’s Pathways to Identity project by sociologist Janet Billson. Focus group interviews with participants in the BMAI and two cohorts of African American males who were not participants in the Initiative, but who also had similar profiles to the BMAI members, were also conducted at the

beginning and end of each academic year.

With the assistance of school staff we were able to determine that the majority of African American males who were admitted to SPA outside of the Initiative, had similar socioeconomic and academic profiles (i.e., from low income communities that did not send a large number of students to SPA and with similar test scores in their elementary schools). The exception was the entrance exam scores of the comparison group(s), that ranged from 50 to 100 points higher than those students admitted to SPA through the BMAI.<sup>4</sup> We used the same interview schedules with both sets of male students and conducted focus groups with each group as well. We also examined grades, attendance, activity participation, and solicited feedback from counselors and school staff regarding the two sets of participants.

We attended and participated in school committee meetings, receptions, and presentations. We also participated on the program's Steering committee, a group of teachers, academics, businessmen and "friends" that numbered over forty people at the BMAI's inception. Focus group interviews with participants in the Initiative and with African American males who were not participants in the BMAI, were also conducted at the beginning and end of each academic year. We spent several days a week in the school every week for the first two years of the study, not to mention part of our summers, after school, field trips and weekend activities with the boys. We observed formally and informally--- classrooms, activities, lunch rooms, open houses, school meetings, monthly

meetings, and various in-school and out-of-school events. We did not log the hours we spent with the boys at the school. However, during our time at SPA we subscribed to what Guba and Lincoln (p 205, 2005) call “prolonged engagement and persistent observation” in order to present an authentically persuasive account of this Initiative and the experiences of those in it. To these efforts we added other materials that we also count as social data – our personal experiences at SPA, the stories of the people at the school, and students speaking for themselves in videos, spoken word, discussion groups, and presentations. We met with minimal resistance to our efforts, though sometimes with indifference from staff. However, we were afforded unusual opportunities to engage, support, and record, not only the changes in the Initiative, but more importantly, the experiences of its students over the course of 4 years.

#### BMAI: Year 1

Similar to students described in studies of other desegregation efforts, (e.g., Wells and Crain, 1997) the neighborhoods in which these boys lived were characterized by poverty and isolation, a stark contrast from the upscale life of the SPA neighborhood. Most of the boys struggled throughout their first year to maintain academic standing at SPA. Several had either D’s or F’s during the school year, all were required to attend an after-school tutorial, and a few were ultimately required to attend summer school. Each boy struggled to align his satisfaction with the school and recognition of the opportunities received, with

his frustrations with schooling and a general unease experienced in the classroom. At the same time that attending SPA was viewed in a positive way, and the physical environment was regarded as a welcome change from the environment of neighborhood schools formerly attended, students conveyed ambivalence about schooling and occasionally a sense of isolation. Their experiences at SPA were characterized as two sides of the same coin, as opportunity generated a view of the school as inviting, yet never quite genuine or accepting. Particularly in their first two years of the program, students believed that class and race shaped teachers' expectations of their achievement at SPA.

We observed that these struggles reflected not only differences in academic socialization and personalities, but also a context where many staff members and teachers were not entirely on board with the program. Much of the debate surrounding the BMAI involved its perceived necessity, function, composition, and "privileging" of students. There were those who did not agree with the necessity of maintaining a racially/ethnically diverse student body, and certainly not by design. Others argued that despite the criteria of declining enrollment, diversity should be defined broadly. Rather than single out one group of students (i.e., African American males) the pilot cohort should have reflected a mix of students (i.e., African American, Latino, Asian, male and female students). The dialogue on composition also attended to the number of students who would be recruited to the BMAI, and while the final decision was

10 students, suggestions never exceeded 14.

The notion of privilege was also a contentious issue as staff opposition to the BMAI was often framed in terms of equity. There were those who believed it was unfair to provide a support system to one group of students without providing it to all students at SPA. For example, SPA mandated after school tutoring for students failing a class and students in the BMAI were required to attend. However, assistance from the teacher required initiation by students. After noticing that students in the BMAI did not approach teachers (despite the fact that several were struggling academically) we asked if they needed assistance. They often did. It became habit for us to approach BMAI students who were either embarrassed or not accustomed to requesting assistance, and ultimately, we were asked to help in the tutoring sessions and a session was created specifically for BMAI members who were required to attend on a regular basis. One of the teachers responsible for implementing the tutoring program expressed his resistance to providing tutoring specifically for members of the BMAI.

I believe that we don't want to be privileging these students against the others here. Personally, I am concerned that providing whatever supports we're talking about, whether its tutoring or mentors, or you guys [referring to the monthly activities in which we participated with students], just results in a sense of entitlement for these guys. It's not fair to the other students and

frankly, it's not fair to them. It certainly won't prepare them for the real world.

At the same time that the rhetoric of equity dominated, teachers were also painfully aware of discrepancies in skill sets and discussed them frequently. Those who questioned whether the boys in the BMAI should be privileged relative to other students at SPA, never questioned the privilege implicit in the school's selective structure and admissions process, curriculum, or expectations of students, nor were the changing demographics of white middle class and private school applicants mentioned. Despite maintaining high expectations of students there appeared to be little effort by many to find alternative ways for youth in the BMAI to make smoother transitions to SPA.

Diverse approaches to address student needs and ways of learning gave way to a one-size-fits-all orientation toward socializing students for success. As a result, anxieties, frustrations, and disassociations by the students were often expressed in their narratives of academic struggles.

I used to like those classes [biology and algebra] but then the work got harder and the way of teaching was confusing. It was very awkward trying to ask them to repeat it again when everyone gets it and I don't. I feel reluctant to ask questions because I feel like I am the only one who does not know. And sometimes when I do ask, they act like I should know. So I just don't ask.

Contrary to the assumptions of at least some school staff most of the

BMAI participants in their first year felt negatively targeted because of their race and socioeconomic background, and because of their affiliation with the program. Though typically not characterized as such by staff, the reciprocal nature of race was that students' perceived race to be just as much a lens through which their teachers viewed them as through which they viewed their teachers. Teachers, on the other hand, denied that race was even a part of their responses or assessments of students. Several boys expressed concern for teachers' acceptance and understanding of their background and believed it impacted their low level of achievement in the classroom. The result was a stated resistance to particular teachers by doing "just enough" work to earn a passing grade. James talked about a teacher who was regarded as one of SPA's more exacting teachers and who most students encountered as freshmen.

Honestly, I feel like she [the teacher] pick on us just because she know where we come from and our background, just because she knows we are in a program with Mr. Johnston. I mean she sends plenty of messages to Mr. J if we do anything. I do enough work to get at least a D. I'm not going to lie. ...I look forward to coming to school, but as soon as I get in her classroom that big whole gray cloud come over my head.

Students also noticed that the racial/ethnic diversity of staff was almost nonexistent, with only four teachers of color at that time and few other staff members who were from underrepresented groups (Illinois School Report

Card).<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, the boys' relatively new experience with diversity, academic rigor of the school, and comparatively larger number of white teachers encountered at SPA, contributed to their unease. However, it would be unreasonable to ignore the manner in which teachers interacted with them as a part of their discomfort. Ms. Drummond, a senior teacher who was also known for her candor, maintained that arguments about privileging students served to veil racialized views of who should be at the school.

Oh, yes. Of course, there was all kinds of skepticism about recruiting African American boys to SPA! Certainly. And no one will admit it to you. It was because some people were just plain scared of the idea. They don't want too many black boys here at the school. I'm sorry to say that I have colleagues here who have very small minds. All they think about is the competitiveness of the school and they don't care about attending to the needs of the African American community. They don't want too many of these kids here.

As researchers we worked to distill how race was practiced in this diverse and elite public high school where a post-racial ideology prevailed. Our notion of *race practices* in school borrows from Patricia Yancey-Martin's (2003) model of *gender practices* in the work place and refers to a system of action that relies on "tacit knowledge and skills" acquired over time and that become self-reinforcing. Analogous to gender practices, race practices also occur



spontaneously and lack reflexivity, meaning that people engage in them almost automatically and unconsciously. Race practices are the behaviors and interpretations associated with race categories or racial groups and are part of the racialization processes that occur in schools. It is the subtlety of race practice that defies description if not observation as race practice is almost certainly disputed as something other than what it is. As Amanda Lewis (2003) found in her work on elementary schools, racialization involves such questions as "who belongs where, what categories mean, and what effect they have on people's life chances and opportunities" (p. 285). They occur at many levels and in many spaces-- in classrooms, hallways, lunchrooms, extracurricular activities, everyday interactions between staff and students, and among students. And just as gender practices evoke a variety of emotional responses, so too do race practices. Participants at SPA reveal how race was talked about, acted on, denied, and elided, not only by teachers and staff but also by some of the students in our study. These practices reveal the visible and invisible borders of race and illustrate how such practice shapes identities and may even represent "critical moments" for students, that is, events that individually or cumulatively signal transitional pathways (Wright, Standen and Patel 2010).

James, one of the more popular boys and a leader in the BMAI group, had several misunderstandings with teachers throughout his first year. Upon entering SPA James resisted what he perceived to be efforts to force him to assimilate to school culture. Like the

students described by Prudence Carter (2005), James perceived the culture of SPA to be in conflict with the one to which he was committed. James pointedly maintained the vernacular of his neighborhood, and dressed in a manner interpreted by some staff as signaling a deviant lifestyle. As a result, his locker was intermittently searched during his first year at SPA. After one of these searches, the Dean decided to suspend James for ten days and to contact the police, when Mr. Duluth [ a counselor] ran to Mr. Johnston and told him what was about to happen. Mr. Duluth and Mr. Johnston intervened and informed the Dean, who had interpreted the writing in James' notebook as evidence of gang membership, that James' writing was nothing more than "tagging", the signing of his name in a variety of ways that included letters and symbols. Mr. Johnston also reminded the Dean that gang activity was as distant from SPA as was the neighborhood in which James lived.

As Jackson and Moore (2006) point out, the peculiar status of African American males in schools involves a general perception of their involvement with violence, drugs, and criminality. When these general perceptions combine with academic perceptions of African American males as “dysfunctional” and “uneducable”, the results are often a self-fulfilling prophecy (Noguera, 2003; 2008). Such views are apparent in the following story as a highly respected

teacher at SPA, Ms. Drummond, disclosed the reactions of some teachers to a series of thefts that coincided with the first year of the BMAI. In so doing, she conveyed how students, who had been carefully screened as meeting a variety of performance thresholds, were nonetheless perceived by some of the adults hired to educate them, as gang bangers, thieves, and thugs.

We had an incident at the beginning of the year, sometime in November I think, when people began having their money stolen. Teachers. No one could figure it out. And of course, you know who they first suspected?! One of them, and I won't bother to say who, [Ms. Drummond rolled her eyes] immediately pointed to the kids in the BMAI and said that was why she didn't support the program in the first place [shakes her head]. She, along with a few other teachers, just knew that they were the culprits. Well, as it turned out, it was a young man, he was white, who was about to graduate. He was in his senior year. Come to find out, he was having problems at home, problems at school, and he was just a mess. He admitted to taking the money and they got him help. He's doing fine now, but it just goes to show, we're a long way from where we need to be.

When situations occur like those described in these stories, certain questions emerge. To what extent did social class and gender intersect with race to influence the Dean's interpretation of gang membership? Would a white

male whose dress style mirrored James', also have been interpreted as a gang member? More importantly, would the Dean have moved to suspend him for 10 tens [an act that would have resulted in automatic expulsion from the school]? If it had been discovered that a member of the BMAI *was* responsible for the thefts at the school, would he also have received "help" as did the white student who admitted to the thefts, or would the police have been brought into the situation? In short, were BMAI students part of the SPA community or were they seen by some as a disruption or threat to it? Such events demonstrate how a number of dimensions intersect in schools and impact students, however, surreptitiously. Unlike other public sites such as parks or shopping malls, attachment to schools requires more than simple access. It is also the extent to which students perceive the environment as a welcoming one.

Perceptions and behaviors of staff and students were linked not only to the interpretive frameworks each set of actors brought with them to SPA, or to the adoption of the BMAI, but also to its structure and implementation. Despite its publicity and the general hoopla surrounding the Initiative, by the time we attended a reception to celebrate the Initiative's creation and recognize its supporters, we were aware of a disjuncture between its planning and implementation. We had witnessed the lack of a coherent support system and had participated in some of its hastily produced activities (e.g., BMAI orientation). By the beginning of the first school year mentors had yet to be assigned. The boys were placed together in a freshman orientation class required of all incoming students and maintained ongoing contact with the BMAI Director, Mr. Johnston. However, their transition to SPA consisted primarily of extra-

school activities such as field trips to a poetry slam, a White Sox game, and the activities created specifically for them by its Director. In its most positive light BMAI implementation was dynamic. A more skeptical interpretation was offered by a teacher who called year 1 "chaotic." Though the Steering Committee worked hard to assess the needs of BMAI participants and implement the Initiative, committee participation was uneven because members also held full-time jobs. The committee tried to fill a variety of roles without a clear vision or consensus on the BMAI objectives. Perhaps the most important aspect of the BMAI was the teacher mentors who were to assist students to navigate SPA. However, finding nine teachers to serve as mentors was not without some difficulty and at least three volunteer mentors recused themselves midway through the process. Others failed to establish a rapport with students or to meet with students on a regular basis. In fairness to teachers and counselors who served as mentors, little preparation or guidance was offered until the middle of the academic year when an administrative intern was appointed to organize the mentoring program and to monitor its success. Though teachers were given a nominal stipend for this work, in general, students did not regard their assigned mentor as the person to whom they turned for advice. Our perceptions of these structures were supported by a number of staff members and a counselor who, dedicated to the BMAI, referred to its structure as virtually absent. "It frustrated me to no end. I mean we invite these ten young men and their families into our community and then didn't have the support in place for them. That was awful."

### The BMAI Years 2 and 3: Organizational Learning or Politics as Usual?

By the second year several structural changes had been made to the BMAI. One of the most important changes was that of the principal, who left SPA and took with him several key staff members. Though not well planned or implemented during its first year, the BMAI had his

unqualified support. While the new principal continued to support the Initiative, support was visibly altered. Even the CPS had removed its staff person and its nominal support of the program dwindled and was eventually eliminated by the third year. The number of students recruited to the BMAI in year two was also smaller with only 7 African American males. The Steering Committee was reduced from a membership of 12 to 4 members and leadership of the BMAI was shifted to the Freshman counselor. Though we continued to offer activities twice a month, our work with students was increasingly limited and several of monthly meetings were summarily canceled. Mentoring was also placed under the auspices of the Freshman counselor whose interns assisted in individualized weekly meetings with members of the second year BMAI cohort.

By year three, the number of recruits to the BMAI had diminished to 5, with one of the new students a sibling of a BMAI member in an earlier cohort, as legacy was now a feature of selective enrollment schools. No longer were students selected to the BMAI based on demographic decline. Instead, the diversity of the school was reflected in the diversity of the third year BMAI cohort (i.e., Black, Latino, and female members). There was no longer a BMAI Steering Committee. Instead the freshman counselor served as head of the newly formed Student Support Committee. Our participation shifted from its original design as engaged research to traditional research activities, and we were no longer allowed to provide activities for students. In fact, activities specifically targeted for BMAI participants were initially organized by the counselors and eventually eliminated altogether.

Changes in the BMAI are open to multiple explanations. On the one hand, a number of the changes may be attributed to exigencies beyond the reach of SPA (e.g., the decision of the CPS to fund only one year of the BMAI Director's

salary). Other modifications could be the consequence of learning about what worked and what did not work (e.g., counselors as opposed to teacher mentors). An alternative explanation of these changes is a lack of genuine or sustained support for the Initiative. At the very least, a number of questions are raised. Added to these, during its second year, the BMAI experienced renewed opposition from a group of parents who questioned its necessity. The debates surrounding the BMAI, and subsequent efforts of at least some staff members and parents to redefine the meaning of diversity and equity, and to interpret inclusion to mean “exclusion” of other students at the school, is mirrored in the changes in support structures of the Initiative. Most of the modifications revolved around providing any structures targeted specifically to members of the BMAI and activities that provided a sense of collective identity for members of the cohort were individualized. One of the consequence of these changes was a notable difference in member allegiance to the Initiative. Consequently, changes in the BMAI can be seen as part of organizational learning about what works and what doesn’t, or they can be seen as political struggles over “who” gets “what” and who delivers these supports.

Even more striking than the shifts in program structure were the shifts in student interpretations of race and race practices during their time at SPA. During their first two years most of the BMAI students saw race and class as particularly salient features of their experiences at SPA. However, these interpretations changed. Interestingly, there was no monolithic response by

these young men as some held onto a strong sense of black identity while others presented more ambivalent attitudes toward their racial identity and one youth completely abandoned race as part of his identity. The following three young men illustrate the range of these responses.

Nathan, one of the students who strongly identified as an African American, disliked SPA from the start, and maintained his views throughout his tenure at the school.

(Nathan 2007)

A lot of these white teachers make you feel like blacks are unworthy of being here... Certain teachers, for example, the way that they answer different situations in the class. Say a group of black kids are talking, they'll be like, 'Could you shut up?!' [raises his voice and imitates the teacher] A better example is Mr. Wright. He's our 4<sup>th</sup> period U.S. history teacher. He is a student teacher. Lawrence [a Black student] will go to sleep and Emily will go to sleep. Emily is a white girl. And he [Mr Wright] will sit in the back of the room and see Emily sleep, but he'll walk right past her and over to Lawrence and kick him and wake him up, while she sleeps during the whole class period.

Nathan (2011)

[referring to the teachers and staff]

Yeah, they think we're just a bunch of monkeys that are just



dancing. One of them called us monkeys!...It's just no respect, like for any of the minorities or their organizations. Alas, they [minorities] have to do their own thing. Like there's basically no school support.

I just feel like the school has no respect for Black people. For example, one of the biggest problems I had this year, specifically, was there was not one African American anything for Black history month. Not an announcement, not a thing. That really affected me. Before, I didn't pay attention to it, but now, it just really hit me that there wasn't one thing. Not one.

[on how he has changed since entering MPA]

I respect myself more. I don't sit back and let people run over me like I used to. Well, freshman year I didn't either, but over the years I've started to calm down. Now I'm starting to become more outspoken, but more on an intellectual level.

As a freshman, Tom preferred to be around white ethnic students and ended his time at SPA unwilling to discuss racial identity.

You have all kinds of people, you know? You have 'white' Black people and you have 'Black' white people. I do notice though that white people are a lot happier and energetic. Yeah. I like white people. They make me happy and energetic.

By his second year Tom referred to his African American peers as

"ghetto" and began to distance himself from the BMAI.

The teachers, they're harder on you since you're Black, 'cause they want to help you and turn you into a better person. But they don't really notice it. They don't really notice that they're doing it.

(2011) [when asked how his views about race]

Like sometimes I used to stereotype people. I could say, 'all Black people do this' or other times I could totally go the opposite way, like I thought that all white people were one way. I feel I now have a lot of different viewpoints on race. I know now that I don't categorize by race but by type of person. I mean I'll categorize people by personality and attitude, not by race. I wouldn't even answer a question about what race I am. Like you shouldn't categorize someone by race. That's just something that should stop. You should ask me more about other aspects of my life...I'm hoping that race is becoming less important. I'm hoping that.

Claude was one of several boys whose views seriously shifted over time.

Claude moved from racial self-deprecation to a more positive view of being African American. Nevertheless, Claude maintained the need to identify himself as not "typical" of African Americans.

Claude (2007)

I think that the world does not want Blacks in its population because mostly blacks commit all of the crime and do everything

wrong.

I used to sit with a group the size of this table [in the lunchroom]. They were all Black. Then the table grew and I was listening to some language being said, and I said, 'I don't want to be in this environment. Ignorant!' So I just moved myself over to the middle table where all of the Caucasians were and they were a bit more respectable.

[discussing which teachers were best suited to which subjects]

For a Black teacher, P.E. Chemistry for a white teacher, and probably literature, mathematics, and Spanish. I think that whites tend to learn more than Blacks. If you throw out a question to a Black and white person, 59% of the time probably the white person would get the answer, and the probably get it correct, versus the Black person, even if they both have degrees.

Claude (2011)

I'm African American or Haitian American and I'm not ashamed to say that. I like saying that I'm proud of my race...I think it's better be African American than it is to be Caucasian because we have a lot more soul. We put a lot of passion into what we do and we have a lot of drive to do what we want, just to get what we want. That's more evident than in other races. That's my opinion.

[How the *Gamma Guys* activity influenced Claude's views of himself]

It helped me to become, not ashamed of who I am. I remember I used to be ashamed that like if I'm an African American then people would already put me in a stereotype. They already put me in a box. Learning to be more bold and be more comfortable in your own skin because you're going to have to live in it for the rest of your life, so you might as well...It taught me that you're not gonna change what people think about you, but at least you can change what people perceive... Like I'm not the typical African American. I'm different. I'm not what you think African Americans should be. I'm totally different and if you get a chance to let me prove myself, then you're gonna get to love my personality.

### **The BMAI: Success or Failure?**

The BMAI provided a mixture of results for its participants and its framers. From our perspective one of its greatest successes was the formation of a close-knit group of African-American males, at least among its first year cohort [and some of the members of the second year cohort]. Academic setbacks impacted students' understandings of the Initiative's effectiveness but not their willingness to associate with it or with each other. These young men spent a fair amount of time together engaging in social and academic activities, monthly meetings, and just hanging out together, as they were socialized into SPA. By the beginning of their senior year, former BMAI Director, Mr. Johnston, was released by the school as part of its staff reductions. Though

BMAI students initially felt abandoned by the school, they organized to maintain their relationships with one another through sustaining an activity that Mr. Johnston had initiated, *Gamma Guys*. Gamma Guys was modeled on Mr. Johnston's college fraternity and included a STEP program and mentoring by college fraternity members.

The perspective of several staff members was that this affiliation necessitated the BMAI's restructuring as one teacher blamed members' interest in "too many black activities" and the racial isolation of these youth, particularly members of the first year cohort.

I find that there are a lot of programs that are specifically geared towards the African American students. We have the Gamma Guys and things like that and I think it's wonderful to celebrate different cultures, different ethnicities but I feel to some extent it has been more isolating actually for some of the students. A handful of our black students are very good at interacting with our other students and you see them sitting with other kids of different races and walking around the halls and talking, but there are a group of students that are only hanging around with the other predominantly African American kids and I think it's partly because they are in some of these groups together, and that's what they do after school...I do think it is somewhat related to the BMAI...so I don't know if it was an unfortunate side effect of

having a program like that.

With some hesitation, a counselor seconded this position.

So I think there's always questions around how much should they [BMAI students] be cohesive and how much they should be spreading out in the building, and I think, pretty early on, people, and not just White people like me, I think, people in general felt like it would be good for them to be spreading out more in the school. So both for the school community but also for them to not have their whole experience be BMAI-centric...So to me those were kind of the two major implementation issues. One felt near crisis, the academic, and the other just felt like something that deserved conversation and attention, and got it.

Signithia Fordham characterizes this phenomenon of disrupting black fictive kinship as part of the post integration practices of private schools, where African American students are recruited on the basis of their difference, and often have isolating experiences, yet are expected to divorce themselves from their culture and community.

This kind of social interaction stands in stark contrast to what is expected of students in the school context – both public and private—where a strong separation of ‘I from us’ and ‘me from thee’ is not only expected but deemed absolutely essential for academic

success...The postintegration experience is to recruit black adolescents and to expect them to deconstruct their identity with the black fictive kinship system and, at the same time, to validate that the schools they are attending are committed to inclusion without racial considerations (Fordham, p. 473 2008).

Despite its public label, SPA has many of the characteristics of a private school and these practices apply here. Of the two issues highlighted by the counselor, academics and segregation, less attention was paid by staff to academic struggles than to the "BMAI-centric" attitudes of students. Teachers and administrators addressed the struggles of BMAI students as the result of the deficiencies of their community schools ("they simply haven't learned *how* to learn"). At the same time staff typically failed to exhibit a willingness to modify their own attempts to facilitate the learning process in ways that resonated to these students. Little attention was given to the affiliations of the first year cohort as something that provided what Patricia Hill Collins (2009) calls *free spaces* in which students could express themselves, establish a sense of wellness, and provide a respite from the stresses of school. Indeed, the collective experience of the BMAI is what helped students to meet needs, share experiences, and validate realities.

Any façade of egalitarianism among school activities [by staff] was swept away as the reaction to BMAI students seeking psychological, emotional and

cultural support in what one teacher called “Black activities” were regarded as isolationist and disadvantageous, as opposed to resilient and agentic. And as in other social spheres, the legitimacy of race practice was dependent upon who did the naming. Denied in the classroom, as well as in other school activities, race practice was identified and highlighted by staff because it was seen as practiced by African Americans.

Unlike the first year cohort, affiliation with the BMAI was not salient for most of the 7 students in the second BMAI cohort. No doubt this is partially attributable to the changes in program structure as few activities were done with members collectively and staff made explicit their goal of rectifying the “mistakes” made with the first year cohort.

### The Dual Nature of Marketing Diversity

Though limited in our ability to present four years of data in this paper, our data presents one of several examples of what were once racially isolated spaces in Chicago that have been appropriated into “diverse or “integrated” space. Though one might argue that diversity is what we’ve been struggling for all along, we suggest that to understand the problems with this concept, we first need to be able to see how it also has been appropriated and for whom. We have seen serious shifts in discursive strategies focused on discrimination from an emphasis on equality of opportunity and equity that characterized the civil rights movement, to our current emphasis of achieving diversity. Maravasti and McKinney (2011) describe this ‘new’ focus on diversity and the banal



multiculturalism it generates in our schools, as merely a softer form of cultural assimilation that is not associated with challenging existing structures of exclusion. The BMAI served a dual purpose at SPA. The attention surrounding the Initiative certainly suggested a good faith effort by SPA to maintain diversity and provide opportunity for students. No doubt this also generated an image of the school that implied some potential benefit to SPA in recruiting students. Given the number of students admitted to SPA through the BMAI it is difficult to understand the real benefits to students of color, particularly African American males.

The school's assertion that diversity was the primary reason listed by applicants for choosing SPA over other selective enrollment schools, was a significant element of this equation. SPA's principal responded to shifting educational policy and his school's decline in student diversity by borrowing the approaches of colleges and universities to advertise the benefits of diversity. In creating the BMAI, SPA demonstrated "managed diversity", with diversity used to delimit access to a few members of certain groups and treated as a commodity [i.e., the desired attraction for groups] (again, see Maravasti and McKinney 2011). The benefits of integrated schools have been well documented and the clarion call of multicultural education and diversity initiatives appeals to the interests of the dominant society in learning how to cope in an increasingly diverse world (also successfully argued in *Grutter vs. the University of Michigan*). Therefore, it would be naive to underestimate the potential impact

that marketing such a program had for the school in attracting white applicants.

### Discussion

Narratives of urban life and Chicago's "neighborhood" schools situate underachievement within a spatial landscape in need of renewal or regeneration. These descriptions are juxtaposed with educational experiences that represent all that is advantageous, as the result of diversification of schools, school choice, and merit-based public education. Selective enrollment schools sit at the apex of Chicago's public schools. They also fit within the larger matrix of gentrification and globalization described in Lipman (2004) (see also Shipps, 1997). However, the lines that distinguish poor and working class from middle and upper middle class educational consumers are not just geographic, economic, or spatial, they are also cultural and racial. Can initiatives like the BMAI, which used to be pejoratively referred to as quota systems, actually be successful, and if so, who benefits? As equity minded researchers we determined that so long as such initiatives do exist, and for the purposes of empowering their participants, we should engage the ways in which it might work to promote the educational welfare of those participating in it.

Over time we began to ask different questions, such as what does diversity mean? How do demographically diverse initiatives [and schools] contribute to academic and social success?<sup>6</sup> Equally important, how does the

process of becoming what Prudence Carter (2006) calls *culturally flexible* occur, and is there a cost to those students who engage this process? As Carter has hinted, the organizational and cultural contexts of schools is at least as important as their "minority-majority" status. Nevertheless, we suggest that for programs like the BMAI to work for the few individuals selected to them, we also need to understand resistance, not only the resistance of students to conform to a dominant or mainstream ideology, but also the resistance of teachers and staff who are charged with implementing them. It is presumptuous to assume that all or even most school staff were politically or academically in sync with the BMAI any more than they may have been on board for a number of other educational initiatives or policies. Therefore, what were the responses and impact of divergent staff predispositions toward students in the BMAI?

SPA is getting a new facility. Because this new facility will be paid largely by Tax Increment Financing the school will also have an altered composition as seats will be reserved for "neighborhood" students. Thus, a school supposedly once based solely on academic "merit" will now take on the dual label of "select" neighborhood school. Last year the SPA Local School Council passed a nonbinding resolution to retain the BMAI as part of the school's commitment to social justice. In the face of shifting demographics, supposed "merit" based systems that combine with school choice, a lack of transparency regarding the admissions process to SE schools (i.e., the famed Arne Duncan 'clout' list),

shifting policies of magnet schools (and possibly SEs) designed to "ease the burden" on families with more than one child in a magnet school (i.e., essentially legacy policies) coalesce to blur the margins of just what "selective enrollment" means. The impact of initiatives like the BMAI suggests minimal or at least highly managed diversity – a not too distant cousin to the once despised 'quota' systems assumed in recent decades.

The *non-binding* support of the BMAI could be strategically motivated at a time when the school is being transformed to accommodate an affluent clientele who will not be required to compete with the thousands of other students who seek entrance to SPA. In short, nominal support for a nominal program could be regarded as part of an effort to secure the reproduction of class advantage while controlling exposure to various populations. It reflects one of the ways that the privileged of the city are competing with one another.

### Conclusion

Clearly the various reform efforts of Chicago have introduced markets into its public education system and markets require marketing. In order to capture a particular consumer, the current market must have the appeal of diversity. The question remains however, what is the critical mass that makes diversity not only real but acceptable, and who gets to set the parameters of diversity? Just as housing developments of the New Urbanism promise "mixed-income" neighborhoods by carefully selecting and monitoring who gets to live in them, [particularly lower income residents], the accountability mechanisms

that have resulted in pushing students out of school, either through failure at social promotion or because schools are more interested in keeping their failing rates to a minimum (to avoid probation or possibly reconstitution), are also used to delimit the population of “mixed” consumers or student clients at the other end of the academic spectrum.

Whether by design or default, neoliberal policies find their way not only into education but also into the minds of those being educated. Regardless of their initial social critiques of the school, by the end of their second year most of the young men in the first year cohort accepted the discourse of individualism, competition, and bootstraps thinking to promoted by the school to satisfy multiple systems of accountability (i.e., academic, social and cultural) and to explain their personal and academic struggles. These sentiments were even more pronounced in the second year cohort.

At the same time that gentrification is seen as a driver behind the development of the Selective Enrollment Schools, little systematic improvement has been seen for the rest of the Chicago Public schools. Certainly, nothing comparable to these schools. Tax Increment Financing almost assures that those gentrifying areas will have access to the schools of their choice, schools like SPA, while the economically disadvantaged will not. Even with the new and current class-based tier selection process recently implemented by the CPS in the wake of federal and local investigations, this is not likely to do much to integrate large numbers of students into the types of schools that offer the

advantages of an SPA. In many respects the BMAI and practices that occurred at SPA, speak to what Patricia Hill Collins (2009) labels as the *New Racism*. This new racism is organized around a politics of inclusion where members of historically excluded groups are now given access to different contexts but not comparably rewarded by them. Hill Collins argues that we continue to be an “imperfectly desegregated society where some parts are racially integrated (but not color blind)” and “where new forms of racial segregation continue to shape American institutions” (p 59). In the case of SPA, this was translated by BMAI participants’ description of the school as inviting yet never quite genuine or accepting. Though not emphasized in this paper, participants' stories present the ways in which race, class, and gender intersect and reinforce each other and how the lives of black male youth, even arguably "privileged" black male youth, continue to be plagued by a *kinder gentler* form of racism, a racism that thrives on the politics of inclusion.

The question remains whether in the environment of markets and extreme individualism, initiatives like the BMAI are designed to address the needs of underrepresented groups or to simply filter enough individuals into the system, to assure those with access to that system, that they are indeed in an integrated environment – in other words, to have just enough contact but not too much? The intersections of educational policy, urban planning and school reform, generate a geography of opportunity that relies on school choice and this reality does not appear to be shifting anytime soon. Therefore, such

initiatives need to be explored further and any attempt at inclusion and equity must be subject to an examination and understanding of the intersections of race, space, and place.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005, more than 10,700 students vied for 2,565 places in the city's eight selective enrollment high schools. This translates to approximately 1 in 4 students who were accepted. By 2010, over 16,000 students competed for 2800 seats in the selective enrollment schools.

<sup>2</sup> The growth in percentage of white students at SPA would undoubtedly have been larger had schools not been able to exercise certain court-ordered flexibility in admissions prior to the anti-affirmative engaged ruling.

<sup>3</sup> One of the boys ultimately left SPA because he was recruited by another of the selective enrollment schools to play sports.

<sup>4</sup> There were a few exceptions to this pattern where a few of African American male students had entrance exam scores that were within 25 points of the BMAI participants

<sup>5</sup> The significance of these numbers is that this is also characteristic of the other top selective enrollment schools where faculty of color has also declined and is significantly less than the district as a whole.

<sup>6</sup> During the 2007-2008 SPA's faculty and staff consisted of only four persons of color.