

Sorting in Sports and Schools:
How Early Childhood Teachers and Coaches Categorize Children

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ABSTRACT

Do sports privilege children with different initial strengths and skills than schools do? To find out, I conduct a comparative, qualitative case study of two institutions of early learning—a preschool and a gymnastics class—using ethnography and in-depth interviews to determine how instructors categorize children, how they tailor instruction to meet students’ perceived needs, and how this differentiated instruction affects student learning and development.

My fieldwork shows that a general process unfolds similarly in both sites. As soon as kids begin preschool classes in both sports and schools, their instructors begin to categorize them into groups based on their proximity to “kindergarten readiness.” When kids first enter institutionalized learning environments, like preschool or a structured gymnastics class, instructors assess them on the skills necessary for “kindergarten readiness.” They categorize them and differentiate their instruction accordingly – they provide extra help to the kids whom they perceive to struggle and extra challenges to the kids they perceive as “advanced.” By the end of the term, these experiences inform their decisions about who is ready for kindergarten, who needs another year or session of preschool, or who should be tested for special needs. As a result of these instructor recommendations, the children are regrouped the following year. These new groups are separated by **social boundaries**, as resources are meted out differently to preschool and kindergarten classes as well as to students who are identified as needing special education services. As children continue to be sorted within the system into groups identified as “gifted” and as “mainstream,” **symbolic boundaries** form that further distinguish the groups.

Thus, the creation of social and symbolic boundaries among groups of children begin from the moment they first enter institutionalized learning environments, as teachers and coaches categorize, instruct, and sort them.

At the preschool level, unlike in later grades, the behaviors both teachers and coaches weigh the most heavily in categorizing and sorting students are social skills. This means that the children to whom the structured environments of preschool and preschool sports classes seem most familiar—those whose homes are culturally similar—likely have an early advantage over peers from homes that are less well “matched.”

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Chapter 1:

How Teachers and Coaches Socialize Kids into Students and Athletes

My dissertation compares how teachers and coaches make conceptual distinctions among children based on characteristics they believe to matter for instruction in their content area. Based on their perceptions of these differences, teachers and coaches engage in an iterative sorting process which includes categorizing and grouping children, customizing their instruction to meet the perceived needs of those groups, and making recommendations regarding ability-track placements. I conduct a comparative, qualitative case study of two types of formal institutional learning—one academic, and one athletic—to investigate these student sorting processes. Through immersive ethnography and in-depth interviews, we learn which child characteristics enable learners to excel in each content area, and whether or not the same children are advantaged in each.

I compare instruction and sorting in a preschool and a preschool sports setting because they are common socialization experiences shared by many children. Likely because instruction of the mind and instruction of the body have throughout history been viewed as antagonistic pursuits suitable for different populations (e.g., Bourdieu 2000; Descartes 1998; Pinker 2003), many people today continue to believe that academic and athletic instruction facilitate different types of child development (Swartz draft). While some research suggests that, indeed, sports provide an avenue to excellence for children who are not outstanding academically, the findings are mixed and inconclusive. Moreover, while the processes by which schools privilege children with certain characteristics have been investigated at length, less scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding which characteristics enable children to excel in sport.

In sports as in schools, differences in child outcomes have many significant contributing factors, but here, I focus on differences at the level of treatment of children within instructional groups. Specifically, I explore whether the categories used by coaches in instructing and sorting children are different from those used by classroom teachers. To make sense of this sorting process, I rely on theoretical work by cultural sociologists who refer to conceptual distinctions—like the ones made by teachers and coaches when determining which children demonstrate characteristics important for developing content area skills and which do not—as symbolic boundaries. Symbolic boundaries contribute to the formation of social and collective identities, and to class, race, and gender inequalities. They also underlie the stable patterns of association among groups that result in unequal access to and distribution of resources and social opportunities.

The literature suggests that the *processes* of symbolic and social boundary formation are universal, despite differences in category *content* and *criteria*. In comparing the two sites of early learning, I identify similarities and differences in category *content*—the concrete behaviors and demeanors of students that instructors attend to and compare—and *criteria*—the boundaries between categories—and I illustrate how they affect sorting outcomes. My dissertation applies existing theories of symbolic and social boundary formation to a new social context: early childhood instruction. In so doing, it provides a rich substantive illustration of how symbolic boundaries are formed and how they function in two early sites, which I describe in the next section. On the basis of these findings, I theorize the relationships among child

assessment, differentiated instruction, and ability tracking as stages in the process of social boundary formation.

It is important to understand the sorting processes which lead to the advantaging of children in sports and schools because we know the benefits of each are distributed unevenly among participants. The benefits of sport, for instance, include increased self-esteem (Bowker, Gadbois, and Cornock 2003; Pascarella and Smart 1991; Vilhjalmsson and Thorlindsson 1992) and peer competence (Ewing et al. 2002; Weiss and Duncan 1992), better grades (Darling, Caldwell, and Smith 2005; Eccles and Barber 1999; Eitle and Eitle 2002), higher educational and occupational aspirations (Darling et al. 2005; Marsh and Kleitman 2002; Sabo, Melnick, and Vanfossen 1993), higher college enrollment (Shifrer et al. 2015) and lifetime earnings (Ewing 1995, 2007; Olbrecht 2005). In order to accrue these benefits, youth must participate, but participation in sport is known to vary by race, class, and gender (The Aspen Institute 2020). Moreover, even among participants, benefits are distributed unequally along the lines of race, class, and gender. While many mechanisms are posited as to why certain groups are more likely to drop out, being “cut” from increasingly more competitive teams and poor self-perceptions of competence are two significant factors. Better understanding the mechanisms by which certain children are identified as “talented” and encouraged to persist while others are denied this encouragement is a first step toward providing more young people with opportunities to reap the benefits of sport participation. The second step is better understanding the demographic patterns among those who receive encouragement, and those who do not. By comparing early childhood educators’ classifying and sorting practices, I hope to contribute part of the answer to a much

broader question: does honing one's skills on the court or the gridiron provide disproportionate benefits for young people with a different set of interests and abilities, or for the same privileged students who tend to already be successful in school?

Literature Review

Categorization and Symbolic Boundaries

To make sense of the series of micro-level processes in which teachers and coaches categorize, instruct, and sort students, I draw upon cultural sociological work on categorization and symbolic boundaries. Categorization¹ denotes the examination and assessment of the broader characteristics of an entity (e.g., an object or a person) in order to determine where to locate it within one or several categories, and the consideration of whether and how these categories fit in one or more hierarchies (Lamont 2012:207). Categories are separated by symbolic boundaries, which Lamont and Molnár (2002) define as conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. Because people recognize symbolic boundaries, the cultural practices (incorporated as habitus or cultural dispositions) upon which they are based “have inescapable and unconscious classificatory effects that shape social positions by defining (social) class boundaries” (172). As tools used in struggling over and building consensus on definitions of reality, symbolic boundaries are a critical medium for the acquisition of status and monopolization of resources (168).

Symbolic boundaries are necessary, though insufficient on their own, for the creation of social boundaries, which are objectified forms of social difference manifested

¹ alternatively referred to as classification and typification

in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities. According to Lamont & Molnár, social boundaries are “revealed in stable behavioral patterns of association, as manifested in connubiality and commensality; symbolic boundaries translated, for instance, into identifiable patterns of social exclusion or class and racial segregation” (2002:168-169). Social boundaries are often produced when groups engage in classification struggles to impose the superiority of their own worldview². In this way, categorization by authority figures creates symbolic boundaries that become the basis for institutionalized social boundaries.

Categorization and symbolic boundaries have been studied in a number of empirical contexts, including learning institutions, but not to my knowledge early childhood education or sport. The concept of categorization has been applied within the sociology of valuation and evaluation to understand legitimation, valuation and evaluative practices, and the conditions that sustain heterarchies (Lamont 2012). Symbolic boundaries have received much recent attention from researchers in anthropology, history, political science, social psychology, and sociology, as they have worked to understand social and collective identity; class, ethnic/racial, and gender/sex inequality; professions, knowledge, and science; and communities, national identities, and spatial boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002). While these areas of research have important implications for the sociology of education, much of this work has focused on the formal evaluation of universities (see, for instance, Salmi's 2009 report on “world-

² When a group succeeds, symbolic violence ensues: a specific meaning is imposed as legitimate, while the power relations that are the basis of its force are concealed (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:4).

class universities” for the World Bank, or Meyer et al. 2007 work on the greater internationalization and standardization of practice in science and higher education), on college admissions criteria (L. A. Rivera 2011; Stevens 2007), or on cultivative parenting strategies to prepare children for more stringent evaluation by college admissions committees (Dierkes and Bray 2011; Lareau 2011a). In this dissertation, I apply the concepts of categorization and symbolic boundaries to the study of two processes that are well-researched individually, but rarely linked—the differentiated instruction and ability tracking that occur in schools.

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is an instructional practice in which teachers vary and adapt their approaches to fit the vast diversity of students in the classroom (Hall 2002; Tomlinson 1995, 1999). Teachers are encouraged to plan lessons to meet the needs of all students by taking into account their variability in prior knowledge and experiences, language, culture, interests, learning preferences, ability, behavior, readiness, and other factors when differentiating the content, process, or product of learning or the classroom environment (Tomlinson 2000). Differentiated instruction is regarded as “best practice” by expert teachers and incorporated into most teacher evaluation frameworks (Valli and Buese 2007; Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde 1998). Research suggests that differentiated instruction is an effective teaching tool, particularly for high-ability students (Lloyd 1999). However, the effects of differentiated instruction on children’s learning and test scores, as well as on teachers’ relationships with students, pedagogy, and sense of professional well-being are not entirely positive and depend on a number of broader institutional factors (Valli and Buese 2007). Moreover, the documented positive

outcomes of specific applications of differentiation do not generalize readily across content areas, grade levels, and student populations.

Differentiated instruction takes many forms in the classroom, and one common practice is grouping students within the classroom on the basis of ability. Ability grouping students has been shown to begin in early elementary school and to widen gaps in learning-related behavior and achievement. Tach and Farkas (2006) found that teacher's judgement of learning-related behaviors and prior test score performance are the most predictive factors in ability group placement in kindergarten and first grade. Moreover, they found that both ability grouping and teacher's assessment of behavior affected student growth on reading achievement tests, even after controlling for prior reading test scores. As a result, during the first two years of formal schooling, grouping led to a widening of preschool performance differences.

Tracking

Academic ability tracking is another form of grouping which varies in outcomes according to the social context in which it is implemented. Following Jeannie Oakes³ (2005), I define academic tracking⁴ as “the process whereby students are divided into categories so that they can be assigned in groups to various kinds of classes” (3). For Oakes, tracking is the most important factor structuring students' different experiences in

³ As an explanation for class- and race-based achievement gaps, her focus on tracking stands in marked contrast to “most considerations of barriers to educational equality [which] have focused on “characteristics of students themselves as the source of the problem. Seen as products of disorganized and deteriorating homes and family structures, poor and minority children have been thought of as unmotivated, noncompetitive, and culturally disadvantaged” (Oakes 2005:4).

⁴ Tracking is sometimes referred to in the education literature as “curricular differentiation” (c.f., LeTendre, Hofer, and Shimizu 2003).

schools, as it “both causes and supports differences in the lives of secondary students” (3).

The extent and the consequences of tracking practices in the United States vary widely. In her classic study of junior high and high schools, Oakes (1985) found that the schools shared common features that they handled differently, including: teaching practices, subject matter content, instructional materials, physical environment, activities, human and material resources, evaluation, time, organization, communications, decision making, leadership goals, issues and problems, implicit (or “hidden”) curricula, and controls or restraints (42). Despite these similarities, she found that the schools’ tracking practices differed along five dimensions: 1.) extent, or the proportion of the total number of classes that were tracked at the school; 2.) pervasiveness, defined as the number of subject areas at the school that were tracked; 3.) flexibility, or whether students were tracked subject-by-subject or across more than one subject on the same criteria; 4.) mobility, measured as the amount of student movement up and down in track levels; and finally, 5.) locus of control; or, who makes the decisions about where students belong. Moreover, in the junior high schools, “[a]s we found at the high school, some subjects were rarely tracked—physical education, the arts, and vocational education—and others were almost always tracked—English and mathematics” (56). Differences along these dimensions contributed to the production of achievement gaps among students tracked differently.

Many scholars argue that academic tracking yields different outcomes for students depending on which track they are placed in. The dispositions, attitudes, and expectations fostered in different tracks have been found to vary (Alexander, Cook, and McDill 1978;

Oakes 1982), with vocational or non-college-prep tracks (or schools with curricula designed to further vocational objectives) encouraging the development of skills and dispositions requisite for working-class jobs, while college-preparatory tracks (or schools) encourage the development of skills and dispositions prized among white collar, professional, and administrative jobs (Anyon 1980, 1981; Bourdieu 1998; Bowles and Gintis 2011; Khan 2012; Willis 2017). Tracking has been further shown to provide students in higher ability tracks with more economically valuable knowledge, especially in math and science (Raudenbush, Rowan, and Cheong 1993). Because students of higher social class standing are often placed in the highest tracks that receive the greatest benefits, academic tracking is implicated in the reproduction of social class inequalities.

Differentiation and Tracking as Symbolic and Social Boundary Creation and Maintenance

Though other scholars' usages vary, throughout this section, I use "categorization," following Lamont, to denote the cognitive act of assigning individuals to categories, "tracking" to refer to the set of institutionalized practices whereby students are consistently spatially segregated to receive different instruction in different classrooms, and "grouping" to refer to a set of informal practices that organize children within the same classroom, either spatially or by task assignment. Though education researchers often use the term "differentiated curriculum" to signify tracking and "differentiated instruction" to signify tailoring instruction for individuals or groups within the same classroom, I use "differentiation" strictly in the latter sense. I consider "tracking" to denote the *formal* manifestation of instructor categorization, in which ability-segregated student groups are institutionalized at the school level. I consider

“grouping” to be the informal practices of separating students considered similar from those considered different, usually on a dimension considered important for differentiating instruction, that occur at the level of the classroom and which likely vary throughout the school. Informal grouping practices may vary in the degree to which they are institutionalized within the classroom. More institutionalized grouping practices include the division of students into permanent groups or according to consistently applied procedures. Less-institutionalized grouping practices occur on a less-consistent basis, are more permeable, or involve spontaneous student choice. Teachers may spatially or temporally segregate students deemed alike on some dimension or they may assign roles or tasks to individual students within groups such that students considered alike along some dimension are given the same task within each of their respective groups. Thus, categorization can result in a range of practices from formal tracking to informal grouping, or, in an undifferentiated classroom, in no instructional tailoring at all. I posit that the differential treatment provided to children on the basis of the instructor’s categorization becomes, over time, a social fact that is taken for granted by the teacher, the other students, and the categorized individuals themselves. The differential treatment among children differently categorized magnifies and reifies difference, and is ultimately used as the basis for formal tracking decisions.

Thus, I conceive of the process by which early child differences are recognized, reified, and translated into different outcomes as follows: Instructor categorization of children results in differentiated instruction, which produces symbolic boundaries among class members. These symbolic boundaries are then recognized as social fact and used as the basis for the construction of social boundaries in the form of formal ability tracking. I

argue that this general process occurs in many other learning institutions, including youth sports settings.

Advantages and Different Benefits of Sport

Throughout childhood, young people participate in various adult-led instructional contexts like sports teams, music lessons, and academic clubs, where they are, as in school, placed into ability-grouped levels or “tracks.” Sports in particular are notorious for employing significant filters to determine who gets to participate, when, and how. Notably, youth sports have been described as a conveyor belt in which many children begin, but few persist and still fewer “go pro” (Rhoden 2010). Friedman (2013) showed that youth dance and soccer have become increasingly competitive over the past generation (Adler and Adler 1994; Messner and Musto 2015). Finally, Clark (2012) found that ability discourses prompted by processes of team selection, emphases on performance outputs, and ongoing expectations of fixed athletic development affected girls’ ability to self-identify as “good at sport,” and that girls’ sporting identities were particularly important in predicting their continued participation in sport through secondary school.

While there is ample evidence that ability sorting occurs in activities, there is a paucity of research regarding which groups of children are more likely to participate at the levels that are highly selective and competitive, and which groups of children are more likely to participate recreationally. Relative to studies of the outcomes of placement in different academic tracks, there have also been few studies of how outcomes differ by participation in various levels of extracurricular activities. Yet there is reason to suspect that children who excel in extracurricular activities and participate at a competitive level

derive different benefits than peers who remain involved at a recreational level (Hartmann & Swartz forthcoming).

Contributions to Sociological Literatures on Culture, Education, Sport, and Childhood

This dissertation contributes to the cultural sociological work on symbolic boundaries by extending study of their function to the areas of education and sport. By exploring symbolic boundary construction in these early learning environments, this project sheds light on how a different form of power differential—that between adult instructor and child learner—affects the dynamic by which symbolic boundaries become tangible social boundaries that influence how resources and benefits are distributed. This project links these insights from cultural sociology with education research on differentiated instruction and tracking. In it, I show instructor categorization to be the impetus for symbolic boundary creation and differential treatment within early learning environments, and I link this to ability tracking, a form of social boundary creation implicated in the unequal distribution of resources.

I also contribute to scholarship on the sociology of sport by further complicating how its effects on participants are understood. By illustrating that the early categorization, differentiated instruction, and grouping of participants leads to some participants' later receipt of disproportional institutional resources and support, I call attention to previously unacknowledged differences in how sports are experienced, particularly by older children after ability tracking has occurred. In this dissertation, I also add to the sociological study of childhood by illustrating the role of children's

agency and subjectivity in their interactions with the teachers and coaches who classify and instruct them.

Methods & Data Collection.

Logic of Case Selection

My research compares an academic case study of a half-day preschool classroom to an athletic case study of a preschool gymnastics program. The academic content taught in preschool—ABCs, 123s, shapes, colors, and animals—varies maximally from the athletic content taught in gymnastics class—jumping, swinging, and rolling. Accordingly, the categories of difference used by coaches as the basis for grouping and instructing athletes presumably differ from those used by teachers to group and instruct students.

Despite these differences in content, the two cases are matched on many other dimensions. For instance, both are institutions of learning which are experienced by many children; both enroll children who are as new to formal learning institutions as possible (thus reducing earlier effects of teacher classification and differential treatment); both involve children who old enough to be expected to accomplish teacher-initiated learning tasks independently and in groups. Moreover, both enroll students from the same neighborhoods (in order to minimize the amount of categorization differences owing to differences in student populations); and both have an experienced teacher with an expert sense of their respective field and familiarity with this particular student population. Finally, both preschool and preschool gymnastics are offered by institutions embedded within fields in which there are similar standard-setting and oversight from national, state, and local governance. These matched characteristics permit a comparison that yields insights into how instructor categorization processes differ across cases.

While the sites are as similar as possible in terms of their geographic location, the learning environments in pre-kindergartens and gymnastics schools are vastly different in terms of the amount of time teachers and coaches have to evaluate children, and in the number of children they are evaluating at any given time. These field sites, and their similarities and differences, will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. In the section that follows, I review research from the sociologies of culture, education, sport, and childhood that provide the theoretical and substantive rationale for this project. Then I describe the methods I used for data collection and analysis. Finally, I provide an overview of the fieldwork, analysis, and argument presented in each chapter.

Part 1. Categorization and Instruction in Preschool and Preschool Gymnastics

To understand how the instructors made sense of student behavior, it was important for me to select a method of gathering data capable of capturing the preschoolers' agency. Because ethnography reveals the voices of children more directly than other research methods make possible and allows them to participate in the production of sociological data (Prout and James 1997), I spent the first four weeks at each field site engaged in immersive ethnography. During times of group instruction, I sat off to the side to write observations in a small notebook. During unstructured times like playtime and recess, I generally took a responsive, interactive, fully involved participant observer role with the children. During this time, I adopted what Mandell (1988) refers to as the "least adult" role, neither dictating nor correcting their action.

For the academic case, I focused on a preschool class at a half-day private, Catholic school which I call St. Cecilia (a pseudonym). St. Cecilia is located in a suburb of a large metropolitan area in the Midwest United States. Within the school, I focus on

the children in a half-day preschool class of 18 students, aged 3-, 4-, and 5-years-old, also taught by an extremely experienced teacher. My observations of the preschool classroom began on the first day of school in September 2017 and continued throughout the remainder of the school year. During the first semester, from September through December, I observed in the classroom three days a week, each time beginning before school as the students arrive and continuing until after the last student is picked up from school. During the second semester, from January through April, I observed monthly. Over the course of the year, I conducted one formal 90-minute interview with both the lead teacher and the assistant teacher in mid-October, and two more formal 90-minute interviews with the lead teacher in February and April. In addition, I generally chatted informally with the teachers every day while helping them to prepare activities or clean up half an hour before and after school.

For the gymnastics case, I observed a preschool class taught by an expert instructor at a private club which I call Nordic Gymnastics (also a pseudonym). Nordic is located in the same suburb as St. Cecilia School, so that the sites are as comparable as possible in terms of the communities they serve and the broader geographical culture. Like St. Cecilia, the gymnastics club is privately funded. This gymnastics class is co-ed, and composed of six 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old boys and girls. I observed every meeting of this particular class during an 8-week preschool session spanning April – June 2017. I began each visit to the field by observing interactions among parents and children in the lobby for half an hour before class. During the class, I moved with the group as they rotated to different events, but remained seated on the periphery, without interacting. After class, I returned to the lobby, and observed interactions between the parents, the

coach, and the children. I chose to observe this particular instructor and this particular class after having conducted ethnography in the site for two years, beginning in Summer 2015. In addition to countless informal conversations with this instructor over the five years I have been affiliated with the site, I interviewed him formally for 90 minutes about this specific group of children, using the semi-structured interview protocol I discuss below.

In this first phase of the project, I documented in my field notes the structure of the instructional period, including daily routines and expectations for child conduct. Then, I observed how instructors in both preschool sites responded differently to individual children as they navigated the spatial, temporal, and interactional structure of the class. To do this, I began by focusing on the implicit and explicit rules governing acceptable behavior and the types of teacher feedback provided to students when they complied with or violated the rules. At each site, I also focused on the content area instruction provided and the feedback provided to students regarding their performance of subject-area tasks. I noted patterns in the kinds of feedback most commonly received by individual students.

Early Instructor Interviews

I conducted 90-minute, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the preschool teachers in October. I used this format because in-depth interviews “can access different levels of information about people’s motivation, beliefs, meanings, feelings and practices – in other words, the culture they use – often in the same sitting” (Pugh 2013:50). I conducted formal open-ended interviews to determine which observed student differences instructors regard as most significant for instruction and how they tailor their

teaching to meet the needs of students who differ along those dimensions. Throughout this dissertation, I supplement these interviews with informal conversations about instructors' teaching philosophies and methods of classification and grouping.

Continuing Observation

I continued ethnographic observations in the preschool throughout the rest of the school year and in the gymnastics class throughout the rest of the session. While observing the gymnastics and the pre-kindergarten classes, I inferred how each instructor classified students based on their interactions with and grouping of individuals. Specifically, I monitored the events leading up to and following positive and negative teacher feedback. In my field notes, I described the child behavior that elicits teacher feedback, the instructor's words and actions in response to the child behavior, and the child's reaction to the instructor's feedback. During this time, I also monitored individual students' content area abilities and social skills. During class work times, I described students' ability to successfully perform the tasks being practiced. To monitor social skills, I paid attention to peer interactions, including who chose to interact with whom, and whether contact was teacher-influenced or student-initiated. While watching these things, I made note of which students did things like: understand corrections without a demonstration, understand when it is appropriate to talk and when to listen, have full conversations with others, share and take turns without reminders or assistance, refrain from arguing about small discrepancies, patiently wait to talk when others are talking, help demonstrate stations for other children, and seemed comfortable being leader when assigned.

I observed instructors' words and actions as they created groups, directed individual children, and organized class behavior, as well as how these interactions changed over time in response to changes in students' behavior and learning. I compared the processes by which categorization, instruction, and student behavior influenced one another over time in each site.

Follow-up Interviews

In the school site, I conducted two additional follow up interviews with the lead teacher to observe how her assessments of individual children's progress changed over the course of the year. In the final interview which took place at the end of April, she reported her recommendations for each child's individual placement for the following year. In the gymnastics site, I followed up with the instructor less formally in conversation during a down time between classes at Nordic.

During my interviews with instructors, I asked which differences among students turned out to be the most important in his or her class during the semester/session I observed. I asked the teacher and the coach to rate the students on the dimensions identified, and to explain their reasoning for putting each student in the category chosen, drawing on observations of and interactions with each child. I asked how they felt their classifications of individual students had changed over the instructional period. For each child whom they evaluated differently, I asked them to explain why. Next, I asked open-ended questions about the class as a whole, about individual students, and about their instruction. Regarding the class as a whole, I asked how they felt the class got along as a collective, whether there were any personality conflicts among students, and whether there were any groups that worked particularly well together. About individual students, I

asked about each student's progress, including their areas of rapid and slow progress. I also asked whether the instructors' opinions of any students changed over the semester/session, and if so, how and why. Finally, I asked the instructors to reflect on their instruction over the observation period, and in particular whether this class required modifications to the curriculum, instruction, or assessment, and whether there were any specific teaching methods that seemed to work well for individual students or groups.

Part 2. Regular and Advanced Tracks in Elementary Math and Gymnastics

In the second phase of the project, I observed older groups of students already formally tracked into groups of advanced and regular learners to better understand how schools and sports think about the differences among "advanced" and regular children. For the academic case, I observed two third grade math classes: one part of a gifted program, and the other mainstream. For the sport case, I observed a fast-tracked developmental gymnastics class and a mainstream recreational class, both involving children aged 5-8. As in the first phase of the project, my ethnographic observations focused on implicit and explicit rules governing acceptable behavior, and the types of teacher feedback provided to students regarding their compliance. I also compared the institutional resources provided to the advanced and the mainstream programs.

In the second phase of the project, I observed two third grade math classes at a public school within five miles of both Nordic Gymnastics and St. Cecilia School, which I call Persimmon Creek Elementary School. I selected this site because it is unique among schools in the area for offering a full-time, "school-within-a-school" program for highly gifted students in third, fourth, and fifth grades. At Persimmon Creek, I observed a self-contained, gifted third-grade math class, and a mainstream third-grade math class on

Wednesday afternoons from October through December 2017. The teachers of both classes had more than ten years of experience teaching. I also observed instruction of each class in at least one other subject area and with at least one other teacher.

In the second phase of my research, I likewise focused on a gymnastics group consisting of slightly older children, after they had already been formally tracked into separate classes by ability. I observed the first level of the Developmental Program, an advanced, invitation-only pre-team group, and the first level of the Recreational Program, a mainstream, gymnastics class for beginners. In both the Developmental and the Recreational classes, the children ranged in age from 5 – 9 years old, and were all girls. I observed one 8-week session of the Recreational class, from April – June 2017, and Developmental group practices from April – August 2017. I formally interviewed the coaches for both classes. I chose to focus on girls' gymnastics exclusively because the boys' enrollment at Nordic dropped during my field work, and the boys interested in participating through elementary school and beyond were all condensed into the same program.

I supplemented the observations of the three target classes at Nordic Gymnastics by taking field notes during many other preschool classes taught by other instructors, as well as a variety of other classes including boys and girls gymnastics, trampoline, tumbling, diving, tae kwon do, and parkour. I observed athletes ranging in age from 18-months-old and accompanied by their parents to the adults who attend open gym. I observed team tryouts, parades, community day celebrations, competitions, and team parties. In addition, I taught a number of preschool classes at the site both before and after conducting this ethnography. I also was a member of the coaching staff for the

entry-level team (USAG Compulsory Levels 3-5) and participated in and audio-recorded team selection meetings among coaches, during which the tryout performances of specific athletes were discussed and new team members were chosen.

Qualitative Analysis

I took extensive jottings while conducting ethnographic observations and used them to type out comprehensive field notes as soon as possible after leaving the field sites. I also fully transcribed all teacher and coach interviews. To analyze this material, I first repeatedly read through the field notes and transcripts. After identifying major themes and patterns, I used NVivo qualitative coding software to identify examples of grouping, task modification, and provision of positive and negative consequences.

In using these cases to identify differences in the sorting processes that go on in sports and schools, I share Dreeben's goal of pointing out "modal patterns and common elements believed to exist despite known variations" (1968:4). For that reason, I treat the content and criteria of the categories upon which the preschool teacher sorts students as typical of highly qualified preschool teachers in schools serving predominantly middle-class, suburban students. Likewise, I treat what I find to be the content and criteria of the categories upon which the gymnastics coach sorts preschoolers as typical of highly qualified preschool coaches in gymnastics clubs serving the same type of community. Moreover, I also treat the "advanced" and "regular" ability tracks in both elementary school and gymnastics as ideal types of each learning environment.

To explain how I use the data to develop hypotheses about the categories underlying teacher grouping, consider two examples. First, consider a lesson in which there is a group for whom the teacher seems to modify the assignment to make it easier, a

group for whom the teacher seems to create additional challenges, and a middle group who are expected to complete the assignment as originally described. Here, I would hypothesize that grouping occurs on the basis of content area mastery. Alternatively, consider a situation where there is a group of children who frequently fail to grasp instructions the first time they are given, a group of children who almost always seem to know exactly what to do, and a group that tends to understand directions after watching their peers begin an activity. In this case, I'd hypothesize that the grouping is guided by ability to understand follow directions.

I then assess these preliminary hypotheses by focusing specifically on differences between these proposed groups. For example, given the first hypothesis above, I review the field notes for examples of modifications to assignments given by the teacher or the coach for children in each group, noting whether each was for the purpose of supplementing/challenging or remediating the curriculum. In cases where my preliminary hypotheses about grouping did not predict teacher treatment of children, I returned to the data to try again to identify a pattern that could be confirmed.

Next, I analyzed the interview transcripts to determine the teachers' and coaches' philosophies on grouping students and their strategies for differentiation. I compared these stated rationales to my field notes detailing how the teachers and coaches actually grouped children in practice. Differences between how instructors think they are classifying students and how they are actually treating students differently in practice are considered instances of misrecognition.

Finally, I compare how children are sorted in sports and schools. To do this, I first contrast the content and criteria used by teachers and coaches to make sense of student

differences. Second, I examine how teachers and coaches differentiate their instruction based on the needs they perceive their students to have for remediation and challenge. Third, I compare how teachers and coaches make recommendations for child ability group placements. Finally, I examine how the differences between regular and advanced track gymnastics classes compare to the differences between regular and advanced track classes in school.

Preview of Chapters

In Chapter 2, “Sites and Structures,” I show that in both schools and sports, instructors create a class structure that serves as the basis for their initial evaluations. I describe the physical and temporal structure and the behavioral expectations of the gymnastics site and the school site and illustrate their similarities and differences. I illustrate the similarities in how the daily routines, activity areas, and rules of conduct of preschool and preschool gymnastics are structured and argue that they place similar demands on children to perform skills such as following instructor-provided directions, interacting prosocially with peers, and completing assigned tasks.

In Chapter 3, I describe the iterative teaching process of categorization and instruction used by preschool instructors. Teachers and coaches observe children’s ability to navigate the daily routines, and design and implement strategies to remediate their weaknesses. In so doing, they focus on the attention skills required to navigate three microinteractional social contexts: collective, individualized, and task settings. They then note children’s progress toward mastery of routines and prescribe more refined strategies to help children get increasingly close to mastery.

In Chapter 4, “Initial Categorization: Outliers,” I show that as children navigate the social structure of preschool or their gymnastics class, teachers and coaches make initial evaluations and categorizations very early in the instructional period. They first identify the children who stand out as being markedly better or worse than their classmates at performing the content area tasks demanded by the classroom or the gym. On the high end, this includes a student who can read polysyllabic words and count to 100, and a gymnast who can perform pullovers on bars and bounce to handstand. On the low end, this includes a student with extremely limited speech and inability to follow simple directions, and a gymnast who is terrified of going upside down. In the gymnastics case, the child with high athletic ability also demonstrated high proficiency at social skills and was recommended for promotion to a higher level. The child with limited athletic skill and low social skills was retained in the preschool class for the following session. In the school case, the academically proficient student struggled a great deal with social skills and was not promoted to kindergarten. The student who struggled academically was referred for special education testing.

In Chapter 5, “How Types of Attention are used for Categorization and Evaluation,” I draw primarily on interview data to illustrate the connections between instructors’ assessment of student behavior and their recommendations for institutional placements. I supplement instructors’ comments on student skills with ethnographic illustrations of the behaviors in question. I show that by the end of the school year and gymnastics session, the children who are initially regarded as being better at following rules are likely to be recommended for promotion to kindergarten and to kindergarten gymnastics.

In Chapter 6, I describe the second phase of my research in which I extend the academic and the athletic case studies to older children. In the academic case, I observe two third grade math classrooms—one for students of mainstream ability, and one for students enrolled in a gifted school-within-a-school program. In the athletic case, I observe two gymnastics classes for children ages 5-9—one for children enrolled in the non-selective recreational program, and the other for children selected into a high-ability, developmental pre-competitive program.

In the Conclusion, I discuss similarities and differences in how children are sorted in sports and schools. I argue that the processes have a number of important things in common that advantage children who enter institutionalized learning environments with strong social skills. Teachers and coaches provide students with poor social skills more feedback regarding behavior and students with strong social skills more feedback regarding performance of content area skills. Over time, the students with strong social skills have more opportunities to develop content area skills and are consequently rewarded on instructor evaluations. While more research remains to be done, I speculate that ultimately, it is far more likely that—with the exception of the outliers—children who begin school with strong social skills will be placed into “advanced” tracks where their advantages are compounded.

Chapter 2

Sites of Schooling and Sport

In their physical environments, St. Cecilia School and Nordic Gymnastics Club could not be more different. Located along a wooded, residential road, St. Cecilia is newly constructed and immaculately landscaped, and attached to an angular and low, modern church building. Nordic is tucked beneath a major highway, in a nondescript warehouse off a frontage road, between an auto repair shop and a steel production facility. Whereas St. Cecilia's dominant aesthetic is reverent, Nordic's is brutalist. Judging from the exterior, one imagines that children would receive a dramatically different education in each of these two environments.

Once inside, it is clear that the external differences are misleading at best. In fact, judging from the iconography that adorns the walls of each facility, both seem to be places of worship. In the hallways of St. Cecilia, beside the door to every classroom hangs a plaque with the picture and biography of a different saint. Throughout the lobby of Nordic hang giant framed photos of Olympic medalists, national champions, and NCAA scholarship recipients. But after spending time inside, it becomes clear that in gymnastics as in Catholicism, it would be misguided—a grave misunderstanding verging on sin—to mistake the worship of these idols as the object of true reverence. Just as the saints must be admired, not *sui generis*, but for emulating the morality of Jesus, the gymnastics greats must be idolized as exemplars in upholding a moral code. In both places, the goal is to educate newcomers to the faith. Children, from an early age, are socialized into the lifeways of the community.

It would seem that the lifeways of a Catholic school, and those of an extracurricular gymnastics program would be dramatically different. Whereas the former facility is filled with implements for instructing the mind, the latter abounds with those for instructing the body. Classrooms at St. Cecilia, jam-packed with educational toys, books, and school supplies, look well-equipped to facilitate children's cognitive development. The gym at Nordic, with its bars to swing from, ropes to climb, and trampolines to jump on, promises myriad opportunities for building strength, flexibility, and proprioception. In each facility, even the layout of the building appears to celebrate the specific flavor of progress vaunted in each site. At St. Cecilia's, as students surpass curricular milestones, their accomplishments are recognized by their annual movement from classroom to classroom down the hallway. Similarly, at Nordic, children move into different physical gym spaces as they outgrow both the diminutive preschool equipment and the basic activities they accommodate, and again later, after they master the recreational curriculum, and transfer to the regulation equipment reserved for the team.

Any comparison between sports and schooling evokes the quintessential opposition between the mind and the body. The Western philosophical tradition, in speculating about the relationship between the body and the mind, have historically introduced a series of structuring social relationships—dichotomous pairs hierarchically ordered in parallel to the spiritual: corporeal division. Elaborating on these binaries, Bourdieu explains their connection to the division of labor. The social division between the economic world and the world of symbolic production, he notes, produces the “divorce between the intellect, seen as superior, and the body, seen as inferior...in short, between everything that truly belongs to the realm of culture, the site of all sublimations

and the basis of all distinctions, and all that belongs to the realm of nature, which is feminine and popular” (Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, p.23). Throughout history this opposition has been grounded in social privilege. Cultivating the disposition and practices demanded of school, the realm of the intellect—which takes its name from the Greek *skholè*⁵—demands of the individual virtuous freedom and disinterestedness, and above all, time. Individuals lacking this consistent freedom from necessity instead have only to engage sporadically in sport, which deals with the body and nature, that which is visceral, unsublimated, and immediate. The maximal social distance between the individuals historically positioned to become educated and those relegated to the realm of sport laid the groundwork for the persistent associations between education and privilege, and sport and material constraint.

Despite this historical contrast and its lingering associations, modern artistic gymnastics and today’s education systems are surprisingly similar in some regards. First, they are overseen and administered by governing bodies surprisingly similar in their formal, bureaucratic, and hierarchical organization. In the United States, the institutional structure of gymnastics is somewhat isomorphic to that of both public and parochial education systems. For instance, standards are set, assessed, and enforced by governing bodies at the state or national level. Each individual school and gymnastics gym are the local providers of instruction that is overseen at the local, state, and national level. This means that in both learning environments, performance standards for students—in the

⁵ Bourdieu borrows the term from Plato, *Theaetetus*, 172-176c, *Pascalian Meditations*, p. 13. The word is Greek for school, but implies “the time liberated from practical occupations and preoccupations, of which the school (*skholè* again) organizes a privileged form, studious leisure, is the precondition for scholastic exercises and activities removed from immediate necessity, such as sport, play, the production and contemplation of works of art and all forms of gratuitous speculation with no other end than themselves.”

form of State Learning Standards or the USAG Code of Points—are set by higher-level governing bodies. The skills required to demonstrate competence at each level and the test items used to assess each child’s performance of these skills are determined by agents exogenous to individual schools or gyms, let alone classrooms. Yet, at each site, teachers and coaches are expected to facilitate children’s reaching of these standards using the teaching methods they deem most effective, provided they comply with State Teaching Standards and USAG Safety Standards. Thus, teachers and gymnastics coaches have the freedom to determine their own curriculum, to create and implement their own formative assessments, and to set their own criteria for determining minimal student performance for promotion, all while ostensibly striving to optimize their students’ performance on externally established outcome objectives. This means that though gymnastics and school work are performed and assessed individually, classes often make use of group or pair activities. As such, instructor groupings can be observed, making these sites ideal for understanding not just how coaches and teachers differ in their cognitive categorization of children, but in how they use these categories in practice.

Also adding to the comparability of gymnastics and school sites is the fact that the position of public and private schools and gyms within their respective fields is similar. This is important because characteristics of the structure of the broader social space of an activity—the social composition of the portion of the market captured by organizations with different funding structures, the relative prestige accorded to organizations with different missions—have been shown to shape the instruction provided to activity participants (Hartmann, August, & Swartz, in review). In the fields of schooling and gymnastics, public and private organizations compete for the enrollment of students. In

both, public institutions are cheaper and available to more socioeconomically diverse populations, while private institutions cater to wealthier families by providing additional services. As a result, the more specialized missions of private schools and gymnastics clubs tend to involve meeting the needs of more homogeneous, better-resourced student bodies in ways that enable children to outperform those in public institutions according to state or national metrics⁶ (August thesis; Greeley 2017; Freeman & Berends 2016; Chubb & Moe 1990; Coleman & Hoffer 1987; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore 1982). As a result of the desirable outcomes achieved by private schools and gymnastics teams, their admissions are often competitive.

For this project, to better focus on how the *content of instruction* affects the process by which teachers sort children, I selected these sites to limit the number of other factors known to influence teaching and learning processes. The classes I observed at St. Cecilia and Nordic Gymnastics were matched on a number of important dimensions, including not only their geographic location and funding model, but also the age of the children instructed, and the amount of experience of the instructors. I also took into account other similarities and differences that could potentially affect the comparison.

First, in selecting field sites, I took into consideration the age of the children instructed. The longer children are exposed to formal education, the greater the differential effects of instructor categorization and instruction on children's socialization.

⁶ Add a note here: The relative performance of Catholic and public school students depends on student sociodemographic characteristics. Historically, Catholic school students have outperformed public school students on standardized testing. Now, it is clear that low-income students of color who attend Catholic schools outperform their public school peers.

So, to understand the basis for initial instructor categorization, and the processes by which categorization, instruction, and sorting influence children's learning of social and content area skills, I focus on their earliest experiences upon entry to formal learning institutions. Specifically, I observe the classification and instruction of teachers and gymnastics coaches who work with preschool-aged children. By three, four, or five years old, children are expected to be able to do constructive work independently or in groups with peers. Because I am interested in social behaviors that include spontaneous interaction with peers around constructive tasks, I want to focus on the youngest grade level in which students spend a great deal of their time engaged in this kind of activity.

A second consideration guiding my selection of a field site was the experience of instructors. It was imperative to choose sites in which teachers and activity leaders have extensive experience working with children of this age in their community (Berliner 2004). By selecting expert instructors, I hope to uncover differences in the categories typically used by experts to make sense of the fields of school and the extracurricular activity. While particular instructors and student groups will always have idiosyncratic elements, experienced instructors will likely be more aware of both their own position within the field of instructors as well as how their students compare to a broader gamut of all students.

Despite these similarities, the learning environments in preschools and gymnastics schools are vastly different in terms of the amount of time teachers and coaches have to evaluate children, and in the number of children they are evaluating at any given time. Whereas students in half-day preschool meet three days a week for about four hours at a time, even the most-involved 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old gymnasts attend classes only two

days per week, for an hour at a time, and the majority attend once per week for 45-minutes. This difference means that coaches have to make their categorization decisions about students after spending dramatically less time with them. On the other hand, the number of students in the preschool classroom is about 18, whereas the number in a typical preschool gymnastics class is no more than 6. This means that coaches have more opportunity to directly engage with individual students during the limited time they spend together in the gym. Moreover, the types of interactions students have with teachers and coaches varies dramatically. Physical contact, for instance, occurs far more frequently in a gymnastics class as it is common for coaches to manually spot children on new skills. Content area skill assessment is more frequent and spontaneous in a gym, since, the gymnastics skills executed by children in a gym are offered to the teacher for immediate feedback, in contrast to classroom work that often must be collected and graded later, providing more time for teachers to reflect on each of fewer student performances and to carefully consider their feedback. In both sites, however, instructors must make choices about student categorization, regardless of imperfect information about students.

In the next two sections, I will describe St. Cecilia School and Nordic Gymnastics. After providing a rich description of the physical settings, I walk the reader through a first visit to each site. Then I describe the physical and temporal structure of a typical class in each place, as well as the daily routines, behavioral norms, and interaction patterns encouraged by the instructors. I end this chapter with a comparison of the two sites. I argue that in both St. Cecilia and Nordic, instructors create a class structure that serves as the basis for their initial evaluations. Because the structure of the gymnastics

site and the school site are far more similar than they are different, many of the same child skills and characteristics are likely to be advantageous in each.

St. Cecilia School

Off a wooded, primarily residential drive, and just out of sight of a public elementary school and a small lake, St. Cecilia's School shares a sprawling, French-bistre, brick edifice with St. Cecilia's church. The building itself is a long and low primarily one-storey space, with a horizontal line of windows and a lofted, gently sloping roof atop the worship area. The school, tucked off the road and behind the church, is older, mainly two storeys, and partially under construction. St. Cecilia's campus also includes a prayer garden and columbarium as well as a small, extremely well-resourced hospice and palliative care center overlooking a large pond. Despite the construction traffic, the grounds and the building are well-maintained, and the parking lot is large enough to accommodate the parents who choose to eschew the morning drop-off line in favor of walking their children to the door.

Though St. Cecilia is a Catholic school, its mission is "to help all of our students develop the talents that God has given them and to grow to be wise, confident, caring individuals," and all applicants who apply are accepted, regardless of their religious affiliation. As a private school, the annual tuition is nearly \$5,500 per student. However, the parish strives to make school available to "as many interested families as possible," so parents whose financial situation renders enrollment cost-prohibitive may fill out an application to receive financial aid. St. Cecilia has a total enrollment of 530 students in kindergarten through eighth grade, with three sections of preschool/prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade; and two each for second through

fifth grade. Sixth through eighth grade follow a traditional middle school format with students switching classes throughout the day. The average class size is 18. All potty-trained 3 ½- through 5-year-old children are welcomed into the preschool program, where the maximum number of students in the three-day-per-week, half-day preschool class is set at 18. The tuition for this program totals approximately \$1500 for the school year, and parents must pay an additional family registration fee of \$250.

Mrs. Marshall's Half-day Preschool Classroom

The preschool classroom I observed was taught by Mrs. Marshall, a veteran teacher of over 20 years, and her assistant, Mrs. Jill, a former children's librarian who has been assisting in various classrooms at St. Cecilia's for 2 years. Both are white, Catholic women. Mrs. Marshall's classroom includes 18 students: 10 girls and 8 boys. Three of the students are bilingual; in addition to English, one student speaks Polish, one speaks Hindi, and one speaks Chinese. One student is Asian, one is Black, and one is Indian. The rest are white.

Many parents are extremely involved in the St. Cecilia's community, with a number of preschool parents volunteering at the Book Fair, various Bake Sales, a "Marathon" fundraiser, parents' nights out, and a host of other Church- and school-related activities. A number of the preschool parents, particularly those with older children who have also attended St. Cecilia's, have known Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill for years. Some of them are teachers at St. Cecilia's who've taught Mrs. Marshall's children; some are neighbors for whom Mrs. Marshall's kids have babysat. When Mrs. Marshall's preschool class met with their third-grade buddies, Mrs. Marshall remarked that she'd taught all but six of the third graders. Many of the parents of preschoolers know each

other extremely well and have standing weekly playdates scheduled for their children. In short, intergenerational closure is extremely high.

In addition to parents' relatively dense social networks among other families at St. Cecilia's, they are also advantaged in other ways. All of the children but one have a parent who stays home with them at least part-time. Based on their zip codes of residence, as well as on my observations of their and their children's possessions, their vacations, and their mention of leisure time activities, most of the children appear to be securely in the middle class. Most of their parents are educated professionals. While a handful are in the upper-middle class, employed as doctors and financial planners, etc., most are in the middle class, working, for instance, as nurses or mid-level managers. A few students attend St. Cecilia's on scholarship. Their parents are employed as bartenders and hairstylists, grocery store clerks or call center employees.

Administrators at St. Cecilia's face pressure to conform to state, federal, and archdiocesan educational policies regarding testing, curriculum coverage, and provision of services. As such, the school rules, such as wearing the school uniform on certain days, walking quietly in lines in the hallway, and being reverent during chapel, are supplemented by additional policies and procedures designed to ensure compliance with external organizations. At the preschool level, St. Cecilia's undergoes an annual program inspection to ensure compliance with a set of research-based standards in order to maintain accreditation with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). This requires Mrs. Marshall and her colleagues to create an extensive portfolio documenting compliance with each of the ten NAEYC standards which address: relationships; curriculum; teaching; assessment of child progress; health;

staff, competencies, and support; families; community relationships; physical environment; and leadership and management.

These contextual factors, and Mrs. Marshall's familiarity with families in the community, shape her expectations for the students assigned to her classrooms. Given students' parents' financial resources and stable marriages, for instance, Mrs. Marshall anticipates that most children will come to school well-rested and well-fed, and, on most days, most students do. She adds that most students most years come in able to sing their ABCs, and many know how to at least spell, if not write, their names. Most know how to count at least to ten.

First Day of Preschool

I first visited St. Cecilia's on the morning of the "Meet and Greet Day" for Mrs. Marshall's new preschool parents. After walking through a scattering of junior high kids in uniforms outside the doors, I enter the building. Tim, a tall, clean-shaven, gray-haired retiree in a plaid button-down and khakis greets me from behind a tall desk. He asks my name and where I'm going, logging this information in his computer. After I tell him, he points, "Mrs. Marshall's classroom is right there, the one with all the hands on the window. She told me you'd be coming today." I thank him and head over.

Mrs. Marshall's room is filled with diminutive furniture and play areas that I find adorable and nostalgia-inducing. She and Mrs. Jill are retrieving toys from a closet packed with art supplies when I arrive. Mrs. Marshall introduces me briefly to Mrs. Jill and tells me I can stash my backpack in the closet. Mrs. Jill has gray hair and glasses, and the delicacy of her frame is accentuated by her earth-toned cardigan and slacks. She grew

up in a suburb close to St. Cecilia's but spent many years working as a children's librarian in Colorado.

Mrs. Marshall takes me on a quick tour of the school, on the way to introducing me to her boss. When we arrive at the school office, we are greeted by Mrs. Harper, a woman in her 40s with shoulder-length blond hair, who's wearing a pink blouse and a white jean skirt. She apologizes for "dropping the ball" on me by not responding to my email about registering for Virtus training, the program offered by the archdiocese to inform its volunteers about child protection policies. Then she tells me how to register and gives me a form to fill out to authorize my background check. On our return trip to the classroom, Mrs. Marshall welcomes a whirlwind of parents and children back to St. Cecilia's, and I tag along in her wake.

A woman pops her head in Mrs. Marshall's classroom and mentions that Jack, one of her last-year's students, is having a hard time separating from his mom. Mrs. Marshall and I pay Jack a visit in his kindergarten class. At the door, his new teacher, a young woman with long, straight, platinum-white hair and wearing all black, including a black cape, casually says hi to Mrs. Marshall and me. Batgirl, or Miss Emerson, as the kids will learn to call her, is one of four kindergarten teachers who are dressed up as different superheroes. Jack is crying and another teacher's aide is consoling him.

Next we visit Chase, another former student who's also quite shy, Mrs. Marshall informs me. Jack's teacher is dressed as Wonder Woman. Her classroom is across the hall. Chase is sitting at a table with another boy and a girl, coloring a paper and writing his name. He seems to be handling the transition better than his friend, but he still looks nervous. Mrs. Marshall talks to him, and I compliment the boy next to him on how well

he has written his name in orange crayon. His name is Maksim, and his “S” is backward. We leave before the bell rings and pass a crying mom in the hall. Mrs. Marshall pats her on the back and offers her a sympathetic smile and words of reassurance. The young mother laughs at how her kid is fine, but she’s having a hard time with kindergarten. She’s holding the hand of a little girl, who turns out to be in Mrs. Marshall’s room this year. We continue down the hall to Mrs. Marshall’s room.

The Physical and Temporal Structure of the Preschool Class

Mrs. Marshall organizes the physical area of the room to have a variety of types of spaces. In the entryway of the classroom, just to the left of the door, there is an attendance area where an apple tree on the wall bears fruit with each child’s name, to be picked first thing in the morning and placed into a basket beneath. The children’s cubbies, a series of mail slots, are immediately adjacent to the tree. Toward the middle of the room, there is an ABC carpet, large enough for the whole class to sit on, that faces Mrs. Marshall’s chair, the calendar, and the Smart Board. Behind that, there is a reading corner, bounded by book cases, with a large soft beanbag pillow on the floor. Next to the reading corner is an art table, and an invention station over which hangs a hornet’s nest. Far across the room is a sensory table filled each week with something new: sand, tiny pieces of drinking straws, corn kernels, and beans. Nearby is a dramatic play closet and a play kitchen and nursery. There is a large, open, central area demarcated by a bookshelf full of different types of blocks—TinkerToys, transparent plastic squares and triangles with magnetic corners, large cardboard bricks—that get switched out intermittently with Legos, Kinex, and Jenga blocks. There’s a prayer corner in which a child-size desk faces a picture of Jesus, and on which rests a small statue of the Virgin Mary, a rosary, and a

candle. There's a diminutive sink in the classroom and a separate, child-sized bathroom. Finally, there are a set of three tables that function in different roles at different times of the morning.

By designating and naming different areas of the classroom, Mrs. Marshall teaches the children that people do different kinds of activities in different social settings. Because she places different objects within different classroom areas, the children come to understand what different tools are used for and how to use them. More specifically, children learn that the scissors, glue, and markers at the art table are used to create art works, and that the play oven, microwave, and food are used to create meals. Because she continually changes the specific items available for use within each area, the children come to generalize that whatever implements appear in the area must be "for" accomplishing the kind of task they already associate with the area. When an item "from" one area appears in a new area, the children learn that the same item can be used in more than one way.

Mrs. Marshall makes numerous planning decisions prior to the start of the school year about the temporal structure of school time. She also establishes classroom rules, behavioral norms, and interaction patterns that operate consistently within this structure and serve as behavioral guidelines for the children in different kinds of interactions.

The structure of each school day helps the students anticipate when they will be expected to attend to particular people or things, and Mrs. Marshall works to keep it as consistent as possible. Though she makes adjustments to accommodate things like the rough midwest weather, special visits by firemen, or building construction, she deviates as little as possible from the class's regular schedule. After the children are dropped off at

the door to the classroom, they engage in a morning routine which Mrs. Marshall calls “Arrivals.” Then they line up to go to their “Special” class—either music, library, chapel, or gym. After they return to the classroom, they have “Circle Time” followed by “Snack,” followed by “Reading and Puzzle Time.” Afterward, they reconvene on the carpet for “Calendar” and to learn what’s available to them during “Free Play.” They have 20 minutes of free play before going outside for “Recess.” During the last five minutes of the day, from 12:10-12:15, they have “Dismissal.”

During calendar time, Mrs. Marshall explains to her students that the temporal structure of the school day falls within larger structures of time like days, weeks, months, and years. School time is also patterned by these larger temporal increments. For instance, each day different students are chosen to be the “line leader,” the “caboose” who “walks at the end of the line and keeps everyone safe,” and the “calendar helper.” Each week, there is a new theme and letter of the alphabet that influence the content of the lessons and play activities. Also, “Specials” repeat on a weekly basis, with music on Mondays, library on Wednesdays, and gym on Fridays. Once a month, instead of going to the library on Wednesday, they visit the chapel with the preschool director, Mrs. Harper. Annually, they celebrate holidays like Halloween, Christmas, and Easter, as well as each child’s birthday.

By maintaining this temporal structure, Mrs. Marshall teaches the children that different kinds of social interactions occur at different times, and that each type of social interaction demands different ways of directing their focus. The consistency of the schedule provides the children a sense of control as it enables them to plan their own day and to prepare emotionally for activities they look forward to, like playing babies with

their friends, and activities they dislike, like separating with their parent at the door. The repetition of the structure facilitates their distinguishing between the things they can control, like which friends they play with, and which ones they cannot, like the fact that they have to wash their hands before Snack. This shared understanding of when child agency is welcomed and when acceptance of the structure is expected is foundational to their social learning. Moreover, by making the sequences of time explicit, the children are given language to talk about their day. This enables them to engage in social planning with their peers.

Classroom Social Structure: Daily Routines, Behavioral Norms, Interaction Patterns.

In addition to facilitating the learning of academic and social content, the spatio-temporal structure of the classroom permits children to learn appropriate social interactions for different social contexts. Mrs. Marshall teaches the children routines that are to occur in specific places at specific times. Each routine is governed by particular rules regarding the children's attention, emotions, and interactions with other people and things. During a typical day, children follow routines for arrival, line up, circle time, snack time, free play, and reading and puzzle time.

The morning routine begins when children arrive with their parents between 9:10 and 9:15 in the morning. They hang up their coats and backpacks and then greet Mrs. Marshall at the door. The children say goodbye to their parents in the hallway, and parents are encouraged not to come into the room. This rule creates a clear boundary that children learn not to question. Children learn that preschool is something which is special for them and which they do on their own. Children are expected to attend to their possible

feelings of anxiety about separation from a parent, to address those feelings by hugging their parent goodbye, and then to redirect their attention to their “Arrivals” activities.

The arrivals activities begin as soon as the child enters the classroom. The children select the apple with their name on it from the apple tree and deposit it in a basket to mark their attendance. Then they head over to the sink, wash their hands with soap and water, dry them with a paper towel, throw the paper towel away, and find an activity to do at one of the tables. By staying busy completing a ritual series of tasks for several minutes, the children’s attention is kept off the departure of the parent, and this eases the transition into the school day.

Children follow a routine for line up as they prepare to leave the classroom. During the first line-up time of the day, Mrs. Marshall randomly selects one red popsicle stick and one green popsicle stick out of a pocket hanging on the wall. The person whose name is written on the red stick gets to be the line leader, and the person whose name is on the green stick gets to be the caboose. By ensuring that the privileges of being first and last in line will be equally distributed among all students, this routine shifts the children’s attention during line-up away from disputes over line-leadership, toward the suspense of whose popsicle stick will be chosen each day.

The line leader stands beneath a star suspended from the ceiling just inside the doorway, and everybody else stands behind him or her. People just getting into line have to go to the end, and the caboose has to make room for them. In line, everyone is expected to “keep their hands to themselves!” Before they leave the room, they are often asked to “put a bubble in your mouth,” or sign “peace and quiet” by making a peace sign

with two fingers, then holding a raised index finger to their lips. These practices signal the transition to the behavioral expectations children must comply with in the hallway.

During circle time, all the children are expected to find a spot on the carpet, facing the teacher's chair. They can sit "crisscross applesauce" with their legs folded, by whomever they want, but they are not to "invade anyone else's personal space." They are expected to sit and quietly listen to the teacher, the narrator of the book on CD, or the video displayed on the SmartBoard. Mrs. Marshall allots circle time for individual children to be the center of attention, which creates many periods for the rest of the class to practice *not* being the center of attention. When it is a student's birthday, she is called up to the front of the circle so the other students can sing her happy birthday. If a child is the calendar helper, he gets to come up to the front and point to the numbers on the calendar as the rest of the class counts aloud. When the class reads a page of the "Our Class" book Mrs. Marshall made by combining the students' "All About Me" sheets, the featured student gets to come up and share facts about herself. By giving the students ample opportunity to practice engaging in attentive listening to a peer, Mrs. Marshall emphasizes the critical role played by attention in giving and receiving respect.

After the initial whole-group focus on an individual, children are generally given a chance to respond to what they heard or saw. By asking the children to share, Mrs. Marshall teaches them that participating in a group conversation is valued, and that particular social expectations govern such participation. For instance, if children want to speak, they are expected to raise their hand and wait silently for the teacher to call on them before sharing. They are not to engage in side conversations or to distract their peers in any way from the person speaking. Mrs. Marshall controls the attention of the

class by granting and revoking permission to speak, based on each child's compliance with these behavioral expectations.

Certain exceptions to the default of quietly listening are allowed. For instance, if someone is bugging a student, they are allowed to say, "Stop!" or, "Please stop touching me!" If a person needs more space, they are encouraged to ask their neighbor to "Please scoot over." If they burp, they can say, "excuse me." These politeness rituals, which aim to restore social balance after the accidental provision of insult or to preempt its potential occurrence, are the preschool variant of the good manners expected ubiquitously throughout society. Their ultimate goal is to prevent a bigger breach of social harmony, or in other words, to prevent the incident from claiming any larger a portion of the class's undue attention than it has already.

There is also a routine to be followed during snack time. The children are expected to wait until they are dismissed to leave the carpet for snack time. Once Mrs. Marshall calls a child's name, however, he is allowed to choose their own seat at one of the three tables Mrs. Jill has prepared for snack time. Each table seats six children. The snacks are served "family style," which means that at each table everyone's snack is placed in the same bowl. The children pass the bowl and take out a portion of the food for themselves. They are each provided with a Dixie cup filled with a small amount of water or milk. If they want more, they are to raise their hand and ask, "May I please have some more water?" If they don't like the snack provided, they are permitted to place it in the middle of the table if it's something like string cheese, or to tell their tablemates "no, thank you," and pass the bowl to the next person if it's something like popcorn. When they are done eating, they are expected to raise their hand and ask, "May I please be

excused?” After one of the teachers excuses them, they clean up their spot, push in their chair, and go to the bathroom.

During both free play and reading & puzzle time, the children’s interactions are far less structured, yet still governed by certain social norms. Most of the norms, many constructed by the teachers to resolve social conflicts in the past, concern sharing toys. For instance, if someone has a coveted book, puzzle, or toy, the student who wants it has three options: 1. Play with something else until their classmate is done with it, 2. Ask their classmate to play it together with them, or 3. Ask them to take a turn playing with it once the sand timer runs out in 5 minutes.

Free Play is distinguished from other times of the day by its lessened restrictions on the children’s attention. During Free Play, new activities are set out by Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill at each table while the kids are engaged in reading and puzzle time. These, along with certain other toys, are considered “open” for play. In contrast, during “Arrivals” or “Reading & Puzzle Time,” dramatic play and construction are prohibited: “the babies and the blocks are not open,” in preschool parlance. Because fewer limits are set on the objects of children’s attention during free play, the students really look forward to this time.

The physical structure of the preschool classroom, the temporal structure of class time, and daily routines, behavioral expectations, and interaction patterns are designed by Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill to socialize young children into the role of student. Mastery of this structure requires children to adopt the norms and comply with behavioral expectations in three different types of classroom interactional settings: individual work times, group gatherings, and free play.

Nordic Gymnastics Club

Only a ten-minute drive from St. Cecilia's, Nordic Gymnastics is housed in a large facility off the frontage road of a busy highway. The gymnastics center is situated in a large, nondescript brick building between a CrossFit and a second-hand store. From the highway, Nordic Gymnastics is visible between a large furniture retailer, two auto repair services, a machine shop, and a steel distributor. On the edge of an inner-ring suburb of a major city, Nordic is situated within three miles of three trailer courts and of the most expensive community in the state. The community's socioeconomic diversity is complemented by more racial diversity than many of its neighboring suburbs, with white residents constituting 74.6% of the population, Blacks 6.6%, Asians, 13%, and Hispanics 5.8%.

Compared to the national figures on diversity in gymnastics, Nordic tends to have fewer African American and Hispanic children and more Caucasian and Asian children participating. Among girls' team athletes at Nordic, the percentage of non-white gymnasts increases at the higher levels. That is, among the 40 girls in Levels 3, 4, and 5—the levels called “compulsory” because all participants compete the same routines—34 of the participants are white (85%), two are African American (5%), three are Asian American (7.5%), and one is Hispanic (2.5%). Among the 23 gymnasts training in Levels 6 or higher—the levels called “optional” because each gymnast has unique routines—16 are Caucasian (69%), two are African American (9%), and five are Asian American (22%). Nordic's program involves far more girls than boys. There are 54 children enrolled in both boys' gymnastics lessons and on the boys' competitive team, for a total

of 14% of all participants, in comparison to 333 girls (86%). Socioeconomic data on participants is not collected by the organization.

At Nordic, everyone starts out in the recreational program, which serves to teach the fundamentals of gymnastics and to begin the process of triaging participants into three ability-grouped tracks. From least to most selective, these are: 1.) XCEL – a track that begins with the recreational program, involves competing in low-intensity Xcel competition, and has the goal of preparing gymnasts to make their high school team. 2.) JO (JUNIOR OLYMPIC) – a track consisting of the Junior Olympic levels 3-10, with the goal of earning a college scholarship, and 3.) ELITE – a track consisting of a SuperTots program for talented children aged 3-5, a fast-track Developmental group for children ages 5-8, a pre-elite training group for gymnasts over 8 who are preparing for elite testing, and elite training which one tests into formally through the USAG. Elite gymnasts aspire to compete on the U.S. National Team. Whereas girls in the JO track often participate at a modest level in other after-school activities, girls in the ELITE track typically drop all other activities, often including school itself, to focus on gymnastics.

The triage begins early for children in recreational or preschool classes. Initially, all children begin taking regular preschool or recreational classes. Coaches scouting for talent identify some children as especially talented and invite them into the SuperTots class if they have yet to begin kindergarten, or into the Developmental class if they are between five and seven years old. There, these girls are cultivated to become ELITE gymnasts. The children who are not selected out continue participating in the recreational track indefinitely. If at any point, recreational athletes become interested in getting involved more seriously in competitive gymnastics, they can participate in the annual

open tryout for the Junior Olympic team. If they make the cut, they continue as far as possible in the JO program. If they don't, they have the option of trying out for the Xcel team, which generally does not have cuts.

Though in theory this is how the system is designed to work, in practice there is actually a great deal more movement back and forth between programs. For example, many ELITE-track children who begin training in the SuperTot or Developmental group switch into the JO track. This happens for a variety of reasons ranging from kids' experiencing excessive stress or ceasing to think that gymnastics is fun, to changing priorities in the allotment of family resources. Similarly, if at any point along the way, a JO athlete stops making progress, scores poorly, cannot afford its tuition, cannot or no longer desires to commit to the intense practice schedule, the XCEL program remains an option. Conversely, if a JO athlete progresses extremely quickly or performs exceedingly well, she can be moved into the ELITE track; likewise, an XCEL athlete whose circumstances or aspirations change can be moved into the JO track. Generally athletes who move down from ELITE to JO or from JO to XCEL are better-prepared than their peers after they transition. On the other hand, athletes who move up from XCEL to JO or from JO to ELITE often have quite a bit of catching up to do to equal their new teammates who have been training at the higher level for longer.

To better understand the differences among these programs, I first sought a better grasp of Nordic's philosophy and business model. To learn about this, I spent time with the owners, a married couple named James and Anna, and with some of the coaches who have worked at Nordic for decades. At a staff meeting held just after the 2016 post-Olympic enthusiasm for gymnastics brought an unprecedented 71 girls to Nordic's team

tryouts, we discussed these topics at length in order to determine the best way to group and manage the accepted newcomers.

Discussing how the gym has operated until now, James explains, “The way we operate, our business model, is that we’re an elite club. We’re one of only about forty clubs in the country that trains elites, and one of only two in [the state]. As the owners, we have to think about gymnastics clubs as a business. They’re how we make money, how we can have jobs, and how we can pay our coaching staff. So in terms of our business model, being an elite club is how we stand out. It’s also how we operate day-to-day, how we run everything from organization to coaching.” As a businessman, James recognizes the importance of setting his gym apart from other local gyms that compete for the patronage of families in the area. Moreover, he also recognizes that doubling the size of the team would challenge the gym’s very identity: “We’ve got to start branding ourselves a certain way. We’re not a compulsory gym. Who cares if we win Level 6 State? We’re training these kids to eventually be good Level 10s and get college scholarships. We want kids to go elite.”

To maintain Nordic’s identity as an elite club, James suggests a structural solution: “We need a JO pyramid with a large base. We can’t keep shipping them off to Xcel or we won’t have any to choose from. That’s cutting off the bottom of the pyramid before we can possibly know who’ll make it.” Part of this unpredictability stems from the early age at which female gymnasts peak, and the tremendous physical and mental changes children undergo throughout their early years. It is simply impossible to predict with accuracy which kindergartners will be successful when they become teenagers. Other unknowns—such as whether a family will be willing to continue making large time

and economic investments in the sport; whether a child will stay small, flexible, coordinated, and relatively unafraid; whether a child will avoid injury—contribute to the difficulty of picking champions early on. James continues, “Since you lose maybe 30% of kids every time you go up a level, you need a lot of kids starting out in that L10-collegiate group. Are those kids ever gonna go elite? No. The elite kids come from the fast track or TOPS groups. With those groups, you start with 6 and maybe get one, maybe get zero. But to get ten Level 10s, you need 35 to 40 Level 3s, minimum. Those kids come out of your JO group.”

Given these goals, James and Anna consider what’s needed for the elite program first, and design everything else to support it. This necessarily entails trade-offs in the level of investment the business pours into its different programs: “Everything else is a feeder program [for the elite girls’ program]. It’s a selective, private, intensive way of training and it requires a lot of support from everyone else in the gym. It puts a lot of stress on the other coaches and the other groups, and there are always going to be trade-offs.”

Such trade-offs are present at several organizational levels. For instance, the ELITE program is financially subsidized by the other programs in the gym. A quick comparison across programs shows that it’s better to buy gym time in bulk. For those participating in a recreational class that only meets for an hour per week, each hour costs \$18.75. However, the hourly cost drops to only \$6.93 per hour if a child practices with the team for 20 hours per week. Moreover, the coach-to-athlete ratio is far lower in the ELITE track than it is in the recreational track. It is common to have three coaches supervising a group of ten girls in the Developmental class; after one becomes an elite,

coaching is frequently one-on-one. In contrast, the recreational program typically has 10 girls per coach, and the Xcel and high school groups can have as many as 15:1. Finally, the coaches who work with the ELITE track athletes tend to be career coaches, with far more experience both as athletes and as coaches, and who cost more to employ. The coaches for the XCEL track are primarily college students, some with little to no coaching or participatory experience.

Because Nordic Gymnastics is a small business, it tries to cater to the needs of its customers. One way it does this is by allowing families to schedule a “make-up” class if their child needs to miss their regular class for any reason. This means that children who are not typically enrolled in a particular class occasionally will participate in a class taught by a different instructor, attended by a different group of children, on a different day or at a different time. Nordic also permits interested children who are not already enrolled in a class to take a free “trial” lesson. The “trial” and “make-up” policies mean that, in any given class, the number of children and the particular individuals in attendance may vary from week to week. To limit this variability, the “make-up” policy officially restricts each child to one make-up class per session, and both “make ups” and “trials” can only be scheduled for classes that are below the maximum student-to-instructor ratio. Though these policies limit the variability in classes, exceptions are occasionally made. Families who have not abused their “make up” privileges in the past are generally allowed to schedule more than one per session, and more-experienced coaches are sometimes willing to allow more “make-up” and “trial” students into their classes even if their enrollment exceeds the prescribed student-to-teacher ratio.

Nick's MightyTots Class

The preschool classes are all 45 minutes in length, coeducational, and have no more than a five-to-one student-to-instructor ratio. Each preschool class costs approximately \$140 per eight-week session. There are four different preschool classes offered, differing in the age groups they serve. Children ranging from 18 months to 3 years old can be enrolled in a Parent-Tot class, which their parents participate in with them. Three-year-olds just beginning gymnastics are often encouraged to take a Parent-Tot class before beginning the independent MightyTot 3s class. As they grow, 3-year-olds are grouped in MightyTot 3s classes, four-year-olds in MightyTot 4s classes, and five-year-olds in MightyTot 5s classes. Sometimes, when there are not enough children signed up at a given time to create three separate preschool classes, all the children signed up are instructed in one multi-age class. The class that I focus on in this section is one such multi-age class, consisting of the 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds signed up to attend on weekday afternoons very close to the dismissal time for local elementary schools. Given that the class takes place during the school day, the children all have at least one parent who stays home with them. Nick's multi-age preschool gymnastics class is similar to Mrs. Marshall's half-day preschool class in this regard.

Demographic information about participants and their families is not collected by the organization, but parents in the lobby appear to vary somewhat in age, race, and income. Yet there is reason to believe that the parents of Nick's students are predominantly middle class: there are four other clubs within ten miles of Nordic which offer preschool lessons at significantly cheaper cost. One gym, located five miles away, charges half as much. There does not seem to be a great deal of intergenerational closure

among the preschool parents. With the exception of parents who knew one another prior to the start of their child's class, none appear to become friends during the hour each week they spend in the gym.

The Physical and Temporal Structure of the Preschool Gymnastics Class

Just as Mrs. Marshall organizes the physical layout of her classroom and plans her daily schedule mindful of the likely differences between what her students will know upon beginning preschool, and what they are expected to know by preschool's completion, Nordic Gymnastics' Director of Preschool Programming, Nick Richeson, takes similar factors into account when preparing for his gymnastics class. Nick has been coaching preschoolers as well as older children in the recreational program at Nordic gymnastics for 10 years. As the Director of the Preschool and Recreational Programs, Nick is in charge of ordering, setting up, and maintaining the equipment in the preschool area. He is also primarily responsible for creating the students' evaluation forms: a 40-item checklist of developmentally appropriate milestones for 3-year-olds, another for 4-year-olds, and another for 5-year-olds. Given his leadership role, Nick also determines the temporal structure of each 45-minute preschool class and creates the weekly agenda for the preschool lessons taught by all the other instructors.

Each preschool class consists of four ten-minute segments. In the first segment, children engage in warm-up stretches and movement. The subsequent three segments each take place on a different "event," roughly corresponding to bars, floor exercise, and trampoline. During the second ten-minute segment, the children head to a set of bar "stations" involving hanging, swinging, and supporting themselves on various bars and associated apparatuses. This portion of the workout is considered a station activity

because the children remain at their designated station until their coach instructs them to progress to the next activity in the circle. In the third ten-minute segment, children follow a “circuit” of floor-exercise activities arranged in a circular pattern. This activity is considered a circuit because the children perform each exercise once, and then immediately proceed to the next station without waiting to be told to move on. Fourth, the children practice a trampoline circuit in which they cycle from one station to the next along the surface of the tumble track, a 40-foot long, two-foot high trampoline, and then go through an obstacle course of activities on their way back. After the children have completed their warm-up and each of the three events, they have a dismissal routine which they complete before leaving.

First Day of MightyTots

Parents who walk into Nordic’s expansive lobby are greeted by front desk staff and directed to the viewing area. There, they join families in plush leather couches who watch their children practice through a wall of windows. The gym is divided unequally into two sides, and parents have a clear view of the smaller one on the left – the recreational area. Despite this unimpeded view, the lobby is regularly full of people tuning out the gymnastics all together. Siblings wait sprawled on the floor, plugged into devices charging in wall outlets. A big-screen TV mounted about 10 feet high, above the windows, is often tuned to the news or professional sports events. Some families spend so much time at Nordic that their other children eat meals and do their homework at indoor picnic-style tables in the lobby. A concession stand supplies team kids on “Break” with mainly unhealthy options ranging from Cheetos to caffeinated sports drinks like Monster, and a pro shop displays leotards, spandex shorts, and grips from doll-sized to adult.

During the daytime classes, however, Nick's preschoolers and their parents have the entire lobby and almost the entire gym to themselves. If you follow Nick's line of preschoolers through doors into the gym, you will see that recreational classes share neither equipment nor floor space with the team. The smaller, recreational area is bounded by a "highway" of duct tape arrows indicating the safest walking route through the clearly separated events. There are organized stacks of clean, geometrically shaped mats available at each. The equipment is chalk-free, diminutive, and safe-looking, with the highest bars less than 5 feet off the ground and heavily matted, and the highest beams standing about a foot tall. There is no foam pit and the two trampolines are older ones with black beds that are less-bouncy than the large, white, in-ground ones on the team side of the gym. While this equipment is by no means cheap or easy to move, it costs far less and takes up a lot less space than the team equipment.

From inside the gym the team area which is difficult to see from the lobby becomes visible. Its boundary with the recreational area is marked by eight high beams in parallel array. Beyond the beams, the two in-ground trampolines with rectangular beds regularly launch athletes skyward. Though the full-time coaching staff vacuum every day, a cloud of chalk envelops the eight full sets of women's uneven bars distributed over foam pits, resi pits, and competition-style landing mats. Many sets of bars have the newest, most expensive rails. One such set is never adjusted from the standard international setting; it must always be ready for the use of the two current Elite gymnasts. Though male and female team athletes combined comprise less than a quarter of all enrolled participants, the equipment to which they have nearly exclusive rights takes up most of the space in the gym. Only on special occasions—such as the last week

in the session, or on bring a buddy day—are recreational or preschool athletes allowed to take turns on the trampolines or to jump into the foam pit. Open gyms—90-minute blocks of supervised, unstructured play on all the equipment—which are open to kids of all ages and at a discounted rate for those enrolled in classes, are held outside of regular team practice hours, typically from 8:30-10:00 at night.

The Social Structure of Gymnastics Class: Daily Routines, Behavioral Norms, Interaction Patterns

On a springtime Tuesday afternoon, the children are ushered into the gym by Coach Nick, who begin the warm up, stretching, and movement section of the workout. He directs them to choose a flat foam square from a multi-colored stack by the door. Then the children follow him along the pathway to the preschool area in front of the lobby windows and make a circle. Each child puts his or her square down and stands on it. Nick leads them through a series of stretches, describing each position as an object or animal and each motion as an activity that is familiar to the children. During this time, Nick chats with the children who, prompted by the familiarity of the topics introduced, share their experiences and opinions about them. After stretching, Nick lines all the children up by the wall and leads them through a series of relays involving different kinds of motion. After that, the children walk over to a red line on the carpet, place their squares atop it, and sit down to await instructions on the first event.

The first gymnastics event that the children practice during class is bars. In the bar area, there is a jungle gym-type apparatus permanently installed, with four pieces of diminutive equipment jutting out perpendicular to one another from a central point. Pointing toward the lobby, there is a tiny set of parallel bars. Proceeding clockwise 90

degrees to the next station, parallel to the lobby wall, there is a miniature ring tower. Pointing away from the lobby, there is a high bar. Finally, between the high bar and the parallel bars, and pointing away from the ring tower, there is a small set of uneven parallel bars. While these pieces of equipment are fixed, Nick changes them from week to week, for example, by raising or lowering different bars, by trading the rings for a tiny trapeze, or by suspending a tire swing or a rope from the high bar. Sometimes, the physical apparatus for a station will not change from week to week, but the activity to be performed on the station will. For example, on the rings, Nick may ask the children to hang with their legs in a straddle one week, swing back and forth the next week, and flex their biceps for a chin hang the third. Nick will typically supplement the four fixed stations with one or two more, depending on the attention span of the group he is working with. He might place a small wedge-shaped mat vertically against the wall, so that children can perform a “Spiderman handstand” by walking their feet up it with their hands on the floor.

After the bar stations, the children rotate to the floor exercise circuit. The floor area consists of a circular path of different pieces of equipment that the children use as implements for rolling, balancing, and jumping. Though the circle itself is always located in the same place, the apparatuses and the activities performed on them change from week to week. Often, the floor circuit will include a rug with hopscotch numbers painted on it, a wooden six-rung ladder with round dowels laid flat, a small round trampoline, a low beam, a mat shaped like a barrel, and a flat mat with hand and feet prints arrayed to cue children to attempt a cartwheel. As with bars, the same floor exercise equipment is often used for different activities from week to week, for instance,

as children will variously bear crawl atop the rungs of the ladder, hop in the holes between the rungs, or go sideways with hands on one side rail and feet on the other.

When the children finish their floor exercise circuit, they take their squares over to the tumble track area and await directions for the trampoline circuit. The trampoline circuit contains the least fixed equipment of the three stations, as only the tumble track is consistent throughout the session. Sometimes, Nick will place a tug-of-war rope snake-like along the tumble track so that the children variously have to bounce slalom over or carefully walk atop the serpentine curves. After that, he may draw a circle in which the children are to jump and create different body positions in the air: piking their legs straight in front of them, tucking them up to their chest, or straddling them wide. At the end of the tumble track, Nick usually creates a spotted station. He may use an eight-inch thick crash mat, which the children put their hands on while bouncing their feet up behind them in a “donkey kick;” he may put a “PacMan” mat—a cylindrical mat with what appears to be a bite taken out of it—for the children to slide over prone into a forward roll; or he may make a slide out of a wedge-shaped mat for the children to log roll down. On these stations which generally introduce skills that the children have never tried or have yet to master, Nick manually positions the children to ensure they understand the correct body shapes and motions to use.

When the children finish their trampoline circuit, they are instructed to retrieve their squares from the mat at the beginning of the tumble track and make a line behind Nick. They follow him to the door to the gym, where they return their squares to the stack. After this, the children sit “by the stop sign” at the edge of the floor in a line. Nick instructs them to put their hands on top of their head, palms down. Then he goes down

the line and stamps the back of each child's hand with a gymnastics-related stamp. After they receive their stamp, they are free to go back into the lobby to find their parents.

Comparison

In this chapter, I have compared two sites of early learning where many preschoolers spend their time: a preschool classroom at St. Cecilia School and a preschool gymnastics class at a private club called Nordic Gymnastics. For each site, I have described the physical setting, noting the material resources of each organization and their patrons. I have also illustrated what happens on a typical day in Mrs. Marshall's classroom and Nick's gymnastics class, making note of how the instructors structure the time and space of the learning environment. Finally, I have shown, in each site, how Mrs. Marshall and Nick have created behavioral expectations, which I will argue, enable them to evaluate and classify the children they instruct.

As evidenced by the above descriptions, there are differences in the physical, temporal, and social structures of preschool and preschool gymnastics classes. In preschool, the children practice reading their name on their apples and listening to stories, whereas in gymnastics the children review their animals by acting like them. Plus, for instance, there is more emphasis on social interactions in preschool than in gymnastics. In preschool, the children are permitted more free time throughout the day to interact with one another around less-structured activities. Gymnastics, because it is only 45 minutes long, remains structured the entire time. Still, gymnasts are expected to take turns participating verbally while stretching in a circle, to share equipment, like desirably colored carpet squares, and to respect one another's personal space. There is more emphasis on physical control in gymnastics, but also often more latitude for what

constitutes “controlled.” These distinct practices lead to corresponding differences in how teachers and coaches think about student difference.

Yet, in gymnastics and preschool, though the structures differ, that there is a structure and that children must learn it first is similar. Though children are given some opportunities to choose their own activities in both learning sites, the vast majority of their class time is spent following directions. Indeed, it is important to note that the structure of preschool is a crucial part of the content of preschool; it constitutes a huge part of what children are expected to learn. By consistently expecting the children to engage in specific activities when in specific locations at particular times throughout the class, both Nick and Mrs. Marshall foster the students’ cognitive construction of a background framework within which to organize the learning that occurs in each space.

In both early learning environments, the instructors have set up a physical, temporal, and social structure that remains consistent throughout the school year and gymnastics session. This structure requires kids to do things that are hard for them that have nothing to do with academic or athletic content. Before kids are expected to know their ABCs or how to tuck and roll, they are expected to do things like wait their turn to do fun activities; listen to, understand, and follow rules and directions; wait their turn to speak; ask for help; regulate their emotions; repeatedly try on learning tasks that are challenging for them; persist despite frustration and sometimes boredom; manage their attention, and behave in a way that demonstrates to onlookers that their attention is appropriately engaged. As we will see, teachers prioritize teaching this structure, because doing so establishes shared expectations and epistemological assumptions (about what constitutes knowledge, learning, and how to learn) which, as a common language, act to

dramatically improve the efficiency of subsequent transmission of knowledge. For instructors under pressure to maximize student learning, such efficiency is essential, and mandates the priority of teaching structure to teaching “content” proper.

As children interact within the highly structured environments of the preschool classroom and the preschool gym, teachers and coaches alike assess how well they are able to follow along. We will see in the next chapters that this assessment forms the basis for their initial decisions regarding student categorization and instruction.

Chapter 3

Daily Routine and How Teachers Use it to Assess and Categorize Students

“Smart is only a construct of correspondence between one’s abilities, one’s environment, and one’s moment in history.” (Cottom 2019:27).

Upon beginning classes in school or sports, children learn the expectations for their conduct through direct instruction, observing classmates, and trial and error. As this happens, teachers and coaches observe their behavior and make judgements about each child’s characteristics as learners. Do they have strong skills in the content area? Can they process information quickly? Do they respect the teacher and get along well with their peers? After years of observing many cohorts of students, both Coach Nick and Mrs. Marshall have developed a sense of the range of social behaviors and content-area abilities demonstrated by most preschool-aged children, and which they consider “normal” preschool behavior.

As I will show here, the class structures described in the previous chapter reflect Mrs. Marshall and Nick’s assumptions about initial child ability and their goals for child progress with regard to social and content area objectives. Both instructors create classroom environments with these parameters in mind by designing the physical layout of their classrooms, planning the temporal division of the class time into manageable increments, and prescribing interaction rituals and rules of conduct. For instance, the duration of each activity reflects the instructors’ expectations regarding how long most children will be able to attend to a task. The difficulty of the tasks the instructors prescribe reflects their anticipation that children will be able to do certain things on their own but will need help with others. The amount and nature of peer social interaction

required of an activity reflects instructors' expectations for the children's ability to communicate, share, and resolve conflict. Finally, classroom rules reflect instructors' attempts to forestall what they have come to view as natural behavioral tendencies of children with the potential to detract from the quality of the learning environment. Moreover, that the classes are structured at all is itself a product of instructor choice and grounded in assumptions about what children are like upon school entry and how they should become through the experience of attending preschool.

In this chapter, I draw on both interview and observational data to identify which child behaviors instructors categorize as falling within a "normal" range, and which behaviors are atypical. In the first half, I use interview data to explore how Mrs. Marshall and Nick think about what their students should know and be able to do upon beginning preschool, and their goals for what they want the children to learn in their class. I probe them each to learn about their previous experiences with preschool-aged children and how they draw upon these experiences when thinking about what counts as socially typical behavior. Then I compare how these judgements differ across the two sites. In the latter half of this chapter, I use ethnographic observations of Mrs. Marshall's classroom to illustrate how she implements the temporal, physical, and social class structure in teaching the students her expectations for their conduct. Drawing on observations from early in the school year, I describe the child behaviors she attends to, her responses to those behaviors, and the methods she uses to teach the behaviors she considers appropriate in three recurring classroom social contexts.

Part 1: Instructor Expectations for Students Guide Structure Design

In this section, I first describe how Mrs. Marshall and Nick describe the skills and abilities they expect preschool children to demonstrate upon beginning class. This knowledge stems from years of teaching experience, as both Mrs. Marshall and Nick have interacted with hundreds of children around the preschool-level content. For both instructors, assumptions about “normal” preschool behavior influence what and how they teach. Specifically, beliefs about the children’s prior knowledge guide their choice of content to introduce first, and their beliefs about how quickly children usually learn guide the pace of instruction. Second, I illustrate how Mrs. Marshall and Nick describe their learning objectives for their preschool students. These goals for student learning influence what the instructors value and pay attention to when instructing and evaluating their students.

St. Cecilia

Mrs. Marshall draws on background information from a number of sources when initially evaluating the children in her class. An important part of her understanding regards the knowledge and skills she expects students to have. Mrs. Marshall explains the academic and social skills that most preschoolers begin school with as follows:

Usually, before they come to preschool, by age three, the majority of them know all their colors. They might not know gray. And of course they're not gonna know beige, or maybe not even brown. But they basically know, pink purple red orange. The colors of the rainbow. I'll get a couple who don't out of 18, but I would say, like 90% will know all their colors. They'll know their basic shapes, circle star heart. Those three, um, for sure most kids will know by three. Um, square, triangle, and rectangle, and octagon...those are the... Some of them, half will maybe know all of those, and half won't. What else?

They know animals, they know the sounds. I think that's kind of a more innate thing by then. Now, maybe children who aren't read to, like maybe

some of them I had in LA might not know a whole variety of animals, like at the zoo, and what their sounds might be. But at least they'd know dog, cat, duck.

A lot of them still don't know how to share. A couple probably do because they've got siblings. But sharing is huge. Waiting to be patient, waiting your turn. How to use the words to ask for something. If they want something or to play with something.

When they start, they should be able to count to 5. And by the end of the year, they should for sure be able to count to 10, and by pre-k, by the end of pre-k, they should be able to count to 20.

I would say the majority of the kids when they first start kindergarten know the ABCs. They can sing the song. Especially if you sing it with them.

Mrs. Marshall notes that children will begin preschool knowing some of their colors, shapes, and animals, as well as how to count to 5. Most will not know how to share, take turns, or use their words to ask for something. Over the course of the year, they will build on these existing skills.

Mrs. Marshall also recognizes that not all children do equally well with structure. Reflecting on her own decisions about how to structure her class, she compares her teaching philosophy which favors play-based learning to the Montessori teaching philosophy. In making the comparison, she draws upon the background knowledge she gained while teaching at two Montessori schools as well as her reflections as the parent of a child attending a Montessori school.

Well, my teaching philosophy is that every child learns differently. I'm really strong on that, that I feel like, you can't be rigid in one direct area. That's one of the reasons why we ended up pulling our daughter from the Montessori school. It was not her learning style. I mean, I think parents just have to be very conscious about what works for their child and what doesn't. I think some children need more structure, some children don't.

I think, [at] Montessori [it] is your choice on what you choose to do. Which I think is great, for [doing what] you want, for children's special interests. But as they get older, they also need to start doing things that they might not be

interested in. Like Math, or math concepts, or those kinds of things. Or if they don't like to read or write. Well, eventually, you have to do that. Right?

But I think in terms of preschool, age, I think the, uh, play-based learning is probably more of a little bit of a balance between a Montessori program, or maybe a preschool that is more academic. That's what I feel like the play-based is more in between. You can have that free-play and the interest of the, and build on the children's interest, but you can also incorporate more of the academic stuff here and there while they play. So that's my philosophy. I think play-based is great. I mean you can still do letter of the week, and you can still teach top-to-bottom, for writing letters. With songs.

Mrs. Marshall and her assistant Mrs. Jill also highly value social learning.

As a result, they prioritize the children's social development by building opportunities to practice social skills into the curriculum.

Mrs. Jill: That play-based learning is just kind of phenomenal. I think the most important thing, 'cause kids do learn at different rates and different styles, but I think to be successful, to be ready to learn, I really believe that that social component is the most vital thing. It sets them up, they can always get caught up cognitively, with the cognitive skills, and things like that, you know the other stuff, but you know, that social is so important.

Mrs. Marshall: I agree with that.

Mrs. Jill: And they learn so much through play. Getting along. And you know, all that is just so important. And I see kids come through St. Cecilia that are like, totally, like they'll be aggressive or aversive to other children, or they'll be withdrawn, and if they continue, you know, throughout the year, they come out of that. You know, I've just seen, just miracles. Just kids, and it sets them up for life to be successful. To be able to learn, 'cause if you're unhappy and you have no friends, then how can you even? And those other kids come in... And then, you know, I think all that play is part of that early literacy.

Mrs. Marshall: I agree, and also, with the sense of why I think play-based is a little bit better than Montessori on that. Montessori is more, like I said, rigid, and independent. Yeah, they really work, basically a lot of the times alone. But they're learning, occasionally, they can work with a partner on stuff. But they're really not working as a group a lot of times. It's a little bit more individual, and maybe with a partner. And so they really also don't have that free play and exploring around the room, a lot of different things in the classroom. You know when you first come in at three, you're only shown like four pieces of work that you can do in the classroom. But then as time goes on, they'll incorporate one more thing in the classroom. As time goes on, they'll incorporate one more activity.

Mrs. Jill: It's very good at promoting that independent learning. You're learning on your own.

Mrs. Marshall: They call it like a "Job." Right? Here's your job. What job are you going to choose today? What job are you going to start with today?

Mrs. Jill: Independent thinking.

Mrs. Marshall: Yes. Yes. And I don't feel like they get that social interaction of how to share. Taking turns. Problem solving with a conflict.

Mrs. Jill: Yes, with conflict-resolution. It's so vital!

Mrs. Marshall: I don't know if they get much of that conflict resolution as they have in play-based. You'll get that here and there, but it's not as present.

Here, Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill explain why they both value social skills development. They provide examples of how they incorporate opportunities for the students to practice interpersonal skills into the curriculum. Mrs. Marshall notes that, unlike Montessori, where children are expected to complete “jobs,” or learning tasks, primarily independently, she tries to provide her students with more social interaction and a broader variety of tasks. By varying the activities available more frequently, and allowing the children “play time” in which to choose which to engage in and with whom, she hopes they will learn how to share, take turns, and solve problems, and resolve peer conflicts.

Mrs. Marshall explains how she can tell when a student may have needs that differ from those of their classmates:

“So really, it's just kind of knowing through teaching, and you just instinctively know. Like, I say, like I'm not a special ed teacher, so I can't diagnose a lot of these things. But I don't, I think teachers SHOULD, have to be, before they graduate, now have to take a semester or a year on special ed. Of what the diagnoses are, what their symptoms are, what's the protocol to help children. What's the system? At least in every state where you get your degree, what is the protocol? Right? How do you start setting up the flags, red flags, so...

“And so I just think that, yeah. With those diagnoses, I'd like to know what they are. All I can just go with is like my gut, and say something is not right here.”

She recalls a specific student about whom she felt this way. “Well, one parent, we sent them to Frasier which is another early child special program, but you have to pay money. It's not... so they went there, and they diagnosed him as being on the spectrum and something else. I can't remember what the diagnosis was, but we weren't shocked. He would do the hand flapping, he would do the, wanted a lot of the combinations. We had combinations for him. Hard with transitions. And grandma took care of him a lot. Grandma would drop off, pick

up, and [she] also had the younger brother. She just looked like, some days, she just looked like she was just hanging on by a string by the time she got him to school. I was just like, "Oh you poor thing." And that doesn't help. When you have an older grandma taking care of a baby and him... How are those boundaries? Right?"

I nod, and say, "For sure."

She continues, "Not a lot of regulation going on there. She's just trying to survive. But yeah, he got help. And I don't know if he's continuing with help, but he is now continuing with public school. And he is now in kindergarten.... I'm sure he's mainstreamed with a para. And I bet he can be one of those who can get phased out. Eventually I think he can eventually be phased out."

In the example she provides of a student who was eventually diagnosed as having an ASD, Mrs. Marshall identifies several of the behavioral indicators which prompted her to recommend his evaluation. He engaged in repetitive motions such as hand flapping, felt compelled to repeat sequences of actions if not performed in the correct order, and experienced difficulty transitioning from one class activity to the next. Having interacted with many children in her years of teaching, Mrs. Marshall recognized these behaviors as atypical of normative preschooler behavior, and as more common among children with ASDs. Her grandmother, lacking this extensive experience interacting with preschool-aged children, did not recognize these symptoms.

Because of this, when Mrs. Marshall recognized that her student's behavior was atypical, she was quick to recommend that his grandmother bring up these observations with his pediatrician, so that the child could be tested for special needs services if it is deemed appropriate. Mrs. Marshall's was motivated to act quickly because the formal educational process of qualifying for special needs services can take quite a while, and in the meantime, the child was not entitled to the necessary accommodations. In this case, the early diagnosis of her student's ASD was effective in securing the accommodation of

having a one-on-one paraprofessional aide in kindergarten. She regards the prognosis of eventually being able to “phase” the student “out” of accommodations as a success.

Nordic

Nick likewise draws on his experiential knowledge when initially assessing the skills and abilities of the children in his classes. His expectations for what children should be able to know and do upon beginning preschool gymnastics, like Mrs. Marshall’s, are quite modest.

Nick: My expectations are very, very low. I expect you to be able to walk, and I expect you to be potty trained. And that is it. That’s literally it. Because I have seen the opposite of that already. Those are the only things that I expect you to be able to do by yourself; I will teach everything else.

Amy: Is there like maybe a slightly higher bar that you think that most kids come in being able to do?

Nick: It depends whether or not they have already been through kindergarten. So, cause MightyTots 5 implies that they are not in kindergarten; Shooting Stars implies that they are in kindergarten. So if they are in kindergarten, I expect them to already be able to follow directions, to listen when your teacher is speaking, and to actively try to do what you're asked to do. Whereas with a preschooler, it's more, can you follow with the group? And can you interact with me without shutting down? And that's about it.

Amy: Have you had a lot of kids who've shut down?

Nick: A fair number. And that's usually just if they, how situationally crazy it is. If it's really really busy and you're brand new, you're more likely to be overwhelmed than if it's really quiet. It is overwhelming.

Nick notes that he expects almost all children to be able to walk and be potty trained by age 3, and that the rare individuals who have begun his class without those abilities have been outliers. Beyond that, he expects 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old preschoolers to be able to follow along with the group and to be able to interact with the teacher without shutting down. 5-year-old kindergartners in the Shooting Stars class, in addition to being

able to follow along with the class, should demonstrate active listening to the teacher and direction-following skills. He also alludes to the fact that the context of the learning environment impacts children's ability to perform these basic skills. Because the preschool area is located within a much bigger gymnasium, there are times—Tuesday evenings in particular—when dozens of much bigger athletes are concurrently in attendance. At such times, the gym can be a circus of noise and distraction.

To keep children on-task and engaging with the system, Nick uses a variety of classroom management techniques.

Nick: I try to maximize what they do right and minimize what they do wrong. So for any poor behavior, you always want to state what they are doing, and then what you do want them to do. Not just don't do that, it's, "I need you to do this." "That is incorrect, I need you to do this." Cause if you just tell them not to do it, that's all they think of. They don't... You want to put the idea in your head of what they shouldn't be doing. And then...your expectations, but you pretty much don't... you try to get it out before they can do it, so...

Amy: Oh, so like you anticipate their misbehavior before it even happens?

Nick: Yes. Mmmhmm. So, like explaining directions before it can happen. And telling them what they should do before it would happen. Setting clear expectations before you start. As soon as we go through the door, it's walk and follow me. The expectation's already set. I say to sit down before they sit down. I say make a circle before we make a circle. So it's getting it all out before they can do it, so they are always following, and they don't have an opportunity to do anything other than follow. You always want to stay one step ahead. They should always be trying to catch up to what you're doing.

By keeping children actively employed in the activities prescribed by the curriculum, Nick prevents them from having idle time in which to engage in off-task behaviors. As a result, Nick, like Mrs. Marshall, views structure as important for teaching preschoolers. To Nick, “systematizing” kids is important given the temptation for children to be distracted or overwhelmed by the chaotic gym environment. A predictable

daily sequence of activity is a powerful aegis: in addition to keeping preschoolers' focus off the potentially interesting or intimidating older children, "the system" also helps them to focus on their own work. As Nick puts it, "It's just generally a rule of, air quotes, "follow the system." The system was there to teach you, so if you try to go around the system, you're only hurting yourself. If you try to circumvent the system, you're only hurting yourself. 'Cause the system is already set up for your greatest success."

The value Nick places on structure stems not only from the necessity of maintaining an orderly classroom in a chaotic environment, but also from his instructional goals. He hopes to inculcate in the children a skill set that he believes will transfer to other learning environments, and he sees structured repetition as the way to most effectively achieve that goal. In explaining the most important thing children learn from taking preschool gymnastics, Nick focuses on the intrinsic. He lists:

Nick: You're in charge of yourself. So, all of your success is based on you, and all of your failure is based on you. So, if you want to be good at something, you need to choose to be good at something. If you choose to fail, you will fail. Hard work. Not to see an end goal. You know, I need to work at this to get better at that. To kind of break things down. Just a general positive feeling, well I worked hard at something and now I see something of it. See success. There is something I couldn't do before. I listened, I worked hard, and now I can do something. So... basically that. Whether it applies to a skill, or to something that I learned at school, or another activity. Individual accountability.

Amy: Anything else that's kind of on the intrinsic end?

Nick: It's fun to do a cartwheel?! It's something fun that they can show off. Either to do something that your friends can't do, or to do something that their friends can. Either to keep up, or to separate themselves out.

Nick hopes to facilitate the children's development of a number of learning skills that transfer beyond an athletic setting. His emphasis on cultivating an internal locus of control, developing work ethic, persistence, and passion for the activity, are commonly

referred to under the rubric of “grit” (Duckworth 2016). In both his testimony and his instruction, he is truly an apostle of the growth mindset: when instructing the children, he focuses almost exclusively on the process of learning, as opposed to the outcome. Nick’s system, carefully calibrated to achieve these motivational objectives, is particularly good at identifying children whose behavior deviates from what he perceives as typical for preschool children.

Given his teaching objectives and expectations developed over years of interacting with preschoolers in a learning environment full of distractions, Nick, along with his colleague Daniel, co-authored a preschool curriculum that progresses from basic preschool competencies to more advanced content area and social skills. Their curriculum prescribes the spatial set-up of equipment, and the activities to be performed on it by each age group, for each week of the eight-week session. Nick and Daniel also created an accompanying checklist of developmental milestones for Nordic’s preschool coaches to use to evaluate each child’s progress. Daniel describes the logic of the preschool curriculum:

For our preschoolers, Nick and I actually sat down for almost two or three weeks and we did the preschool curriculum. It actually, we're really, I don't want to say proud of it, but it actually took a long time because there's five different categories of work. There's Trampoline Skills, Developmental Skills, Apparatus Skills, Tumbling Skills, and Listening & Directions. They're all developmental milestones for this age group.

Daniel presents me with a poster divided into five sections devoted to the categories he listed. Underneath each category heading, there are eight items to be checked, for a total of 40. For instance, under *Listening & Directions*, which is listed first, above the place where students are encouraged, “Place a photo of me and my coach

here,” the eight items to be checked off include: 1.) understands corrections with a demonstration, 2.) understands when appropriate to talk and listen, 3.) has full conversations with other kids, 4.) can share and take turns without reminders, 5.) doesn’t argue about small discrepancies, 6.) patiently waits to talk while others are talking, 7.) can be sent to demonstrate stations for others, and 8.) is comfortable being leader of stations or circuit. Whereas the other four categories – and 32 other skills – describe physical actions like “little pike jump” or “glide swings on barrel with regrip,” the entire *Listening & Direction* category overlaps with skills cultivated by Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill in preschool.

While not expressly designed to diagnose disabilities, Nick and Daniel’s curriculum and its corresponding checklist enable coaches to identify child behaviors that deviate from those typical of children their age. Discussing a similar gatekeeping process at Nordic, Daniel explains, that he too has been the first one to identify a child’s special needs.

And only a couple times has it happened, but these are what you should be doing at this age. If you still can't walk backwards at 2, this is kind of a problem, actually. Or, you're unable to look at your peers in the eyes, that sort of thing. So we actually have all these things that, you can't jump with two feet, well, to jump with two feet is actually really hard, but if you're 4 and 5 and you still can't jump with two feet, is there low muscle tone problems? is there muscle coordination? you know, is there other kind of stuff? So you can kind of catch these skills sooner, you can tell the parents, too. ...As we're going through the skills, you still can't roll sideways. Is there a bilateral coordination problem? is there any, like, brain stuff that we need to know about?

So a couple times, we have actually caught kids that have mild autism or other things like that, because parents don't realize. It's their first-born kid, it's your kid, you love your kid.

As Daniel alludes, as children engage in the regular activities expected of a preschool gymnastics class, instructors have many opportunities to observe their behavior. Since a number of the exercises involved put developmental milestones on display, it is apparent which children have met them and which have not. Daniel gives me an example of one particular child, whom I'll call Edmund, whose behavior recently stood out.

*However, Edmund **must** have the blue square. Without that, he's unable to do things. It's like a problem, you should [be able to] console him, move on, distract, tell him. I mean, as a three-year-old, that shouldn't be a big factor. But Edmund could not function without that square. Okay. One week, cause the other kid had it. Trade squares, it's not a big problem. Three weeks in a row it's the same thing. Fourth week, I took away the square; it wasn't even an option at all. He could not enter the gym without having that square. Not that someone else had the square, it just wasn't there.*

I told the parents, I'm like, "Does he have things at home that he's really quirky about?" She goes, "Yeah, his shoes face this direction, you know, this that sort of thing."

"You know, those aren't typical behaviors. See what the pediatrician says about all this."

As Daniel explains, Edmund's parents had noticed his 'quirky' behavior, but had not realized that it was atypical among children his age. Only when Daniel probed them further to find out if the tantrums and persistent difficulty he experienced sharing with other children in the gym was something that happened at home, did Edmund's parents learn that it was not typical. Daniel, then was able to recommend they consult with their pediatrician to learn more.

Daniel provides another several examples of children whose health issues came to light when he observed their behavior in gymnastics class.

But then again, low muscle tone is a factor we can catch too. Visual impairment as well, cause some kids don't realize they have bad eyesight. She's terrified to jump to the bar. The bar's not scary. She can reach it, but she doesn't see it, so that trust is not there. She's unable to do that, however, with your help, she trusts you. But without, she won't.

So a couple factors, that kind of stuff, so we can kind of catch those things early on because if you're a younger parent, or a first-born's parent, you don't know other kids, you don't know what's going on. So you think your kid's...typical... but they can't see.

So I had one kid who was, a boy, who was crazy good. I didn't think he had bad eyes. But he kept, you know, he would jump off things, and he would miss things. And I'm like, "Well, let me know what his eye doctor says," or whatever.

[Turns out,] he has horrible vision. No one had any idea, [they thought] he was just that crazy. When then he got glasses, he was tearin' it apart, and he could see what he was doing now. He was flipping, he completed his full and a half, he was flipping, he was doing dive rolls, he was doing cartwheels this, he was flying off the bars.... So, I can't even imagine what his world was beforehand— "Oh, he keeps jumping to the mat, but he keeps missing the mat. He's not getting hurt, but it's like, it's not like he just hardly missed that mat."

So things like that we can kind of catch too, which is nice. So, the curriculum for the preschoolers is set for identifying those milestones.

Here, Daniel provides numerous examples of preschool gymnasts' behaviors which stood out to him as atypical. These included ASD symptoms like those described by Mrs. Marshall. To illustrate this type of red-flag behavior, David provides the concrete examples of a student who could not function without having the blue square, and required his shoes to face a certain direction at home. Like Mrs. Marshall, he also mentions low muscle tone as a possible indicator that a child may be developing atypically. Additionally, he recalls experiences of helping to identify preschoolers' bilateral coordination and vision problems.

Comparison

In this section, I have shown how Mrs. Marshall and Nick describe the skills and abilities they expect preschoolers to begin school with, and the skills and abilities they regard as most important for children to develop in their preschool class. Regarding their expectations for initial child abilities and skills, they have a lot in common. They share assumptions that children will come in unprepared to navigate a social environment and accordingly structure their classes to teach basic skills like sharing, waiting for one's turn, listening, and following along. They share assumptions that children will not know how to do more than the most rudimentary skills in the content area. Whereas in preschool, they might be able to count to five and recognize a few animals and colors, in preschool gymnastics, they might be able to run and jump on two feet. Accordingly, both Mrs. Marshall and Nick order their curriculum to help children move from the most basic of skills toward mastery of the course's objectives.

While their content area goals for the children obviously diverge, Mrs. Marshall and Coach Nick largely agree on the importance of social skills. Both value skills like sharing, waiting for one's turn, listening, and following along, and they make a point of reinforcing them repeatedly by building them in to the class structure. Their goals diverge, however, with respect to the relative importance of some other social skills. On the one hand, Mrs. Marshall highly values interactional skills like cooperation, problem solving, and conflict resolution, and accordingly she makes available numerous opportunities for children to work and play together. She and Mrs. Jill see these skills as important in making friends and feeling accepted and comfortable in a learning environment. These things in turn, enable children to focus on learning. On the other,

Nick prioritizes social skills doing as instructed by the coach, not arguing over small discrepancies, and being able to demonstrate stations in a leadership role. In this sense, he prioritizes social skills that are important for hierarchical, rather than peer, relationships. But like Mrs. Marshall, Nick also sees these skills as critically important for learning. By consistently following directions and working on the tasks as instructed, children make noticeable progress toward mastery of the content area skills. This, in turn, helps them build a sense of self-efficacy that helps them feel confident in approaching other tasks that may appear daunting at first.

Part 2: Daily Routine – Learning Attention Norms and Behaviors

Next we turn to an in-depth examination of how Mrs. Marshall puts into practice the physical, temporal, and social structures she has devised to facilitate her preschoolers' learning and development. In analyzing my field notes, I identified three types of social contexts that Mrs. Marshall teaches her students how to navigate. Each social context recurs regularly within the structure of each school day, in specific places and at specific times, and is governed by a set of characteristic social norms and expected behaviors. I distinguish these three social contexts by what the children are primarily supposed to be focusing on during each, because, in analyzing my field notes, I recognized that Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill spent a great deal of time and energy ensuring that the students were paying attention to the appropriate stimuli in the classroom. Consequently, in describing their expectations for how children should behave, I pay specific attention to the directives they give students regarding the paying and seeking of attention. From these directives, I infer the attention norms Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill consider socially

appropriate for the classroom as well as the spectrum of concrete behaviors they regard as in compliance with and in violation of those norms.

In preschool, attention norms and behaviors vary in three types of classroom social contexts: task attention contexts, collective attention contexts, and individualized attention contexts. Each context is governed by a distinct set of social norms prescribing proper proportions and sequences of attention-paying and -receiving. Each context also has distinct rules governing the seeking of attention—specifically, who is allowed to seek attention from whom and when as well as how they are expected to signal this desire. The norms governing each of the three classroom social contexts mandate that the corresponding type of attention—task, collective, or individualized—predominate over the others. Here, I describe each type of attention⁷ and the social contexts requiring its use, followed by examples of each from my field work.

First, *task attention* is used when an individual pays attention to learning new content, practicing a skill, creating a project, or working toward a goal. It often includes some degree of metacognition, as children consciously try to improve their ability to perform the task they're engaged in. In the classroom, task attention contexts such as

⁷ Though I describe the forms of attention as analytically distinct, they may in fact be more difficult to categorize in practice. In any given moment, a form of attention may be perceived differently by different people. For example, when Mrs. Marshall provides a student with individualized attention, from the point of view of the students' classmates, Mrs. Marshall may also be providing her with the *collective attention* of the entire class. This is because the other students have internalized the Circle Time norm of following Mrs. Marshall's gaze, and attending to what she focuses on. In the same way, they follow her example in devoting *task attention* to the pictures and content of the lesson. They simultaneously provide their *collective attention* to her as the speaker along with their *task attention* to learning the concepts introduced and the vocabulary to express them. Because teachers and students are mindful of the multiple meanings of their attention, their strategies for exchanging it are often complex.

Arrival Time, Table Time, and Snack Time demand that individuals spend the majority of their time focused on a task which is often selected by the student from among a set of prearranged choices. Within task attention contexts, children are allowed to seek attention from peers or from the teacher by going up to them and speaking in quiet voices, but these exchanges are expected to be brief, and are often initiated to facilitate performance of the task. Though engaging one's *task attention* is not always a deliberately social act, it is interpreted by others as socially meaningful. Students will sometimes engage in task attention behaviors to earn their teacher's praise for being on-task; sometimes they will use them to avoid a conflict or the anxiety of joining in creative play with peers. Frequently, the task attention a child devotes to playing with a particular toy is noticed by her classmates, who take an interest in that item as well. In a sense, the child's task attention cathects the item in question with the value of its chosen-ness, often rendering it the object of competition among other children to invest their own attention in.

Second, *collective attention* is used by an individual when providing attention to or seeking attention from a group of others. In collective attention contexts such as Circle Time, Music Class, and Story Time, children are expected to quietly attend to the speaker at the front of the group and refrain from calling attention to oneself and from breaking others' concentration on the speaker. When the speaker has finished, children are allowed to signal their desire for attention by raising a quiet hand. When solicited by the speaker, children are sometimes expected to chorus responses in tandem with their seated classmates. Students' recognition of and compliance with collective attention norms is valuable to teachers particularly in moments when they must convey the same information to many students at once, such as when they give directions, introduce new

content, or combine their class with others on field trips and assemblies. Given the necessity of children's compliance with collective attention norms for group instruction, teachers often reward compliant behaviors with praise. Students are sometimes awarded with opportunities to command the *collective attention* of their classmates, such as when a child is called to the front to share his or her "All About Me" page.

Third, *individualized attention* is used in one-on-one exchanges which require individuals to repeatedly alternate between paying and receiving attention. Individualized attention contexts like Play Time and Recess include exchanges between a student and a peer, between a student and a teacher, or among participants in small groups. In these contexts, each participant is expected to receive a relatively equal amount of attention from interlocutors, and to devote the remaining time to attending to them. Participants alternate relatively frequently between providing and receiving attention, and each has relatively equal license to seek the attention of the other(s). Because individualized attention contexts frequently involve children's exchanging of individualized attention around objects of play, rather complicated attention norms must be adhered to for children to play together without conflict. For instance, if the norm of taking turns paying and receiving attention are violated, conflict among the classmates ensues as one partner bemoans the other's breach. In addition, as we will see, individualized attention from teachers and peers is often sought by students as indicative of validation, recognition, and approval. It is often given to express the same.

In the sections that follow, I present examples that illustrate Mrs. Marshall's expectations for classroom-appropriate student behavior as well as student behaviors that fail to meet her standards in task, collective, and individualized attention contexts. I show

that by explaining expectations and praising behaviors that accord with them, and by explaining prohibitions and sanctioning behaviors that violate them, Mrs. Marshall socializes children to adopt particular classroom norms and behaviors for using attention in the classroom.

Task Attention

Among the many milestones preschoolers must reach before being designated “kindergarten ready,” independent completion of simple and multi-step tasks ranks high on the list. To develop this ability, Mrs. Marshall schedules a series of task-based activities for the children to practice completing first thing each morning, during a period she calls Arrival Time. As described briefly in Chapter 2, children are expected to hang up their coats and backpacks, kiss and hug their parent goodbye in the hallway, and then enter the classroom alone. Once inside, they locate a laminated apple with their name on it from among the 18 others velcroed to a big, colorful tree on the wall. They pluck their apple and deposit it in a basket below to mark their attendance. Then, they proceed to the sink to wash their hands, and afterward to the table of their choice to work on an activity laid out for them.

Performing this sequence of tasks requires students to independently devote their task attention to a number of duties. First, Mrs. Marshall expects the students to direct their attention to the task of hanging up their belongings. If they struggle, they can solicit individualized attention from their parent. This exchange of individualized attention with the parent is expected to continue as they say their goodbyes. Immediately upon crossing the threshold of the classroom, however, the child is expected to redirect her attention toward reading the names on the apples, and finding her own. Next, the child is expected

to redirect her attention to crossing the room and washing her hands by the sink. While washing her hands, she should attend to each component of the task in turn—turning on the sink, squirting the soap onto a palm, washing the soap off, turning the sink off, taking a paper towel, drying her hands, and throwing the paper towel away—until the multi-step task is complete. From there, she is permitted to choose which activity table to join. At the table, she is expected to expend task attention on completing the activity, though it is permissible to exchange individualized attention with other friends at the table.

To make sure the students understand this routine and how to complete it, Mrs. Marshall explains her expectations on the first day of school, at a Meet ‘n’ Greet with the students and their parents. As we see here, upon arriving, the children practice the prescribed series of tasks with their parents, and then sit down with them for Circle Time.

When the families arrive, they complete a number of tasks together, including hanging up their backpacks, picking their apples, and washing their hands. Then they work together on completing a checklist. Its items include things like, “Meet Mrs. Jill and have your picture taken”, “Find the goldfish”, “Decorate a border for your family photo”, “Find the sensory table”, and “Find and complete a puzzle.”

After a short time, Mrs. Marshall sings, “Come, come, come on over...” to gather all the children to the carpet.

Once the class is seated, she asks, “Who can tell me... What is the first thing you should do when you get to school?”

Maggie volunteers, “Hang up our backpacks!”

Mrs. Marshall praises her, and then asks about the next thing.

Seemingly encouraged by the positive feedback, Maggie immediately says, “Take your apple!” before anyone else can answer.

Mrs. Marshall nods. But she adds that they should first hug mom or dad before they go inside and take down their apple. She reviews #1, 2, and 3: backpacks, hug, and apple.

Then she reminds the kids that on Friday when they come to school, it’s a special time just for them, and all their mommies and daddies will have to go do chores like grocery shopping while they play.

Bella frowns. “My mommy’s still here and she’s staying with me!”

Mrs. Marshall sets her straight, shaking her head. “On Friday, when you come back, there will be no parents, just kids.”

As this field note illustrates, on Meet ‘n’ Greet Day, the children first experientially go through the start of their school day, with their parents’ help. Then, when the children sit down to Circle Time, Mrs. Marshall reads them a story called *Preschool Day Parade*, in which the characters go through a preschool day structured similarly to their own. Throughout the story, Mrs. Marshall asks the children questions about what they are supposed to do after arriving at preschool. In this first exposure to Mrs. Marshall’s expectations, the children’s various responses demonstrate whether they understand the expectations. Mrs. Marshall provides the children with feedback that helps to clarify her expectations. When Maggie correctly responds that the first thing they should do is “hang up our backpacks!” Mrs. Marshall provides her with verbal praise. When Maggie identifies the third thing they’re supposed to do, skipping the second thing, Mrs. Marshall nods to acknowledge that she was on the right track, but verbally corrects her and reviews the proper order. When Bella later argues that her mommy will stay in preschool with her on Friday, Mrs. Marshall becomes even more explicit, clarifying, “there will be no parents, just kids.” By encouraging parent-guided practice and the children’s discursive knowledge of the tasks they are to complete during Arrival Time, Mrs. Marshall lays the groundwork for evaluating student learning of and competency at task attention through the instrument of the Arrival Time routine.

Each day, as children engage in the task attention-demanding activities, like those of Arrival Time, which regularly occur, Mrs. Marshall evaluates her students’ task attention behaviors. Because opportunities to practice task attention are built into the daily schedule, Mrs. Marshall is able to distinguish students’ occasional struggles with a particular task from repeated difficulties with the underlying use of task attention. When

Mrs. Marshall notices a pattern of the same students struggling with the same parts of the routine, she intervenes to remediate their specific task attention weaknesses. Her interventions indicate that children struggle with task attention in primarily two ways: they either cannot sustain attention long enough to complete the task assigned to them, or they cannot disengage from the task when the daily schedule requires them to transition to another activity.

One way in which students fail to meet Mrs. Marshall's expectations for their use of task attention is by struggling to complete a task that requires following multi-step directions. For example, many children initially experience difficulty when putting on their winter gear before going outside for recess, as it is a process that involves putting on numerous items of clothing in a particular order. Mrs. Marshall notes that the twins, Brandon and Luke, have continually struggled with getting dressed independently. This difficulty represents a shortcoming of task attention because, rather than persisting with their efforts to figure out how to complete the complex task, they turn to an adult to do it for them. In our February interview, Mrs. Marshall describes how the twins have struggled since the first time it snowed in November to put on their winter clothing and her strategy for helping them in this way:

“They struggled for the longest time with multi-step directions. And I think they still do. But they're getting better. Like they're finally now, just this week, getting dressed by themselves without us having to tell them everything: ‘Snow pants first, then jacket.’ They were so proud of themselves today that they beat the timer. And they got everything on. Luke was so proud that he was beating John. He was like, ‘I beat him!’

“And honestly, in the last three weeks, they finally really understood the process of getting their winter clothes on. Multi-step direction. They really struggle with multi-step direction. It's really very linear [with those two]: you stand in line. Not, get your coat on, put your backpack on, and stand in line. Or when we'll say, ‘This time, we're going

to go out to the big playground, just put your coat on.' Inevitably, one of the two of them will put [it all on]..."

Mrs. Marshall speculates, "It's very interesting, but Mom, though, I think babies them and does everything for them. I think that does not help at all." After a thoughtful pause, she continues, "At one of the conferences, their mom said, 'When are they gonna finally be able to get dressed by themselves?' I'm like, 'Well stop dressing them!'"

She continues, "I said, "They're getting better. They're getting better, it's coming along." I said, "But let 'em try to do as much as they can on their own. They can. If they come [to school] with their t-shirt inside out or backwards, who cares?"

To facilitate Brandon and Luke's ability to complete the task of putting on their winter clothes, Mrs. Marshall provides them with more-detailed instructions, visual cues, additional opportunities to practice, and time incentives. She is often able to scaffold their insufficient task attention using these interventions. First, she tries the intervention of providing more-detailed instructions. By providing shorter verbal directives incrementally, and providing a new, brief, instruction each time the previous one is complete, the twins are able to complete the task on their own. Once they can do this with only verbal help, she moves to visual cues, hanging a series of numbered posters on the wall depicting the articles of clothing to be put on in the correct sequence. Finally, when the twins have mastered getting all their clothing on, in the right order, Mrs. Marshall introduces time incentives to help them speed up the process. By challenging the preschoolers to get all their winter clothes on, first in under five minutes, then in under four, and so on, she reinforces her expectation that the children get themselves dressed independently and efficiently.

Daily routines in which children are provided the opportunity to practice sustained task attention also provide Mrs. Marshall the opportunity to observe how students transition into other activities afterward. In the structured environment of the

private, parochial preschool, disengaging from an activity because a social situation demands it is an important social skill that some students struggle with. Here, the children are asked to multi-task during Story Time by taking turns washing their hands in preparation for Snack. Though most children redirect their attention appropriately, Ethan and Maggie are extremely reluctant to stop attending to the story.

When Mrs. Jill taps the shoulder of the first ten or so children, they immediately get up to wash their hands. But when Ethan gets tapped, he passively refuses. He simply ignores Mrs. Jill when she asks. She lets it go for a minute and taps the next three students.

Since not all the children have finished washing their hands, Mrs. Marshall begins a new book: Pete the Cat Saves Christmas.

Acting silly, but not disengaged, Brian says, "Pete the Cat Saves Toot."

John laughs and repeats him.

Brian says it again.

Brandon sits on his knees, seeming by his facial expressions to be listening, but with his fingers picking at posters on the wall. Mrs. Marshall asks him to sit all the way on his pockets, because Eden can't see behind him.

"Do waiting and celebrating rhyme?" Mrs. Marshall continues.

Mrs. Jill taps Maggie to wash her hands, but she refuses at first.

When Mrs. Jill asks again with a harsher tone, Maggie runs to wash her hands as fast as she can so she doesn't miss too much of the story.

Mrs. Marshall tells the class they may all go find a seat for Snack, but adds, "Ethan and Maggie, you cannot sit at the table until you wash your hands."

"I did wash my hands!" Maggie says indignantly.

In this example, from early December, Maggie and Ethan have become reluctant to wash their hands because of their interest in listening to the story. Their resistance to Mrs. Marshall's expectation that they divide their attention and multi-task seemed to emerge after Thanksgiving Break, and after about a week of occasional protests, Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill discussed solutions to the issue. The teachers approved of Maggie and Ethan's intense interest during story time and did not want to adversely affect their nascent love of reading, but they also did not want to allow them to break the rules. They

brainstormed other ways of scheduling the handwashing, and in the meantime resorted to calling on Maggie and Ethan last, after the story was over and the rest of the children were on their way to the table. They achieved a final resolution after Winter Break when Mrs. Marshall's class was moved to the library because of construction. Because the library was located next to girls' and boys' hall bathrooms with three sinks each, all the children could go into the bathroom to wash their hands at the same time, and nobody had to miss out on story time. In this rare instance, the students' reluctance to disengage their attention from the story eventually prompted the teachers to reevaluate their expectations, and to desist with to efforts help the children comply.

Teacher reevaluation of task attention expectations does not always result when student engagement in an activity makes them reluctant to transition. This insistence that students learn not only how to sustain their task attention, but how to break it off indicates that, in the private, parochial preschool setting, complying with the social expectations embedded in the structure of the school day is paramount. Disengaging from a captivating activity because the social situation demands it is extremely difficult for some students to do. Ethan, in particular, struggles with this not just during story time, but during many transitions between activities. Consider the example below, in which Ethan hides on the playground during recess, continuing to play, when the rest of his class forms a group for dismissal.

I return to the playground with the lollypops Mrs. Marshall has planned to share with the children for "L" week just as she is ready to start dismissing the kids. Mrs. Jill has everyone sitting in a circle waiting obediently for their names to be called so they can get their lollypop and go home. Everyone except for Ethan is listening. Ethan continues to play on the playground by himself, continuing to turn the metal steering wheel as though he were driving. Mrs. Marshall notices him and calls him to come sit down. When she chooses who may go, she saves him for last,

even though his mom is there. Ethan looks worried, seeming to realize that his receipt of the lollypop is in jeopardy. Mrs. Marshall tells him that he needs to listen right away next time, or else he won't be able to get a treat like his friends. She asks him if he will be a better listener next time. He nods, expectantly.

Here, we see that even though Ethan knows what behavior is expected of him, he does not want to disengage his task attention from his activity to go home. Mrs. Marshall gives him a strict, but kind, talking-to and extracts a promise to listen better before offering up the lollypop. As these examples illustrate, students are expected to be able to sustain their own attention long enough to independently complete multi-step tasks, and to stop attending to tasks when the time to do so comes to an end.

Collective Attention Strategies

The second type of attention behaviors children learn upon beginning preschool are collective attention strategies. Strategies for providing collective attention enable preschoolers to do things like listen politely to a speaker and participate in class discussions. Strategies for receiving collective attention include things like being able to stand in front of the class to help with the calendar or to share one's "All About Me" page. Knowing and demonstrating classroom appropriate ways of both providing and receiving collective attention are prerequisite to kindergarten readiness.

During Circle Time, preschoolers are provided with opportunities to learn and practice classroom expectations for the use of collective attention. They are expected to continue to look at and listen to the speaker, remain seated to keep from blocking the view of other audience members, and refrain from behaviors that channel others' attention away from the speaker. They are also expected to wait until the speaker has finished presenting to participate, and when wanting to ask questions or share, to politely

signal their desire for attention by raising a hand. Being a recipient of collective attention while speaking or helping at the front of the class entails splitting one's attention between the audience, the content of the message, and one's own feelings of excitement or anxiety. While presenting, a student must stay focused on the content of their own message, orient his or her body in the direction of the audience, and use a voice that's loud enough for others to hear to communicate a message that's coherent and on-task.

The children's behavior fails to meet teacher expectations in several ways. In one instance, Mrs. Marshall makes the relationship between her behavioral expectations and collective attention explicit one day when Bella, Claire, and Noelle each want to sit by Lily, so they crowd in tightly around her on the ABC carpet.

Mrs. Marshall comes in from helping children hang up their jackets in the hall and takes a seat in the teachers' chair. Upon noticing the four girls in the front corner sitting superclose, she tells the class, "When we sit down on the carpet, we should not be touching our friends. It is very hard to pay attention if somebody is touching you. I know that for me, I have a very hard time paying attention if somebody is touching me. Some of you might have a hard time paying attention, too, if somebody is touching you." The girls scoot a few more inches apart.

Then Mrs. Marshall draws a popsicle stick to determine who the calendar helper will be. She reads the name on it and announces, "Vann! Come on up here, Vann."

As Vann makes his way to the front of the room, Bella protests her lack of propinquity to Lily again.

Mrs. Marshall tells the girls, "If you can't sit next to each other without talking, you need to pick a different spot. You can sit next to each other during centers, or free play, or even at snack."

Besides sitting too closely together, there are other more overt ways in which children violate Mrs. Marshall's expectations during times requiring collective attention. Demonstrating class-appropriate collective attention strategies during Circle Time can be particularly difficult for children who haven't gotten enough rest the night before. In this example, we see that Asher struggles to comply with teacher expectations during Circle

Time not just when Mrs. Marshall is in charge, but also when he has a substitute teacher.

Mrs. Olson, the sub, tries a number of strategies to encourage Asher to demonstrate class-appropriate collective attention behavior despite his fatigue.

“Oops. My turn, Vann,” Mrs. Olson says. She puts her finger to her lips. “I need you to sit up on your pockets, Asher.”

“I’m tired,” he protests.

“Well, you still have to sit up. Would you like to sit on the carpet square so you know where your body should be?” Mrs. Olson asks.

He extends his arms to take it and sets it on the floor right beside the class carpet. He proceeds to curl up on it like he’s sleeping. Mrs. Olson ignores him and starts reading the book. He stands up momentarily, still on the carpet square. He’s listening all the while, though, and as he gets engaged in the story, he sits down and listens more closely. He starts responding to the story aloud.

Mrs. Olson pauses reading to whisper, “Asher, do you see all your friends? They’re sitting quietly. Can you sit quietly too?”

He yawns.

She continues reading. He mouths noises quietly to himself. “It’s orange.”

She reads something about cows.

“I like cows,” he says. She ignores him, so he repeats it.

He leans back and bumps his head on the dollhouse.

Dekari says, “That cow is actually a picture made out of leaves.”

“Did you all hear what Dekari just said?” Mrs. Olson asks. She repeats, “The cow is actually a picture made completely out of leaves. The man is too. Look at leaf man. Leaf man wants to go home after his long trip.”

“I wanna go home!” Asher remarks.

Here, we see Asher struggling just to stay awake. In this case, his fatigue from not sleeping well the night before is interfering with his ability to comply with Mrs. Olson’s expectations. It’s not that Asher doesn’t understand that he’s supposed to sit up and pay attention to the story without bothering his classmates. He just finds it hard to engage in these appropriate behaviors when he’s too tired to sit up. While Mrs. Olson is sympathetic to his plight, she expresses later a reluctance to simply let him sleep, as it

would send the message to the other students that it was okay not to pay attention during Circle Time.

Not sitting and orienting properly to the story can go wrong in other ways as well. On another day, Mrs. Marshall invites the class to sit down on the ABC carpet briefly after snack to sing songs, review the activities they've done so far that day, and to preview the activity choices that are available for them during playtime. During this time, twins Luke and Brandon wrestle playfully on the floor just before Mrs. Marshall begins to explain the materials for making popsicle stick puppet people available at the Orange table.

They sit down on the carpet and sing "If you're happy and you know it." Asher stands during the song. Then they review what we've done today. Mrs. Marshall reminds them, "Let's all sit criss cross. Bubbles in your mouth. Gracie, Asher, John, I like how you're sitting. Luke, can you cross your feet?"

She resumes the recap: "We read I Like Me! and Hooray for You!, those were our books today. Gracie, I want everyone to know what we're doing today." As she says this, Luke is bear-hugging his brother's head. "Luke and Brandon. Luke and Brandon. Hands to yourself, else I'm gonna split you up, and that would be sad." She segues into a preview of all the things they can do during free play. "You can make people over there, or play with glurch at that table, or use the dry erase markers to do some tracing, or you can even make puppets. You can make one for yourself, or you can make one for a friend."

Makayla adds, "Or you can make one for your brother or sister."

"That's a great idea," says Mrs. Marshall. "Brian, not yet."

Brian sits back down. Mrs. Marshall finishes pointing out the options. Then she lets them go play.

Here, Mrs. Marshall issues a gentle reminder to the twins that while sitting down to Circle Time, they are expected to keep their hands to themselves with their pockets on the floor. She reminds them of what the consequence will be if they do not stop what they are doing and begin demonstrating the collective attention behavior that is expected: she will have to separate them, and they will be sad. This reminder is enough to prompt both

boys to desist from combat and focus up on Mrs. Marshall. In this case, Luke and Brandon are not only breaking the norm of listening to the story, but also the norm of not disturbing classmates' focus.

Jimmy is another student who struggles to live up to the teachers' expectations that he refrain from distracting his classmates during Circle Time. His breaches of the norms of collective attention are often flagrant. We see an example of this during the first week of school, when Jimmy demonstrates a variety of behaviors deemed inappropriate:

Mrs. Marshall starts singing, "Come come come on over! It's circle time!" The class gathers on the carpet.

Jimmy screams, "I don't want it to be circle time!"

Mrs. Marshall tells him, "You have two choices: you can sit up on the carpet with our friends, or you can sit on the chair. You can make a choice or I can make it for you." He doesn't say anything, but continues to languish noisily on the floor.

"You can make a choice, or I can make it for you. Which one do you want?" she repeats. He doesn't seem to even acknowledge that she wants him to answer her at first, but he begins making eye contact and listening. "Okay," she says, trying again now that he's paying attention.

"You can make it for me," he says. She starts to pick him up and move him over to the chair, saying "Okay, we're going to sit in the chair, then." He screams.

She stops. "You said I could make the choice. So I chose sit in the chair. Should we try again? Do you want to sit up criss-cross applesauce on the carpet or do you want to sit in the chair?"

He just cries, so she moves him over to the chair.

As soon as Mrs. Marshall begins to read All About Me, Jimmy tries to get Luke's attention. Luke is trying to listen to the story, but Jimmy has his hands up in his face. "Let's get our friend Jimmy a chair, Mrs. Jill." She continues to read

Mrs. Jill tries to keep Jimmy focused on the story, but he keeps paying attention to her. He makes clicking noises with his mouth.

Even with Mrs. Jill's attention and now seated away from the circle on the chair, Jimmy begins to scream.

Mrs. Marshall has no choice but to stop reading. "That hurts my ears," she says. "Look at Bella? She's got her hands over her ears. Your voice is hurting her ears too. Is that an inside voice? No, I don't think so."

At first, Jimmy tries to interact with Luke, who is seated next to him, instead of listening to the story Mrs. Marshall is reading to the group. Because this is not the first time Jimmy has seemed to struggle with demonstrating classroom-appropriate collective attention behaviors, Mrs. Marshall asks Mrs. Jill to move Jimmy to his own chair, situated out-of-reach of his classmates who are seated on the ABC carpet. Even seated on the chair, with Mrs. Jill quietly prompting him to direct his attention to Mrs. Marshall and the story, Jimmy resists engaging in the collective attention expected of the class. Instead, he screams. In this instance, Mrs. Marshall seems to infer that Jimmy's behavior is the result of not understanding how his behavior is affecting others. To remediate this, she explains to Jimmy that his volume is hurting Bella's ears. She breaks it down further to explain that she knows how Bella is feeling because of how she has her hands up over her ears to block out the sound.

Individualized Attention

The third type of social context Mrs. Marshall teaches children how to navigate is the individualized attention context. Because Mrs. Marshall expects the children to interact with their peers one-on-one in "classroom appropriate" ways before beginning kindergarten, she encourages them to practice exchanging individualized attention during Play Time. The individualized attention skills they practice are necessary in active listening, turn-taking, and sharing both the floor and the props of play. Students can practice exchanging individualized attention not only in pairs, but in small groups as well. In contrast to exchanges of collective attention, in which the license to demand the attention of all others is limited to certain individuals, exchanges of individualized

attention provide all participants share (relatively) equal license to demand and receive attention.

As an example of a successful exchange of individualized attention, consider what transpires between Vann and Makayla, who have each chosen to sit together at a table upon which 20 locks and 20 keys were spread about. Each of the locks and keys displayed a number and an array of that many dots. The #1 key, with one dot, unlocked the #1 lock with one dot, and so on. While playing with the keys and locks, they exchange individualized attention.

Makayla collects all the locks and all the keys. She proceeds to unlock them in order. She passes them to Vann after she's done with each. He struggles a little, so I help him reposition the key. "Try like this," I say, turning the key around so that the teeth point at the lock. He places it in the lock and it opens.

Next, Vann picks up a different key and a different lock. "It's here!" he shouts, holding it up to her.

"That's not a 5, that's a 15!" Makayla corrects him.

He disregards her advice and tries the key anyway, to no avail.

She hands him the number 15 key. He tries it and it works!

Here, we see Vann and Makayla exchanging individualized attention as they play with manipulatives at one of the activity tables. Makayla quickly works to unlock a series of individual keys, passing each, as soon as she's done, to Vann. In doing this, she demonstrates her mastery of shifting her attention from the task of unlocking to exchanging individualized attention with Vann as she passes him the lock. When Vann struggles a little to insert one key into a lock, Makayla desists from her own work to watch him patiently and issue the observation that he's using the incorrect key. Her provision of individual attention, in effort to be helpful, goes unheeded by Vann, however, as he initially ignores her comment. She persists, and when she offers him the correct key, he briefly shifts his attention to her to take it.

Students and teachers also often exchange individualized attention. Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill often spent one-on-one time with individual students, for instance, when pulling children aside one-on-one to do assessments, make Easter projects, or write stories. During our final interview in April, Mrs. Marshall remarks how fun it has been to work with individual students over the past few weeks. She describes how much Ethan enjoyed having her undivided attention:

“He was loving me do that question thing for mom and dad. I mean, he just wanted to just sit down and just do it with me.”

“Giving you an interview?” I laugh.

She replies, “Yeah! You know, I’d ask a question like, “What do you love about your mom?” and he’d be like, “Well [she imitates his thoughtful face and pensive pause], because she gives me kisses. I love her so much.”

When small groups of students play together, with each student actively participating, they are also partaking in the exchange of individualized attention. Consider this example from another Play Time in December when five students are playing together with glurch. In this small group setting and primarily by exchanging individualized attention with one person at a time, the children each contribute to building the narrative of pretending that the glurch is cotton candy and getting Mrs. Jill to eat it. Because they execute these one-on-one exchanges before an audience of their peers, they even join forces to get Mrs. Jill’s to come over by them,

Vann exclaims loudly, “Look at me, Miss Jill!” She’s all the way across the room. He’s holding a string of glurch that he stretched all the way from one of the tables into the bathroom.

Mrs. Jill notices him. She asks him if he wants her to take his picture. He smiles and nods.

“Wow,” Makayla comments to Claire. “His glurch is so long! It’s going all the way into the wall.”

Riffing off of Vann, John holds up a stick laden with glurch. “Want some cotton candy?” he asks Claire. She accepts. Then she calls out to

Mrs. Jill across the room, "Hey, want some cotton candy? Want some cotton candy, Miss Jill?" She extends glurch on a stick.

"Miss Jill, come here!" Claire calls out.

Faith goes over to show Mrs. Jill. Finally, Mrs. Jill comes over.

"It's wet!" Mrs. Jill exclaims. "It's not cotton candy, it's glurch! You were gonna let me eat glurch!" she playfully accuses them.

There are also numerous ways in which children struggle to comply with the teachers' expectations as they attempt to exchange individualized attention. When this occurs, Mrs. Marshall intervenes to clarify her expectations and help the children learn how to comply. After observing the children at play over the first week of school, Mrs. Marshall presents a Circle Time lesson to teach the class strategies for managing a common Play Time problem: disputes over toys. In a room full of toys and friends to play with, habitual and monomaniacal insistence upon having only the one toy someone else is playing with often stems largely from initial difficulties in exchanging individualized attention. The sort of verbal exchange required to settle a toy dispute necessitates mastering the art of taking turns listening and speaking, and when children lack the skills to settle initial disputes, they often escalate. To forestall this, Mrs. Marshall explicitly teaches the children that toy conflict situations are not emergencies requiring the immediate attention of everyone else in the room; in fact, they are a situation that the children can handle on their own. To handle those situations, Mrs. Marshall has created the "sand timer rule," which she explains to Asher below. In this instance, Mrs. Marshall needs to step in and mediate a conflict between Bella and Asher, who both want to "talk" on her old cell phone.

Bella and Asher fight loudly over the blue phone. Even from the other side of the room, they're so loud that I have to see what's going on. Asher's running after Bella, trying to take the phone away.

"Asher, let's use the sand timer. That's what our friend Bella was trying to show you," Mrs. Marshall explains. She helps him tip the sand

timer over, and the sand begins to fall. She tells him that when the top is empty, it's his turn to play with the phone.

Asher stands next to the sand timer for the full five minutes it takes to empty completely. When it runs out, Asher returns it to the center and sets it down, then heads to the imaginative play area by Bella.

Asher tries to take the phone away from Bella, saying, "It's my turn!" She gives it up but cries loudly.

Claire goes over to Mrs. Marshall, "Bella's crying because it's Asher's turn and she doesn't want to let him have it."

Mrs. Marshall says, "It's hard to share sometimes, isn't it?"

In this instance, Mrs. Marshall verbally explains the sand timer rule, and, upon observing each student's misunderstanding, helps him or her to acquire a novel understanding. Mrs. Marshall teaches Asher that implementing the rule can be a successful strategy for gaining access to the object of someone else's task attention. Bella, who was already familiar with the advantages of using the sand-timer rule on others, learns of its reciprocity. She acquires new comprehension that the sand-timer rule, as a *rule*, can be used *by* others to take the item upon which her task attention is focused. Claire, the detached onlooker, grasps not only the advantages for Asher, the disadvantages for Bella, and the fairness of the rule, but she also seems to realize that Bella lacks this understanding. In this example, the novel understandings reached Asher, Bella, and Claire indicate progress toward being able to exchange individualized attention in "classroom appropriate" ways.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I first demonstrated that Mrs. Marshall and Coach Nick create the structured learning environments described in the last chapter based on their assumptions about children's prior knowledge and their learning objectives for their class. I explored how teachers and coaches describe the process by which they identify the children who

are markedly more or less advanced than their peers at critical aspects of learning. First, I identify the expectations teachers and coaches have for what their students should know and be able to do upon beginning preschool, and their goals for what they want the children to learn in their class. They are guided by these expectations and their instructional goals in planning the structure of their class and the rules they will enforce, and in physically setting up the room to make this possible. Before children begin preschool or preschool gymnastics classes, their instructors this novel, socially constructed structure of each class exists in the mind of the teacher. The instructors' first task is to teach the children their expectations for how class time, space, and social interaction are to regularly unfold. As children learn to navigate these structured learning environments, their behavior is interpreted by teachers and coaches with regard to norms for children their age. Thus, the structured learning environment of the preschool class and the preschool gymnastics are instrumental in prompting children to behave in ways that instructors can observe and compare.

First, teachers and coaches agree on a number of the key skills they regard as important for learners. The overlap occurs in the area described as "social skills" by Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill, and which Nick and Daniel refer to as "Listening & Directions." However, while teachers identify as important knowledge about colors, animals, and counting, coaches identify skills related to jumping, swinging, and rolling. In terms of the skills teachers and coaches hope children will learn from their class, both adopt a growth mindset, valuing a set of skills they believe sets children up to be successful learners in the future. While for both instructors, social skills like sharing, turn-taking, listening to the teacher and following directions are considered important, Mrs. Marshall and Nick

differ in their understandings of the mechanisms by which they believe these skills will benefit them. Mrs. Marshall designs her curriculum around the practice of social skills because she believes they are integral to the development and sustenance of interpersonal relationships and friendships, which she sees as necessary if not prerequisite to students' taking an interest in academic content. Nick, on the other hand, designs a curriculum that provides children with abundant opportunity to practice waiting one's turn, listening to directions, following them, and processing verbal feedback. He does this because he believes that these social skills are instrumental to acquiring and developing new content area skills.

Second, I provided examples of the norms and expectations for child conduct that are embedded within those structured environments. Using Mrs. Marshall's classroom as an example, I showed that those norms and expectations differ across three micro-interactive social contexts, which occur at different times within the school day, in different areas of the classroom. Within each of these social contexts, students are expected to use primarily one of three kinds of attention – task attention, collective attention, and individualized attention. To illustrate which behaviors the teachers regard as “appropriate” and which as “inappropriate” for the classroom, I then provided examples of children using each kind of attention during the corresponding social context. I distinguished which child behaviors were praised and rewarded by teachers from those that were reprimanded, remediated, or followed by negative consequences. I have further demonstrated that these attention skills are prerequisite for the successful performance of higher-order “classroom appropriate” social behaviors, such as following

multi-step directions, transitioning to new activities with the rest of the class, completing assignments, participating in a group setting, taking turns, sharing, and resolving conflict.

In the examples discussed in the latter half of this chapter, the structure of time, space, and social interactions of the preschool and the preschool gymnastics classes operates as an assessment instrument which children engage with more or less successfully relative to others their age. Teachers and coaches have near-constant opportunities to evaluate children's skills and abilities as they learn to navigate these structures. In the next chapter, I discuss the first step of this evaluative process: identifying the outliers. In it, I detail how Mrs. Marshall and Coach Nick identify the children who are markedly more or less advanced than their peers at critical aspects of learning.

Chapter 4

Identifying Outliers through Social Interactions with the System

In this section, I provide ethnographic accounts of how Mrs. Marshall and Nick identify the children who stand out markedly with regard to social and content area skills and abilities from their classmates or from other children the instructors have interacted with in the past. I refer to these exceptional children as “outliers,” and illustrate the specific strengths and difficulties these children exhibit when interacting within the structured environments of the gym and the classroom. I show how the accommodations instructors provide for the outliers are based on their hypotheses about the underlying cause of their exceptionality. Finally, I show the decision-making process Mrs. Marshall and Coach Nick use when determining whether to refer outliers for special needs testing or to retain in preschool the students who are age-eligible for kindergarten.

Despite the differences in their content areas, teachers and coaches use similar processes when categorizing children. This process begins early in the school year and gymnastics session, when Nick and Mrs. Marshall identifying as outliers the children who exhibit behaviors that fall beyond the “normal” range. They generate hypotheses about what is causing the child’s behaviors to be markedly more or less competent than those of their peers. In making these determinations, Mrs. Marshall and Nick draw on their knowledge of symptoms of special needs (described in Ch. 3). If they suspect a child may have a special need for which accommodations are required, they provide very different interventions for that child than for others whose behavior is attributed to causes other than special needs. Based on these assumptions, the instructors make

accommodations to meet the child's needs and monitor how he or she responds to the accommodations. Regarding children with exceptionally high ability, the provision of enrichment is influenced by the structure of course offerings at the organizational level of the school or the gymnastics club. I suspect that they are not alone in doing so, and that it is likely a common first step in categorization taken by many teachers and coaches.

Outliers with Exceptionally Disruptive Behavior

Preschoolers can be considered outliers because their behaviors mark them as significantly above or below a number of norms for children their age. Here, I first provide examples of children whose behavior flagged them as outliers below the norm in Mrs. Marshall's preschool and in Nick's preschool gymnastics classes. In both school and gymnastics, disruptive students' behavior is handled differently depending on whether it is attributed to a child's special need.

St. Cecilia

During my time at St. Cecilia's I observed a student named Jimmy whose repeatedly disruptive behaviors prompted Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill to regard him as an outlier. Jimmy appeared to struggle tremendously with emotional self-regulation, direction-following, and peer social interaction. Jimmy missed the first week and a half of school due to a severe case of head lice. Returning in mid-September, his behavior in the classroom stood out on his first full day of school. Consider this Story Time, during which Jimmy continually tried to interact inappropriately with classmates, despite multiple reminders to keep his hands to himself.

Mrs. Marshall raises her right hand and asks everybody else to raise theirs, too. Then she makes the sign of the cross. They say a prayer together, making hand motions for some of the words: "God, you are love.//We love you.//Jesus, be our light.//We shine for you.//Holy Spirit, guide us.//We follow

you.//Amen. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”
When they finish the prayer, Mrs. Marshall says, “Good job, preschoolers. That was very reverent. You did a very good job. Now we’re going to review our schedule for today.”

While she reviews the schedule, Brian and Asher get a little bit antsy.

“Brian and Asher. Can you guys sit by each other and listen? Cause if we can’t be good listeners, I’m gonna have to separate you, and that would be sad.”

The two resume the criss-cross applesauce position, and Mrs. Marshall holds up a book and tells the children it’s title. “Has anyone read this story before?”

No one raises their hand. Jimmy gets up on his knees and reaches out to touch Makayla, who’s seated beside him. Makayla leans the other direction to get away.

“Jimmy. Jimmy. Sit on your bottom. That’s distracting to our friends. Last warning, and then we’re gonna have to sit in a chair.”

Mrs. Jill quietly taps four kids on the shoulder and tells them to go wash their hands.

The character in the book eats with chopsticks. Bella blurts out, “I didn’t do chopsticks. It was so hard. I dropped my food on the floor!”

Jimmy makes noises with his lips and tries to get Makayla’s attention again by sticking his hands in front of her face.

“Jimmy.” Mrs. Marshall pauses. She looks at him and says, “No.” She resumes reading.

Jimmy escalates his search for attention. He sings out loud and continues to make gestures in front of Makayla’s face. She tries to ignore him, leaning back and to the side, trying to see the pictures and hear the story.

Mrs. Marshall stops reading. She takes a chair and puts Jimmy in it. She explains to the others, “Jimmy was being very disruptive during our Story Time. That’s very rude. So he can’t sit with our friends anymore during Story Time. And that’s sad.”

Mrs. Marshall continues reading the story.

Jimmy moves around in his chair, squirming and sitting backwards, looking everywhere but at the storybook. He seems to get bored, and then grabs his crotch.

“MY PEE IS BACK!” he announces to Mrs. Mrs. Jill.

She tells him he may go to the bathroom. To me, she explains, “He lost it for awhile.”

In this situation, Jimmy demonstrates inappropriate social interactions with other students. He continually tries to touch Makayla, despite her body language indicating that she is upset by his efforts. She moves away, leans to the side, and tries to continue

listening to the story. Mrs. Marshall repeatedly asks him to stop, and when he fails to comply, she moves him to a chair, away from his classmates. She informs him and his classmates that his behavior is rude, and that he should feel sad to be separated from his friends. Jimmy does not seem sad after being moved to the chair, but instead seems bored without other any other children to interact with. His seeming failure to understand the teachers' expectations for appropriate interactions with other students during circle time, coupled with his seeming lack of understanding that being separated from one's peers is punishment, contribute to Mrs. Marshall's judgement of Jimmy as an outlier.

Jimmy's behaviors are disruptive in other ways as well. Consider this example from later the same day, when Jimmy continues to resist complying with the teachers' expectations at the end of Play Time and during Circle Time. Not only does he refuse to sit still and listen during a lesson about the letter "L," but he also vocalizes his displeasure loudly, disrupting the other children's learning.

When it's time to clean up and sit down on the ABC carpet to review the letters of the alphabet, Jimmy throws a temper tantrum.

Mrs. Marshall holds him close to her body in a sort of unwanted bear hug. "You need to listen and stop your body," she says calmly.

"I'm tired!" he shouts.

"Then you need to sit down in this chair and rest."

He does, but angrily. His body language is defensive and full of tight muscles. He screws his face into a pout and his hands into fists. He hunches over and picks up his feet off the floor. He doesn't yell out at this point, though.

While Mrs. Marshall was attending to Jimmy, Brian had turned sideways to talk to Asher. He doesn't notice when Mrs. Marshall sits back down in the teacher's chair.

"Brian. I'm waiting," Mrs. Marshall says, before beginning the letter of the day.

She holds her finger up in a letter "L" and instructs the class to make an "L" with their fingers, too. Then she draws one on the board. Next, she asks the group, "What sound does it make?"

Following Mrs. Marshall's lead, they all belt out a chorus of luh luh luh luh luhs.

“What’s something that starts with the letter “L”?”
Brian continues to sing Ls and made-up words that starting with “L” sounds. He doesn’t raise his hand.
“Vann. I’m calling on Vann. Brian, put a bubble in your mouth.”
Vann says, “Llama!”
“Good, llama. Anyone else?”
Makayla raises her hand. Before she can say anything, though, Ethan shouts, “Lemonade!”
“Lemonade,” Makayla seems to change her answer.
Mrs. Marshall continues to call on students with their hands up. She ignores Jimmy, who complains to Mrs. Jill.
“I’m sad,” Jimmy says, turning around to face to Mrs. Jill. “I want to play.” He’s sitting backward in his chair, so she turns him around and resumes ignoring him. This angers him. He begins to shout, “I’m sad! I WANT TO PLAY!” Since everyone continues to ignore him, he turns backwards in his seat again, the better to keep an eye on Mrs. Jill. She turns him around again and he shouts, “Get away from me! Get away from me!”
Brian and Asher have trucks in their hands while sitting on the carpet. Mrs. Marshall takes them away and tells them that they can play with them again later. She asks Brian to sit on the letter “Z” by Nora. Then she continues reading.
Jimmy gets up mid-story, apparently capable of being ignored no longer.
“Sit back down, Jimmy,” Mrs. Marshall says. She calmly resumes reading.
He yells, “Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop!”
The other children, try to ignore him as Mrs. Marshall keeps reading.
Jimmy stops his tirade momentarily to strategize. He screams, “Lady bug book! Lady bug book! I’m all done sitting down.” When he continues to get ignored, he repeats, “I’m ALL DONE SITTING DOWN!”
Mrs. M continues reading, pausing only to say, “Sit down.”

Since class is almost over, and Mrs. Marshall sees Jimmy’s mother in the hallway, she calls his name in the first group of students she dismisses. Jimmy’s reaction to Mrs. Jill’s efforts to keep him focused on the lesson and quiet is to yell defiantly and push her hands away when she tries to turn him around. In this example, other children are also misbehaving, but their antics do not disrupt the lesson to the extent that Jimmy’s do. Asher and Brian, for instance, who have smuggled in toy trucks from Play Time, quietly relinquish them when asked to do so by Mrs. Marshall. Jimmy’s behavior, in contrast, is

not only more disruptive, it is also more continuous as he persists in yelling until he gets what he wants – permission to vacate the chair.

Jimmy's behavior deviates from the norm not only in Mrs. Marshall's class, but in his special classes as well. For instance, in gym class, he also demonstrates an inability to follow directions and a tendency to disrupt the class with his loud vocalizations. The gym teacher, Mr. Parsons, also reprimands Jimmy for talking out of turn, but the physical and interactive nature of the class activity limits how disruptive his behavior is to the lesson.

When they get to the gym, Mr. Parsons asks the preschoolers to sit down on the line. He asks me to sit on the benches on the side. Then he explains to the kids that he has only one rule: Everybody's quiet when he's talking. Before he starts explaining the game, he goes around the line and stands in back of them. Many of the preschoolers automatically turn around. He says to the rest of them, "Turn around. Turn around. Turn around, guys," until he gets all the students facing his direction.

"Do you see the spots on the floor? What color are they?"

The kids yell, "orange!" and "blue!"

Mr. Parsons says, "We're going to find a spot. Everyone find your own spot. Don't pick it up. Put your feet on it! Think you can do it all by yourself?"

"Yeah!" they shout.

He walks over in my direction and explains to me that this is how he teaches spacing.

"Ready, go!" he shouts.

They all choose a spot and stand on it. Everybody manages this part.

Then, while they're all standing on their spots, Mr. Parsons leads them through some basic stretching. He tells them, "Reach up! Lean way back! Touch our knees! Lean back! Touch our legs! Touch our toes without bending our knees! Swing our arms! See how when we're doing that, we're not by another person. That way we don't hit anybody. Let's make circles with our arms. Make them smaller, and smaller, and smaller. Shake 'em! Shake 'em!"

Mrs. Jill comes over and asks if I will go sit on the other side close to Jimmy and Asher. "They're gonna need some help I think," she says. "And I'll stay over here by the twins."

I go over to the other side, about 5 feet away from Jimmy's dot, which is closest to the wall at stage-left.

Mr. Parsons instructs the class to balance on one foot. Dakari is an absolute stand out. He lifts a (bent) leg to 45 degrees above horizontal and barely wavers. When he's told to switch, he repeats the same thing on his other leg. Maggie's pretty good at this, too. So is Makayla.

Next he tells them to jump on two feet on their spot. Since this is pretty easy, he challenges them to jump on one foot on their spots. I have to remind Jimmy to stay on his spot several times in between the jumping and the listening for the next direction. He faces backwards, seemingly unaware of where his attention is expected to be. When Mr. Parsons tells them to run in circles around their spot, Jimmy shows no sign of having heard him. I prompt him, "Run around your spot! See how Makayla's doing it? Run like Makayla!"

Jimmy sees her and starts copying. His circles are large and unwieldy and encompass several classmates' spots.

Mr. Parsons comes over to check on him. Jimmy itches his head and looks down. Mr. Parsons continues making the rounds checking in with students who are performing various activities on their spots. While Mr. Parsons gives the next direction, Jimmy keeps trying to talk to me. I whisper, "Listen to Mr. Parsons," and point at where he's standing. Jimmy crosses his arms. Then he comes over and tries to give me a hug. I gently redirect him back to his spot.

Next, Mr. Parsons tells them to try jumping from one foot to two feet, and from two feet to one foot. He comments to me, "That's really pretty good."

I ask, "Dakari? Yeah."

"No, I mean the whole class. Overall, they're doing really good."

I nod.

When they're instructed to jump over their spots, Nora does it once, then waits on her dot. The other kids repeat the action until they're told to do something else.

"Freeze!" Mr. Parsons announces. For the most part, they do. "Good job of freezing! Now, run around your spots three times as fast as you can!" He waits for most to finish their orbits... "Freeze!"

I get Jimmy back on his circle.

Mr. Parsons asks, "Now, who thinks they can run and find a new spot?"

"Me!" Ethan starts chanting loudly, "Me! Me! Me!"

Some of the other boys catch on and chant along. Mr. Parsons tells the class in an irritated tone, "Stooooopppp." Then Jimmy catches on and begins chanting anew. "Me! Me! Me!" he intones.

Mr. Parsons turns to him and says very sharply, "Stop. Just stop!"

Jimmy doesn't have time to defy his order because immediately after issuing the order to Jimmy, Mr. Parsons commands the class to switch spots. Jimmy is distracted by the activity and runs around like everybody else. The difference is, the others are running to a destination, whereas Jimmy seems to be just running to run.

Mrs. Jill comes over to me and says, "Did you notice with that one that he doesn't listen to the words, he just waits to watch what other people are doing?"

Mr. Parsons repeats the spot-switching activity twice more. Both times, Jimmy doesn't quite get that they're supposed to stay on their spot once they've picked it.

In this example, we see that the structure of the activity matters for whether or not Jimmy's behavior is regarded by Mr. Parsons or Mrs. Jill as disruptive. Though when the children are running around on their dots, Jimmy's behavior is not disruptive enough to derail the entire lesson, it is still atypical enough to warrant Mrs. Jill's suggestion that she and I provide him with additional support and direction. In contrast, when the children are expected to be seated on their squares, listening to Mr. Parsons, Jimmy's behavior draws a sharp reprimand. When Jimmy drew the ire of Mr. Parsons by imitating the other boys, his infraction differed from theirs. Whereas Ethan responded to Mr. Parson's rhetorical question with a sing-songy "Mee....Me! Me! Me!" and several other boys mimicked him, Jimmy didn't join in at the same time. It wasn't until after Mr. Parsons had reprimanded the others and they had sheepishly ceased their intonation that Jimmy began to take up the chant anew. Though Mr. Parsons' response, an irritated, "Stop! Just stop!" seems to indicate his interpretation of Jimmy's behavior as defiant, Jimmy does not seem to me to have a grasp of which behaviors he is supposed to be engaging in when. Throughout the entire lesson, he seems to alternate between trying ineffectively to copy what other children are doing, and disregarding directions entirely to do what he wants. During the physical activities engaged in during the gym class, though Jimmy's behavior may be ineffective for learning the gross motor skills practiced, it does not disrupt the learning of the other students and goes largely unnoticed and uncorrected by Mr. Parsons, Mrs. Jill, and myself. On the other hand, when the class is expected to be listening to directions, Jimmy's behavior stands out, and is heavily monitored and directly addressed by the adults.

In demonstrating these behaviors, Jimmy is unlike the other students in the class and is regarded by Mrs. Marshall as an outlier. Because there is no school-level policy at St. Cecilia's in place to manage children with exceptionally disruptive behavior, it is handled on case-by-case basis. The typical solutions for different students range from recommending a child get evaluated for special needs, to including an additional aide in the classroom, to moving a child into a different class. But the interventions for students whose behavior is exceptionally disruptive does not take into account its effects on the individual student alone. Teachers also consider how other students are currently being affected by that individual, as well as how the other students would be affected were certain interventions to be implemented.

Mrs. Marshall: I think in public schools, they get through the cracks until like third grade. And I do think some parents just don't know. They just don't know. They have nothing to compare their child to, like I think that's the case with Jimmy. Mom had no idea. I mean, to me, just watching him with gross motor skills, I was like, "Ohhh..." He's got low muscle tone. You know? But if it's your oldest, you have no idea.

For Mrs. Marshall, the decision to refer Jimmy for testing was clear-cut. Jimmy's inability to sustain attention and to refrain from constantly seeking attention from adults and peers in all classroom contexts indicated to Mrs. Marshall that his needs were more severe. Worried that he would "fall through the cracks" and fail to receive the help he needed, she took the necessary steps to get him referred for special education screening right away. In completing extensive documentation, Mrs. Marshall used excerpts from my field notes to illustrate the kinds of behaviors she was observing in the classroom and their frequency. After setting these processes in motion, she also talked to his parents and got him switched into the Tuesday-Thursday half-day classroom by the end of September. Because the students in that classroom were younger, Mrs. Marshall hoped

they would be less likely to ostracize Jimmy on account of his inappropriate behavior. In addition, she also planned to ask for help from a fellow teacher who had more knowledge of effective interventions for students with special needs:

Mrs. Marshall also plans to ask a colleague who attended a class over the summer about teaching children on the autism spectrum to sit in and give her feedback on Jimmy—not that she’s an expert having taken one class, but just because she might know better what to look for. Mrs. Marshall’s at the point where she needs to make decision whether or not she has the resources to help him. Jimmy may need more one-on-one help. She wants to make it at least through conferences before she decides that, in part because his parents are planning to have him professionally evaluated in the meantime.

As described here, Mrs. Marshall’s concern about Jimmy’s attention behaviors have prompted her to seek out additional information from her colleague about autism spectrum disorders. Though she initiated this conversation in order to determine whether she had the resources to teach Jimmy, she actually received a number of suggestions for concrete practices to try in the classroom.

Ainsley suggested they reduce the number of transitions in the morning, and that they place the chair in the opposite front corner, so that when the kids face Mrs. Marshall to read a story, they’re not able to watch what’s going on in the hallway behind her. She also suggested using more non-verbal, specifically visual cues with him. For example, holding a finger to one’s lips could signal he needs to stop talking. Ainsley gave them a handout listing potential interventions and an article about working with kids on the autism spectrum.

After talking to Ainsley, Mrs. Marshall experiments with the interventions suggested for use with children on the autism spectrum to see if they help Jimmy to manage his behavior in her classroom. Putting her advice to use, Mrs. Marshall reoriented the layout of the ABC carpet and the teacher’s chair, so that the class faced away from the hallway during Circle Time and could focus on her rather than the commotion in the hall. She also tried to minimize the number of transitions in the day by rearranging the

order of activities. In doing this, she reduced the number of times Jimmy (and his peers) would have to adjust to a different classroom context and its particular attentional norms. Finally, to get Jimmy to focus on her when she was speaking, Mrs. Marshall tried directing him to “look at my lips,” rather than at her eyes. Despite these efforts, Jimmy continued to require almost continuous help while in the classroom.

Because the in-class interventions proved insufficient to help Jimmy navigate the structure of the class, Mrs. Marshall decides to move Jimmy out of the Monday-Wednesday-Friday half-day preschool class and into the one that meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She explains her logic to me during recess on Jimmy’s last day with the Monday-Wednesday-Friday class.

While the kids get started playing, Mrs. Marshall explains to me why she thinks it’s better for Jimmy to switch to the Tuesday class. She says she told Jimmy’s mom that she wants preschool to be a positive experience for everybody, and she thinks the children in the younger group will be more tolerant of Jimmy’s behaviors. She says that when she asked Jimmy’s mom if they’ve noticed any issues at home, she mentioned all the same behaviors--the outbursts, the crying, the touching. Jimmy’s mom says his dad has a hard time handling the behaviors sometimes. Jimmy has a cousin who’s on the autism spectrum, and they’ve noticed some similarities in their behaviors. Mrs. Marshall recommended to her that she mention her concerns to Jimmy’s pediatrician.

Mrs. Marshall reflected on her own experience of teaching -- like 8 years at a Montessori school, several years at a different Catholic school, and like 15 years at St. Cecilia -- about 25 years in sum -- and said that Jimmy’s behaviors are the most severe she’s ever seen personally. Judging from the frequency and severity of his outbursts and his seeming need to touch other kids all the time, his behaviors are the most severe.

Jimmy’s parents were very receptive to the feedback provided by Mrs. Marshall about his behaviors being a cause for concern. His mother spoke with his pediatrician and followed his advice to bring him in for a special needs assessment. Jimmy was determined to qualify for supplemental instruction through the public school district, and

began attending classes there several days a week, in addition to remaining in Mrs. Marshall's Tuesday-Thursday half-day class throughout the rest of the school year.

Jimmy is not the only one in the Monday-Wednesday-Friday half-day class with behavior that deviates from what Mrs. Marshall regards as typical. Asher is another student who frequently demonstrates behaviors that are inappropriate for the preschool classroom. In particular, he exhibits a resistance to following teacher directives, and an inability to express his emotions calmly when he gets angry. Consider this music class during which he openly defies Mrs. Jill's directions.

Mrs. Northrop leads the line to music, a pink scarf in one hand and an orange in the other. She instructs the children to each pick up two scarves. She asks them if they can draw a number one with their scarf. They each zip one scarf up and down, up and down. She asks them to try making a number one with their other hand. They move that scarf up and down, up and down. Then she asks them to make a number eleven -- making a one with each hand, using both scarves at the same time.

"Now make a number zero. Go around and around!" They do.

"Make a number zero with the other hand." They make lots of circles with their scarves, like toreadors dizzying their bulls.

"Now, make a double zero!" Both hands get in on the action.

Then Mrs. Nordstrom announces, "Let's try to throw the scarves, so that they fall down like the leaves on the trees. What is happening to the leaves on the trees right now?"

The kids throw their scarves.

"Let's see if we can catch the scarves on our elbow! Let's see if we can catch the scarf on our knee!"

"Catch the scarf on your toes!"

Dekari shouts first, "Got it!"

Jimmy gets mad at John for taking what he thinks is his scarf. Really it's a different one. Mrs. Mrs. Jill goes over and gives him a different one from the pile of extras on the floor, which his original one landed on. This is a good enough solution for Jimmy. He continues following along with the lesson.

Someone grabs Asher's fallen scarf and he stomps off angry about losing it.

"I'm tired!" he shouts. He tries to sit down on the risers and pout.

Mrs. Mrs. Jill tells him he has to participate or sit on the floor. He's not allowed to sit on the risers.

Asher refuses to move from the risers. He screams loudly when Mrs. Jill tries to gently touch his shoulders and get him to move. She lets go, but they're at a stalemate. He looks at her and waits, still seated, making an angry face at her.

She moves toward him again and he moves ever so slightly to his left, so that he is standing beside the risers, not sitting on them.

The singing continues.

Asher remains alone and away from the group, with his arms crossed.

Mrs. Jill regards him warily, but does not approach him again.

Mrs. Nordstrom suggests a new activity. "Let's make stars up in the air. Can we make stars with our scarves? Now, let's sing our star song. Does anybody know a star song?"

"Twinkle Twinkle Little Star!" a bunch of kids call out in unison.

"Let's sing it!" they shout, and the song begins: "Twinkle, twinkle..." They finish the song while waving the scarves overhead.

"Let's see if we can hold our scarves up high again. Make your voice do what your scarf does. Throw the scarves up! WeeooooOOO!"

The kids copy everything Mrs. N. does and sings. They toss their scarves, mimicking, her "Whoooooo..." She goes up and down with her voice, waving the scarves in a horizontal zigzag: "Woo-ooo-ooo-ooo!" They do the same.

"Can we make our voices go in a circle?" she makes a noise like a fire truck siren while spinning, and they all do too. When this ends, she directs all the children to place their scarves in a Tupperware bin and then sit down in the circle.

Jimmy is sitting in the middle of the circle, so I tap him on the shoulder and whisper to him sit on the letter D. I point at an open spot in the circle, and he scoots back to sit there. He participates for awhile, then starts bugging Brian. Brian lies down flat on his back to get away from Jimmy's hands waving in his face.

Meanwhile, Asher continues to fume privately and to refuse to participate. However, when the children line up to walk back to Mrs. Marshall's classroom, Asher miraculously files in with the rest. Nora does a good job as the caboose, tolerating all the drama in front of her without comment or complaint.

When we get back in, the kids sit on the carpet for Circle Time. I brief Mrs. Marshall on the drama during Music. "Jimmy?" she asks.

"Actually no, he was pretty good," I say. "Asher had a full-on meltdown. I'm surprised he came back with us."

She shrugs, as if to say 'no surprises there.'

Here, we see Asher exhibiting defiant behaviors in Music class. Though initially, he participated in the activity appropriately with the other preschoolers, he grew angry when a classmate mistakenly picked up his scarf from the floor. This prompted him to

withdraw from the activity altogether. When he tried to sit on the risers, Mrs. Jill reminded him that they were off limits. He screamed when she tried to manually prompt him to comply with her request to get off the risers, and refused to participate throughout the rest of class. Mrs. Marshall's reaction to hearing that there was drama in Music Class was to expect Jimmy to be its source. She was not, however, surprised to hear that it was Asher.

Not only were some of Asher's atypical classroom behaviors disruptive, but some could be dangerous as well. Asher frequently demonstrated meltdowns and struggles with emotional self-regulation, particularly when he was angry. For example, during Play Time one day, Asher's violent outbursts prompted Mrs. Marshall to remove him from the room. Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Hanson, the preschool program director, came in and sat with him until he calmed down enough to participate in class.

Asher, playing at the cafe with Brian, has a major meltdown. Mrs. Jill intervenes and tries to talk to him. This only makes his emotions flare up more, and he tries to hit her to get her away from him.

Sitting at a table, threading Apple Jacks on pieces of yarn, Makayla, Claire, Dekari, and Lily discuss Asher's behavior.

"He's in the Red Zone," Makayla says, describing his anger with the vocabulary from a recent lesson on emotions.

Mrs. M., seeing that Asher is not calming down for Ms. Mrs. Jill, tells him they're going to take a walk.

Claire comments, "She's taking Asher on a walk."

Makayla adds, "She's taking him out of the class. So we can stay safe."

Dekari quips, "It might even take like a year."

Lily agrees, "Yeah, it will."

Dekari adds, "It might even take like a week."

Lily apparently wasn't talking about Asher. She says, stringing her cereal, "It might take like a month to get them all on here."

Dekari says, "It might even take like 12 weeks!"

...

During this time, Mrs. M. has brought Asher back to the classroom. Only moments later, he's having another full-on meltdown. He's throwing and kicking

the blocks that many of the other kids are playing with in the center of the room. Mrs. M. puts him in a chair to calm himself down.

As Asher fumes privately at the prayer desk, Mrs. Hanson comes in to talk to him. Mrs. Marshall explains to her that there's been lots of "kicking, screaming, hitting, and throwing." Mrs. Hanson sits in a child-sized chair beside Asher and waits for him to calm down before addressing him.

On this morning, we see that Asher's behavior when he is angry can become extremely disruptive of classroom order and irritating and potentially dangerous to the other students. Not only does the escalating disruptiveness of his behavior prompt a proportionately severe set of consequences from the adults, but it also inspires the other students to gossip and joke.

As we saw in Chapter 3, Asher struggles to comply with norms of collective attention, sometimes because of excessive fatigue from not having slept well the night before. In his case, however, he also struggles regularly to comply with teacher expectations in task and individualized attention contexts. When working on tasks, if Asher encounters an unexpected challenge, he regularly seems to experience overwhelming frustration, which he expresses violently, for instance, by smashing the item or throwing it across the room. He has not yet learned that, when unsure how to complete a task, the classroom expectation is to disengage one's attention from it and seek attention from a teacher or a peer to ask for help. In one-on-one situations with friends, if he perceives others to have treated him unfairly, Asher struggles to express his anger appropriately and occasionally resorts to hitting or kicking. He has not yet learned to comply with the classroom expectation that, in individualized attention contexts, one is to desist from attending to one's emotional state in order to secure a peer's attention and communicate what is wrong.

From early in the school year, the teachers are concerned about many of Asher's classroom behaviors. Yet, they note that he is self-aware, he often strives to be a good friend, and he does at times follow classroom norms. Mrs. Marshall's initial plan to help him learn to control his temper, therefore, is to work with him on respecting boundaries in class, and by coordinating with his family to reinforce them at home. As the year progresses, however, Asher's behavior does not improve. Because his anger issues continue to manifest in all three attention contexts, the placement question Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill grapple with is not whether he is ready for kindergarten—they have decided that, quite clearly, he is not—but instead whether his issues are severe enough to warrant referral for special education testing. As the school year progresses, Mrs. Marshall decides to refer him. In February, she explains to me that she has encouraged his family to get him screened by the special education services personnel in the public school district that serves their residential area:

Mrs. Marshall: That one. Uhhhh... Yes. I'm hoping to do the same thing I'm doing with Jimmy for him. Um, he is supposed to have. Mom cancelled his screening, actually with that situation, she's having some medical issues.

Amy: How's he doing academically? Like is he...

Mrs. Marshall: I have to test him, also since he didn't come [to preschool] this week. But I can tell you probably not well. He can't focus. He can't... Technically he could be going into kindergarten.

Amy: Wow. Next year? Is he going to?

Mrs. Marshall: No! But he could by birthdate. So [the screening]'s the next thing he needs to go to. Maybe he can get some extra interventions, and he'll do better if he's all-day. Maybe he'll do all day for consistency, and also maybe relieve some of mom's stress at home. Right? So if she's that stressed, then maybe not having him home will help relieve her anxiety all day.

Here, Mrs. Marshall explains her hopes that the following year, Asher will receive “extra interventions”—supplementary special education services through the public school system—in addition to enrolling in the all-day pre-kindergarten class at St. Cecilia. She notes that not only does Asher struggle socially, but

academically as well, due to his difficulty focusing without getting overwhelmed by frustration.

In April, Mrs. Marshall reports Asher's family's decision regarding his placement the following year:

Mrs. Marshall: They're going to try to send him to the full day. The Tuesday-Thursday full day....

Amy: That's going to be a long day... (trails off)

Mrs. Marshall: (completing my sentence) ...for a kid who cannot sustain himself... [Sighing] Yeah, I know. Everything has to be an exception for him. And I struggle with that, because, it's like, that's gonna get him nowhere in life. And nowhere in elementary school. He's gonna have to feel like everything needs to be accommodated for him. And not be taught patience, and not self-regulation. And learning to take his turn. Like, everyday, he wants to be the line leader. Or he wants to be the calendar helper. He really struggles with wanting his way.

In this exchange, Mrs. Marshall explains that Asher's parents have decided to heed her recommendation to refrain from sending him to kindergarten the following year, despite his age eligibility. In expressing her concerns about his future in elementary school and life, should he continue to lack patience, self-regulation, and turn-taking skills, she seems disheartened that she was unable to teach him those things. She worries that his tendency to focus on the system itself in order to fight its rules will preclude him from engaging with the content that the system is designed to distribute.

Yet, despite Asher's disrupting meltdowns and difficulty controlling his anger, he also demonstrates the ability to follow directions as well as a willingness to "be a good boy." This sets him apart from Jimmy who seems to engage in behaviors without a clear sense of whether they are against the rules or not. Asher's social self-awareness also sets him apart from Jimmy, as Asher seems at times to want to please Mrs. Marshall. Consider this example:

After we finish cleaning up, Mrs. M. has the kids sit down on the carpet for a book on CD. This one's called My Unimaginary Friend.

“Asher, go put the toy away please,” she whispers to him. He ignores her.

“Asher, go put the toy away.” Again, nothing.

“Asher, you can do this all by yourself. I know you can. You’re a good boy. Go put it away,” she whispers. Finally, he gets up and puts it away.

“Good job, Asher. Thank you!”

He beams.

Exchanges like this lead Mrs. Marshall to determine that Asher is ready to learn how to control his expression of emotions. This instance shows that Asher understands that he is not supposed to bring toy cars with him to Story Time, and that even though his desire to keep playing makes it hard for him to prioritize Mrs. Marshall’s regard for him as a “good boy,” he is capable of making an appropriate choice. This understanding factors into Mrs. Marshall’s decision regarding what steps to take to create the best possible learning environment for Jimmy and Asher, and all their classmates.

While Asher clearly has difficulty managing his temper, and is frequently resistant to teacher directives, Mrs. Marshall does not feel that he would benefit from moving to the Tuesday-Thursday class.

Mrs. Marshall: Yes. Yes. And I think these two need to stay away from each other (Brian and Asher).

Mrs. Jill: And Jake.

Mrs. Marshall: Yes. Yes. And Jake. Because he's more gentle (Brian), and this one (Asher) can try to take advantage of that. I saw him doing the puzzle.

Mrs. Jill: This one (Asher) has a very compassionate heart in him.

B & A: He does.

Mrs. Jill: And he likes it to be acknowledged. He feels proud of himself when he can be a good friend.

Mrs. Marshall: Right. He's aware.

Mrs. Jill: Which is a big deal. Like some kids aren't.

Mrs. Marshall: We need to, we need to. Hopefully through his life, he can learn how to control that temper. This is gonna be more.

Mrs. Jill: And that frustration level.

Mrs. Marshall: He's gonna have to learn some coping skills with that, because...

Mrs. Jill: But Mrs. Marshall's working really hard, you see what she's doing with him...

Mrs. Marshall: That's the most important thing for me for him, that is to be able to learn to control that temper as he gets older. Because he can just fly off the handle.

Mrs. Jill: Now this one I see the home environment needs to be really involved.

Mrs. Marshall: He needs boundaries. He needs to have those boundaries.

Mrs. Jill: And they have to reinforce what they're doing.

*Here, Mrs. Marshall refers back to what we'd said earlier in the conversation about the importance of boundaries.
(earlier)*

Mrs. Jill: ... The one thing I noticed that the home environment, that I really see, is I can tell the houses that have good boundaries, and houses that are very... And boundaries are hard. Some parents just can't do it. They want to be more, the, liked, you know, they have some popularity thing, they want to be the really "liked" parent. They don't realize that by setting boundaries, you're showing a lot of love. You know.

Mrs. Marshall: Or they maybe just don't want to deal with the consequences of having a child cry in public.

Mrs. Jill: Yeah. They get very ashamed or something. We see the parents, and you can tell them, I mean you can see it on their faces that they're embarrassed, or.

Mrs. Marshall: I think our society puts a lot of pressure on parents to have the perfect child, that doesn't act out and scream or cry in public,

Mrs. Jill: Oh it does!

Mrs. Marshall: And people can stare and be like, Why can't you handle your child?

Mrs. Jill: And it's like every child's different.

While Mrs. Marshall notes that Asher tends to take advantage of some of his gentler peers, she and Mrs. Jill agree that he is also self-aware, and strives to be a good friend. As the teachers allude to in this exchange, though both Asher and Jimmy demonstrate disruptive and even sometimes dangerous behaviors, the key discriminating factor between them is Asher's ability at times to act appropriately. Whereas Jimmy is never capable of appropriately navigating the class structure, Asher generally is. For Asher, his meltdowns are contextual, conditioned by peer altercations or, the teachers speculate, lack of sleep and boundaries at home. Mrs. Marshall's plan for him is to help

him develop the ability to control his temper, therefore, is to work with him on learning boundaries.

Asher's behavior also has an incredibly negative impact on his classmates.

Consider what Mrs. Marshall told me regarding its impact on Brian:

Mrs. Marshall: Um, Brian. Brian is getting a little bit sometimes silly, which is fun to kind of see. Um, what were your, this is kind of interesting, what would be your observations of him today?

Amy: Brian's, I don't know, Brian's funny. He was not nearly as... like when Asher's here, I see Brian and Asher interacting and bugging each other a lot, playing together a lot, and I feel like last time, the moms were, right? you were talking to Brian's mom about trying to like separate them...

Mrs. Marshall: separate them (nodding). Cause I think his mom, he was not wanting to come to school again.

Amy: Because of Asher?

Mrs. Marshall: 'Cause he was hitting him and bothering him so much. So she had to go to Mrs. Hansen (the preschool director). Cause I said, then say something to Mrs. Hansen, because I keep saying this stuff. But it would be nice, 'cause she was a kindergarten teacher, and said, I'm willing to go to Mrs. Hansen and say, you know to help move things along. And it has. So that's good. Um. (Asher's) Mom was in denial, kind of what we were saying, about sometimes he hurts his friends. And it was like, No... we've had her to call her to come into pick him up a couple of times. So...but we also kind of notice about Brian is that he can kind of, he can sometimes be physical, but then Asher will take it to a next level and it makes Brian uncomfortable. So when it happens, he sometimes doesn't know how to stop it. Or he says "Stop," 'cause he has told me, "I told Asher to stop, and he's not stopping." And it makes him uncomfortable, it doesn't make him feel safe. So, I think it's kind of like a combination: he wants to engage with him (Asher), a little wrestling, you know...

Amy: Kind of like what you were saying about John, last year?

Mrs. Marshall: Yeah. But he doesn't know how to... I think Asher can take it too far. And then he (Brian) gets upset, and then he doesn't have that trust situation.

As this example illustrates, Mrs. Marshall's interventions and eventual decision to refer Asher for special needs testing is made with not only his best interest in mind. She also worries that Asher's inappropriate behavior is interfering with the learning experiences of classmates like Brian. Brian, whose mother was a kindergarten teacher before taking time off to be at home with her young children, confided in Mrs. Marshall that Brian was reluctant to come to school because Asher made him uncomfortable. Not wanting Brian's

eagerness to come to school to be adversely impacted by Brian's rough-and-tumble play, Mrs. Marshall and Brian's mom collaborate in petitioning the preschool director to devise a more significant (out-of-classroom) intervention plan for Asher. If such an intervention plan was in place, Asher would benefit from having extra attention from an adult who could calm him down during an outburst, and in the longer-term, the documentation of such interventions could be used to persuade his mother of the need for professional assessment of a special need. Brian, too, would benefit, from knowing that Asher would not be able to stay in the classroom if he didn't follow the rules.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the structure of the broader organization, including both the class options offered to children of a particular age, as well as the need for permission from one's superiors to implement changes in placement within a term, affect the sort of differentiated learning experiences Mrs. Marshall can provide for students whose needs differ from those of the majority of their classmates.

Nordic

Given that children are only expected to walk and be potty trained upon beginning, children are rarely flagged as outliers because of their content-area skills. More commonly, kids are regarded by their coaches as exceptional due to disruptive behavior. Within the preschool class I focused on, there were no children whose exceptionally disruptive behavior rendered them outliers. However, over the four years I conducted research at Nordic, I did observe students' exceptionally disruptive behavior on several occasions. One instance in particular stands out from when I was being trained by Nick to coach my own preschool classes.

After observing classes at Nordic throughout the summer of 2015, I started working there in the Fall, because they were in need of coaches to teach recreational classes. Though I had 20 years of coaching experience, likely the questions I had been asking as an ethnographer about why coaches did things certain ways made me seem like a novice, and Nick, as the Recreational Program Director, wanted to make sure that I understood his system for teaching preschool before allowing me to teach my own classes. For this reason, I was “trained in” by following him around and assisting his classes for a session. To me, this seemed like an ideal opportunity to gain a better understanding of his instruction and the logic underlying it. Nick knew that I would be writing notes on his teaching methods and the children’s behavior for my research and seemed excited to share his knowledge.

During the first week of the session, I observed what happened when a four-year-old named Rory demonstrated extreme resistance to Nick’s instruction. Her extreme defiance rendered her an outlier in Nick’s multi-age 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old preschool class:

Though 4 of the kids in the class seemed to understand that they were supposed to do certain things in certain places, Rory didn’t seem to listen to anything Nick said. Her mom was in parent/tyke class at the same time, and she often looked around the gym to see what her mom and little brother were doing. When they rotated to the back circuit, Rory’s attention started to drift. When the other kids were following directions and sitting down criss-cross applesauce to wait for Nick to give them directions, she was climbing on the small, stuffed staircases placed beneath the high bar to help the children reach it. Nick stopped her and guided her back to her square. He showed them what to do at each of the stations, then told each one where to start.

The other kids tried their best to copy what Nick had showed them, but forgot details, like what to do on the squares (frog jumps), or how he wanted them to walk across the beam (stepping into passe, like flamingoes). They took turns and waited for the person in front of them to finish before they started.

Except for Rory. She ran through the circuit as quickly as she could, skipping anything she didn’t remember. She didn’t wait for her classmates. She

climbed besides one of the other little girls on the staircase and skipped the snake rope all together because the boy on it was going too slow. The only station she took her time on was the mini trampoline. There, she kept jumping so long that a line formed behind her of other children, patiently waiting for their turns.

I didn't want to intervene with her when she was doing the part of the circuit that Nick was on. But when she got over by me (near the staircases), I stopped her from running by placing my hands on her hips, and I asked her to look at me. When I had her attention, I asked her if she remembered what we were supposed to do there (pointing to the carpet squares she'd just run through).

She didn't respond at all, but made a move to escape.

I resisted her running forward and steered her by the waist back to the first carpet square. She wasn't oppositional yet, but she was clearly looking to get away. I said, "let's do our jumps together" and went beside her on them and jumped across.

She ignored me completely and bolted. I stopped her again and brought her back to the first square. I told her to use her listening ears, again getting down at her level and making sure she was looking at me. This time she complied, doing her jump across the carpet squares before running through the next few stations.

When she got back to me, I was prepared to do the same thing, to help her understand how to follow directions and to reinforce my expectations. I tried to get her attention, first by saying her name. Nick told me to let her go. He said he'd crush her later on. She's good, he explained, so he didn't want her to stop liking it.

Unlike most preschool classes who do stretching for the first 10 minutes, this group does stretching at the end of class because another group uses the stretching area at the beginning. This order seemed difficult for the kids because their attention span has dwindled by the end. Rory repeatedly tested Nick during this time. He told her to sit criss-cross applesauce and keep her hands on her knees. She took them off her knees as soon as he looked away and watched him closely. She had a smug and resistant look on her face.

As this example shows, Rory engaged in off-task behavior throughout the entirety of the 45-minute lesson. She climbed on the equipment when she was expected to sit with her classmates and listen to directions. She ran through preschool area, rather than completing the exercises prescribed at specific stations. She also failed to progress from one station to another along the circular path they were laid out in, tearing back and forth between her favorites across the circle instead. At the time, I reflected in my field notes

that I would have handled Rory's defiance differently than Nick did. Personally, I wrote, I think it's better to have consistent rules that always get enforced, especially for kids who aren't used to structure. But since it was Nick's class and he knew her and her family, I respected his judgement and refrained from contesting his advice. In retrospect, I realized that it wasn't that he disagreed with what I wanted to do, he just wanted to be the one to do it himself, perhaps because he would continue to be her teacher, even after I was done training in and had my own classes.

It became more clear the following week that Nick wanted her not simply to listen to the teacher but to listen to *him*:

Despite the fact that Rory was noticeably better throughout the class than she had been the week before, she was still frequently resistant, and by the end of class, Nick was losing it. He became even less tolerant of challenges to his authority as the group rotated to the last rotation: stretching.

Rory's hair fell out of its ponytail (or she took it out deliberately -- it's hard to tell which) about 5 minutes before the end of class. Her mom noticed (from where she was on a different circuit with Rory's little brother), and came over, walking through the middle of our circle of three-year-olds. Nick said to her mom that it was fine, and then before she was even out-of-earshot, said "Rory is going to have to deal with me without any interference from her mother."

Nick continued to make sure she did her sandwich properly. Going around the circle, he asked each kid what they wanted to put on their sandwich, and how many. Rory listed three things (weird things -- oranges were one of them, but I can't remember the other two) this week (as opposed to last week's solid minute-long list, which Nick took in stride), and then Nick asked how many (monkeys? earrings? oranges?) she wanted. She took a long time coming up with a number, and when she did, said something like 3. So we counted to three, patting our knees. Julian wanted peanut butter and when Nick asked, "How many peanut butters do you want?" said "10,000." Nick said, "Okay, let's count by thousands." The kids helped count along. They said "One," and Nick echoed, "thousand." They said "two," and Nick said, "thousand,"....

Then they spread everything all over their sandwiches (piking), got out their (imaginary) sandwich cutters, split their sandwiches in half (straddling), and gobbled them up.

When stretching was done, they did a few relays, then everyone carried their squares over to sit by the stop sign and wait. Nick emphatically told Rory to

sit down or she couldn't get her stamp. Afraid of losing her privilege, she squeezed in.

In this example, it becomes clear that Nick attributes Rory's behavior issues to her mother's helicopter parenting. When Rory's mother, baby in tow, interrupts Nick's class to style the hair of her three-year-old, Nick passive-aggressively retorts, "Rory is going to have to deal with me without any interference from her mother." Immediately afterward he ensures her proper body position for the pike stretch by manually making her into a human sandwich.

Because Nick has diagnosed the source of Rory's disruptive behavior, not as a special need, but as the result of an indulgent parent, he refrains from suggesting that her mother conference with her pediatrician. Instead, Nick decides, as Mrs. Marshall did regarding Asher, that she would benefit more from remaining in the classroom. There, she would have frequent opportunities to practice engaging with the class structure, and depending on the success of each attempt, he could provide her accordingly with punishment or praise.

In an interview, Nick explains his philosophy about how his escalating consequences work to change child behavior. He also addresses the significance of a child's intentionality.

Amy: What happens if they don't follow?

Nick: Um, it depends on to what degree. You have to kind of gauge if it's intentional or not. Usually intentional behavior will be met with negative reinforcement. And then unintentional will be more a reminder or positive. So if it's intentionally negative, I will very directly tell you, "You are bad and you should feel bad. You are wrong, and that's not what we do here." And then, if it's just, they have no idea, or they're like brand-new, um, then it's just, "This is what we should do. I don't want you to do that, I want you to do this." But each, if the behavior continues to happen, I react exponentially. So, first time, it's okay. Second time, no, it's not okay. Third time, get out. So, you just remove them from the situation. If they want to do it, then, they will change their behavior to stay....

Amy: So, I guess, how do you infer their intention? Can you give me an example of a kid that you knew was doing it on purpose, like breaking a rule on purpose? Like how did you know that was what was going through their mind?

Nick: Based on...so if you've already gone through all the steps of, No you shouldn't, No you shouldn't. And then, I've had ones where, "If you do that again," like make very clear, "If you do that again, then you have to go. I will remove you from class." And then you look away and look back. They look at you and do it anyway. That is intentional. And then I pick them up, no matter how big they are, and I remove them. And they have no choice. Whether they are kicking, screaming, anything else, they made the wrong choice. They understood what the consequences will be, and I follow through on the consequences. So, it's very very rare, but, being being genuine helps a lot. A lot of parents threaten and never follow through. I will never say something that I won't follow through on.

Here, Nick explains that if he has been clear in his expectations, and the child still doesn't comply, it is his job to assess whether the misbehavior is intentional or due to a continued lack of understanding. When it's deemed intentional, he issues a series of escalating consequences. Though this sort of intentional misbehavior is rare, when it occurs, Nick is not afraid to remove the child from class permanently, if necessary. He emphasizes the importance of following through when he threatens removal from class as a consequence, in order to teach the children what to expect if they disobey. Because the gymnastics gym is a dangerous environment for children who cannot follow the rules, they are not allowed to remain in class. They put themselves and others at risk with their potential for venturing into dangerous areas of the gym. If they were to traverse the landing mat for beam dismounts while a much older and bigger child was completing a routine with a double back flip or the diagonal of the floor exercise mat while a more powerful athlete was tumbling full-force, the outcome could be disastrous for both the naughty preschooler and the higher-level gymnast. Moreover, such antics also distract the coach from the other preschoolers in the class.

Given the escalating consequences Nick said he might administer when students like Rory, whom he has deemed capable of reforming their behavior to match his expectations, fail to do so, I asked Nick how parents react to this type of discipline. He explains that what the parents think does not matter to him at that point. Of pinnacle importance, however, is maintaining a safe environment for all the athletes in the gym, and for that reason, he has no problem kicking someone out. He implies that this sentiment holds even if it means the gym loses a customer.

Amy: How have parents...I mean, I'm assuming this isn't something you do very often, but...in the past, if you've ever done that, how do the parents usually react to that?

Nick: Usually pretty negatively.

Amy: To you or to the kid?

Nick: Um, to both. Both. It kind of depends on how well I know them. There have been some where they've hit the limit relatively quickly. And there's been other times where, after I've known somebody for awhile, I felt comfortable doing that. Most of the time, it doesn't need to escalate to that point, because I shut it down a lot sooner than that. But, if I ever get to that point, I no longer care if the parents are happy with me or not. That is a secondary thing. It just doesn't matter anymore. They just need to go.

Here, Nick explains that he is generally able to prevent children's defiant behavior from escalating to that point. When it occurs with a student who is relatively new, the parents—who have paid a great deal for their child's instruction—tend to be unhappy with Nick for dragging their kicking, screaming, child back to the lobby and prohibiting him or her from returning for the day. In these cases, dissatisfied parents sometimes request a refund and remove their child from lessons on their own. Other times, a typically manageable youngster has a very bad day. In those cases, Nick already has an established relationship with that child's parents, and relies on the rapport to elicit their support for his consequences. When preschoolers are kicked out of an independent

preschool class because of their inability to follow safety rules, Nick requires them to move into a Parent-Tykes class—where they must be accompanied by a parent—instead.

Outliers who Lack Potty Training

While it is sometimes difficult for teachers and coaches to gauge whether an exceptional behavior is severe enough to warrant significant intervention, other outlier behaviors are more cut-and-dry. Such is the case for potty training, which is formally required by both St. Cecilia School and Nordic Gymnastics. Despite this shared policy, how each site handles outliers who lack potty training is conditioned by the structure of course offerings available at the organization.

St. Cecilia’s expectation that preschoolers be potty trained before enrolling is clearly communicated to parents and faithfully enforced by preschool faculty members. The official policy is stated on its website: “All potty-trained 3-5-year-olds are welcome at the preschool, regardless of religious affiliation.” Occasionally, however, children will begin preschool before they are potty-trained, or despite demonstrating competency for a few weeks, they will begin to regress. This happened in Mrs. Marshall’s Tuesday-Thursday preschool class during the third week of school. A student named Mallory had a series of accidents at school, and then one day showed up wearing a pair of disposable pull-ups. Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill discussed this one morning before the children arrived.

When I get there on Monday morning, Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill are talking about Mallory, the youngest girl in their Tuesday-Thursday class who just turned 3. She came to class in a pull-up, and that’s not allowed; children are required to be potty-trained to be signed up for preschool. After this happened, Mrs. Marshall emailed her mom a reminder note explaining the policy in a nice way. She said it’s normal for kids to regress, especially when they just turned three. She suggested that even if she’s having accidents, it’s better to avoid putting children who are potty-trained back in pull-ups because it’s confusing to them. Apparently, the mom had emailed Mrs. Hansen over the weekend and Mrs.

Marshall on Monday informing them that she and her husband were going to pull Mallory out of the class for now because she's adopted and "adopted children need to be parented differently." As Mrs. Marshall relates this story to Mrs. Jill and me, she seems pretty horrified at Mallory's mother's decision and especially at her rationale for making it. Mrs. Jill is too, and I shake my head sympathetically. Mrs. Marshall says, "If that's her philosophy, she's gonna have a hard road ahead."

In this example, Mrs. Marshall acknowledges to Mallory's mother that regression among three-year-old children who are newly potty-trained is common, and that a few accidents are not grounds for removing her from preschool. She reiterates the rule, however, that pull-ups and diapers are not allowed in the classroom. To justify this rule, she communicates what she has learned over 20 years of experience working with newly potty-trained children: switching from underwear back to pull-ups confuses children. By sharing this insight with Mallory's mother, for whom Mallory is an adopted first child, she demonstrates her willingness to help Mallory develop the competency required to continue in preschool. Mallory's mother, however, is unwilling to comply with the "no pull-ups" rule, and instead opts to withdraw Mallory from preschool for the time being.

Mallory's case shows that sometimes, when teachers identify a child's behavior as beyond the acceptable norm, parents react in unexpected ways. Here, Mrs. Marshall's attempt to help Mallory's family to comply with the preschool program's rules result in their leaving the program altogether.

At Nordic Gymnastics, though technically, there is a requirement that children be potty trained upon beginning independent preschool classes, it is difficult to enforce. This is largely due to the fact that, since classes are 45 minutes long, most children have a parent or other caretaker observing each class in its entirety from the lobby. If a child who wears pull-ups or a diaper needs to go to the bathroom, a caretaker is on hand to

assist. Moreover, most parents, at the urging of Coach Nick, are good about taking their child to the bathroom immediately before class.

Outliers with Exceptional Skill in the Content Area

Here, I provide examples of children whose behavior renders them above the norm in a gymnastics or a school setting. For children in both settings, it was their exceptional ability in the content area that earned instructor attention and caused them to be regarded as high-end outliers. Because Nordic offered higher-level class for preschool children, whereas St. Cecilia did not, children were moved up to the higher-level class at gymnastics, while they received enrichment activities in the preschool classroom. In other words, I found that the main determinant of the accommodations received by advanced students was the structure of the courses provided by the organization.

St. Cecilia

Ethan is a bit of a special case because though his interactions with the structure reveals his weaknesses in social and gross motor skills, his one-on-one interactions with adults and older children like his third-grade buddy reveal his exceptional academic abilities. At the age of four, he has a large vocabulary, extensive knowledge in specialized interests like weather and automobiles, and can read entire books. On the other hand, he struggles to execute the physical activities presented in gym class, and in the classroom to follow along with Cosmic yoga and freestyle dancing when music is played on the Smart Board. Moreover, while he has no trouble interacting with peers during structured activities like lining up to transition from one activity to another, or while sitting on the carpet during Circle Time, he struggles to play with other children when interactions are volitional. As we saw in the last chapter, he also struggled to

disengage from activities like listening to a story read aloud to wash his hands or playing engineer with the playground steering wheel when it was dismissal time. Mrs. Marshall describes him this way:

Mrs. Marshall: Sometimes he's in his own world. I'm wondering if he's gonna be on the spectrum. He is brilliant, but he has no...social capabilities. So this'll be interesting to see how he develops in another year. We'll give him another year, but he is...I mean he is, he is completely reading. Like he read one of the books to the third graders during buddies.

Amy: Wow. I can believe it. Like, even with like the weather chart, he was obsessed with weather for a long time. He could read December, he could read "snowy" -- he knew it wasn't like "Snow" or "snowflake." Or something like, he knew it was "snowY".

Mrs. Marshall: Yeah. He's brilliant. But I also don't know if he has some... You know how some brilliant people just sometimes lack common sense. So like Claire was able to differentiate what you were saying, of, No, she means the real party, not the play party. This one (Ethan), I don't...sometimes, too, like, he's very literal. One time, I was like "Oh, Ethan, wouldn't it be cool if --what did I say?--like something could fly? or like, and he looked at me, like, "That can't fly." And I'm like, "No, what happens IF it could, like, pretend," and he's not... He's like, "No. That's not possible." (laughing) I'll be interested to see about Ethan, if they stay. I have a feeling that they maybe would send him to kindergarten here. It'd be kind of interesting to see because he's so smart, like he really kind of has social interaction development. It'll be kind of interesting to see if he could be one of those really brilliant Harvard teachers that have Asperger's. You know? He can't make connections.

Amy: Cause his interests are so, they're very narrow, they're very specific.

Mrs. Marshall: He has no... he cannot get a joke. He's very literal, right? He can't, it's black or white with him.

Though Ethan demonstrates off-the-charts reading ability for a preschooler, his atypical social behaviors and his difficulty with figurative word-play and counter-factual thinking renders him someone Mrs. Marshall plans to keep an eye on in the years ahead. Though she speculates that Ethan may have an autism spectrum disorder, his interactional differences have not yet interfered with his social development to an actionable extent. Neither has his exceptionally high reading ability caused him to lose interest in the content area tasks she offers her preschoolers. For students like Ethan who are extremely

advanced for their grade level, Mrs. Marshall generally tries to accommodate their needs within the classroom by differentiating her curriculum, as opposed to implementing the changes necessary to allow them to “skip” a grade.

Nordic

On the other end of the spectrum at Nordic, there are children who do not fit well in the MightyTots class because they are too advanced. In the preschool class that was the focus of this study, Bailey was one such student whose physical ability set her apart from the others.

On the donkey kick station, Bailey does a bounce almost to handstand.

Mia walks around her.

“Why is the birdie in here?” Vivienne asks. There is indeed a bird flying around the rafters of the gym.

“Cause sometimes we leave the door open. They like to swoop down on small children,” Nick says. “Sometimes they come in here on accident.”

“On accident?” Vivienne asks.

“They don’t do it on purpose. They just come in here on accident,” Nick clarifies.

As this example shows, in contrast to her classmates, Bailey demonstrates not only impeccable on-task behavior, she also performs a bounce to handstand on the small trampoline – a skill that is a good indicator that she will be able to easily learn the handstand flatback vault required in entry-level competition. Whereas Vivienne is mesmerized by the birds in the gym and stops her exercise to chat with Nick about them, Bailey maintains a steely focus on her station. Her small body inverts quickly, popping back and forth between upright on the trampoline and handstand with her hands on a small mailbox-shaped mat. Not only is she quick and focused, her tight legs remain together and straight, drawing Nick’s praise for her “good form” and serving as a telltale indicator of her attention to detail.

Another week, Bailey's exceptional ability reveals itself in her ability to listen to and make detailed corrections regarding her execution of the basic gymnastics skills demanded by the bar circuit. Moreover, in contrast to the other children who get confused about what to do on each station and who are far more focused on their conversations, Bailey remembers what to do from having simply watched Nicks' initial demonstration.

Mia gets a spot on the rings. She says her baby sister sleeps all the time.

Nick says, "That's because she's little."

Wyatt says, "A stuffed animal always makes me go to sleep."

"Miss Mia, can you go armpits in?" Nick asks. "Can you make the same shape as the bear, Donovan?"

"What?" Donovan asks.

"Can you do what the bear is doing? Sit on the ground and put your belly in the air. It's a table," Nick explains. He helps Donovan do this. "Yeah, it is a table!"

Pointing at high bar, Vivienne asks, "Can you help me go up there?"

"In a minute when it's your turn," Nick tells her.

Donovan gets confused and goes to rings instead of low bar. Nick tells him, "In a little bit, you're on this one."

Donovan runs back and Nick helps him to hang like a possum on low bar.

Wyatt does the possum by himself on p-bars. "My hands!" he exclaims. He claps and shakes them. Then he does another one. Talking to himself while stuck in possum hang, he says, "Uh oh. My head." Then he figures out how to unhook his legs and put his feet on the floor.

They rotate. Wyatt does armpit hang. "I did it!" he shouts. "Hey Nick, look what I did!"

He comes down, then seeing Nick was finishing helping Donovan on high bar, resumes his previous position and calls out again to get Nick's attention.

"Nice job, Wyatt," Nick says. Then Nick helps Vivienne on her p-bar possum hangs. After that, he goes to help Donovan.

"My hands are sweaty," Vivienne comments, half to herself.

"Where do I go?" Wyatt asks.

"To the tire swing," Nick tells him. Then he turns to the self-sufficient child on the chin up station, "Chin up and down, Bailey. Less swinging. Pull your head up and down. Put your feet on the bar. Yeah! Yeah!" Bailey does like ten pull ups, easily. Then she talks to Mia.

"You're six?" Mia asks her.

"I'm five," Bailey says, exasperated.

"I'm in kindergarten," Wyatt says.

Donovan and Wyatt go over to Nick who's helping Bailey who's already rotated to possums.

Here, when Bailey rotates to the chin-up station, she knows what to do, but her technique isn't quite correct. Since it's hard to pull up from a dead hang without swinging, Nick tells her to put her feet on the lower bar in front of her. Then he coaches her to pull her chin up and over the bar without swinging. As he talks her through the motions, she listens and changes what her body is doing. When she executes the skill correctly, it is easy for her and she is capable of doing quite a few in a row. This example also shows that in contrast to most of the other children who require reminders about where to go and what to do, Bailey rotates immediately and gets to work as soon as Nick tells the group to switch. On the basis of her outstanding athleticism and focus, Bailey was recommended to enroll in the higher-level preschool class, SuperTots, the following session.

With children like Bailey, who are too advanced for the MightyTots class, these outliers are tapped for participation in the SuperTots program, an invitation-only, slightly longer preschool class for "advanced" girls up to 5 years old. The boys' program does not have an equivalent advanced-track preschool class, due to a combination of factors including its lower enrollment and the fact that boys physically mature and peak in their gymnastics careers later than girls do. But for girls, in a sport where the best athletes in the world peak at 19 years of age (London 2012 Olympic participation statistics), starting early offers an advantage. SuperTots, as the entry level class for the ELITE track, prepares talented preschool-aged girls for a seamless transition into the Developmental program (described in Chapter 5), which in turn enables them to compete at a higher level at a younger age.

Only children who really stand out in MightyTots get chosen to participate in SuperTots, and even fewer accept the challenge. Of those, fewer still remain in the SuperTots class until they are old enough for either the Developmental class, if they are successful, or the Compulsory team, if they are less so.

And the criteria for getting in is not easy. Excellent social and behavioral skills are a prerequisite, but on top of those, other characteristics are desirable.

Amy: Well that makes sense. How do you decide who gets to be in SuperTots?

Nick: Part of it's just how, if they can already accomplish everything in class, like, if they can get to the point of what I would want them to be for Shooting Stars, before they're age eligible to be in Shooting Stars. Or if they just have an above-and-beyond natural talent.

Amy: So, when you say "what you want them to accomplish before they can be in Shooting Stars" and before you said "Shooting Stars should be able to walk and go to the bathroom", I'm assuming you have higher standards for the kids you're deciding to put in?

Nick: My standards versus my expectations are different.

Amy: Okay, okay.

Nick: I don't expect. Cause Shooting Stars can start without ever having taken class; whereas SuperTots, since it's invite only, you are already above and beyond the curve.

Amy: In a perfect world, what would you like them to be able to do when they come in to Shooting Stars, like just your typical preschool kid.

Nick: They should listen, follow, and be able to make a correction on the first try.

Amy: Yeah, I mean, that's much higher than most kids come in with.

Nick: Yeah, but, being in the invite-only one, it's a separate set of expectations.

Amy: And with these kids who are invited, are there any red flags, or any things that would make you say, like, absolutely not?

Nick: If they can't follow corrections. Or if they are unable or unwilling to listen. If I have to spend time with behavior, it's a red flag. Cause that's a waste of time later. Um, if I as the coach can just work on gymnastics and not on the other stuff, then that's usually a good sign. If I ever have to think that maybe they couldn't, they can't.

Amy: So, it's just a definite... You can be pretty choosey.

Nick: Yeah, I can be very very choosey.

Nick notes that the program is highly selective, and that he can be very “choosey” in terms of which children are invited to participate. He notes that in contrast to the children in the regular Shooting Stars class, these children are not yet in kindergarten. However, despite their younger age, they are already capable of performing skills—both

social and behavioral as well as physical—at the level of the ideal Shooting Star. They should be able to “listen, follow, and make corrections on the first try,” or to “have above-and-beyond natural talent.”

Nick elaborates on the relationship between the behavioral skills and the physical skills. Though he initially identifies them both as equal indicators of a child’s eligibility for the “advanced” track program, as he explains, it becomes clear that the behavioral skills are more indispensable. He remarks that having to “spend time with behavior” wastes the coach’s time, limiting opportunities to “just work on gymnastics and not the other stuff.” Therefore, children who “can’t follow corrections” or who “are unwilling or unable to listen,” or even those whom Nick “ever ha[s] to think that maybe they can’t,” are not invited.

I ask Nick just how likely it is that a child will be identified as talented in MightyTots. He informs me, “Um, I would say on average, I invite—it’s been a little less lately, ‘cause I haven’t had as much time to run things—I’d say like probably 20 a year, in any given year. And probably 15 out of those 20 initially accept. 10 will continue for any given period of time, and like 5 to 7 will actually finish through when I like push them out into other classes.”

Interventions for Instructor-Identified Outliers depend on Institutional Structure

When children are identified as outliers by the teacher or coach of a particular class, that instructor must determine the best way to meet their needs. How instructors meet the needs of those outliers depends heavily on the classes provided by the educational organization and how they are structured. This entails considering whether the child would benefit from being placed in a different class when the organization

offers alternative classes for students of the same age. If there's only one preschool gymnastics class, then all kids must stay in it, even if they're markedly more or less equipped to handle its structure than their peers. If there are two half-day preschool classes, then teachers have the option of moving them to the other one if they feel it's a better fit. At both St. Cecilia and Nordic, there are several instructional options available for students of preschool age.

St. Cecilia school offers three preschool options that serve children of different ages and vary in their length and cost. The first is an all-day option that meets from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. for potty trained children ages 3 – 5. Parents can choose to enroll their children in all-day preschool two, three, four, or five days per week. The second option is a prekindergarten class for 4- and 5-year-old students that meets from 9:15 a.m.- 3:45 p.m. Parents can choose a three-day, Monday, Wednesday, Friday option; a two-day, Tuesday and Thursday option; or a two-day, Monday and Friday option. The third option is the half-day preschool, which I observed. Half-day preschool is available in two- or three-day-per-week options. Children ages 3 ½- to 5-years-old can attend the three-day, Monday, Wednesday, Friday option, whereas 3- & 4-year-olds can attend the two-day, Tuesday and Thursday option. After preschool, there are three classrooms each for all-day kindergarten, first, and second grade. For third, fourth, and fifth graders, there are two classrooms per grade. For middle schoolers in grades six through eight, there are two homerooms for each grade, but students switch classes for different subjects.

This means that when Jimmy's behavior marks his development as significantly behind that of his peers, Mrs. Marshall has the option of moving him to a different class where the children are developmentally younger. On the other hand, though Ethan

demonstrates exceptionality at reading other academic skills, there is not a sort of pull-out enrichment class that he can be recommended for (such as the gifted program I focus on in Chapter 6), and as a result, Mrs. Marshall must meet his needs by differentiating instruction in her classroom.

At Nordic, 45-min., once-per-week, co-ed preschool classes are offered for children as young as 18 months old. For these lessons, called “Parent-Tot” classes, children do not have to be potty trained, and they are accompanied by a parent, who monitors their behavior and helps them to complete basic gymnastics skills. For potty-trained children, independent preschool classes are offered exclusively for 3-year-olds, exclusively for 4-year-olds, and exclusively for 5-year-olds, as well as in multi-age 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old groups. Nordic also offers a “Super-Tot,” invitation-only, one-hour preschool class for students identified as having high ability, which is the entry-level class for the alternative “fast-track” program. Beginning with preschool classes, the vertical class structure offered by Nordic is similar to that of St. Cecilia in that there is a sequence of classes through which children are expected progress in regular annual steps. Children in three-year-old preschool enroll in four-year-old preschool upon turning four, and four-year-olds begin five-year-old preschool after celebrating their fifth birthday. When children in five-year-old preschool classes begin kindergarten, they are shifted into the recreational program, where they begin with “Shooting Stars.” Typically children require one year in each recreational level to demonstrate mastery and move on. What’s different between the class structures of the two sites, however, is the comparatively large proportion of children who do not follow the typical, one-year-at-each-level track at Nordic Gymnastics. Whereas it is unusual—at least after kindergarten—for children to get

held back a year or to skip a grade at St. Cecilia's, it is relatively common for a gymnast to require significantly more or less time than a year to master the skills at each level. This means that, over time, a child who progresses more swiftly may spend only six months in each level and may master the sequence of available courses by third grade, in contrast to a child who develops more slowly and requires two years to master the skills at each level. It is also relatively common for children to take time off from gymnastics to pursue other activities, something which also delays their progress.

This structure prescribes the options Nick has for moving the children he identifies as outliers. As we saw with Rory, though her behavior was disruptive, Nick did not regard it as improper enough to warrant moving her back into the Parent-Tot class. He expressed confidence in his own ability to teach her to follow his system, despite the fact that her mothers' guidance when she was in Mighty Tikes had not accomplished this goal. On the other hand, Bailey's exceptional gymnastics talent prompted Nick to recommend that she sign up for Super-Tots at the end of the eight-week session in his class.

At St. Cecilia's, the year-long duration of the preschool class meant that making an exception and moving a child by means other than those prescribed by school policy was a lot of work, but worthwhile because it would impact Jimmy's learning, and the learning of his classmates for an entire year. In contrast, because Nordic's sessions lasted a much shorter eight-weeks, waiting until the end of the session to move Bailey added enough convenience for both Bailey's parents and Nordic's administrators to warrant leaving her in Nick's Mighty-Tots class for the remainder of the session. Because so few children were chosen to participate in Super-Tots, far fewer class options were offered,

and all were in the evening. For Bailey's parents, this would require switching her from a 2:15 class on Tuesday afternoons to a different weeknight after 4:00. For the administration, this would potentially mean adding an additional child to an already full class. Given more than a month to prepare, however, these changes could be implemented without major inconvenience, and in the meantime, Nick could provide Bailey with additional challenges by differentiating his instruction in the Mighty-Tots class.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that Mrs. Marshall and Nick follow the same general process when identifying children whose behavior differs significantly from that of their peers. For both of them, this process begins with their determination of which children exhibit behaviors that are beyond the "normal" range. I show how the structured learning environments prompt children to engage in interactions that are then regarded by instructors who gauge their typicality. Next, teachers and coaches generate hypotheses about what is causing the behaviors that are markedly different from those of their peers. In the final stage of the process, teachers and coaches make accommodations to meet the child's needs.

Motivated by genuine concern for her students, Mrs. Marshall and Nick are both eager to document issues so that children in need of special education services don't "fall through the cracks" and fail to receive the help they need. In identifying child behaviors that fall outside the "normal" range, they attend to what I call the three types of attention. For instance, in monitoring students' task attention, Mrs. Marshall makes a note to keep an eye on the twins, Brandon and Luke, because of their struggle to attend to entire multi-

step tasks like putting on their winter clothing. She voices concerns that Vann may have cognitive processing issues because of how slowly and ineffectively he colored his stick figure and washed his hands. She speculates that he doesn't pay attention to the right things while working on the task – instead of monitoring his progress toward completion, he was merely going through the motions. And, she speculates that Ethan, while very advanced in reading, may at some point be diagnosed as having Asperger syndrome because of his inability to disengage his attention, his fixation on particular topics, and his inability to attend to figurative meanings of language (e.g., with jokes or word play, he'd get “stuck” on the literal meanings). To Nick, Donovan's tendency to forget what to do on different stations and which station to go to next could indicate a task-attention-related deficit. However, because he is the youngest child in his class, his difficulty attending to the appropriate stimulus at the right time could simply indicate that he needs more time to learn how to navigate the structure of the class. Rory's behavior of quickly running through all the stations signaled to Nick a more serious cause for concern. Given that she was already five years old, he expected her to be able to understand the difference between “station” rotations and “circuit” rotations – at least after hearing the rules explained and participating in each type for eight consecutive weeks.

Some children's use of collective attention raises red flags for Mrs. Marshall as well. Brian, for instance, often gets distracted and plays with the signs on the wall, rather than focusing on the speaker during circle time, and Mrs. Marshall monitors this as a possible indicator of an attention deficit disorder. Regarding individualized attention-- the kids who struggle to share attention with peers during free play, like Bella, cause Mrs. Marshall to voice concern about her emotional self-regulation skills to her mother, so she

can work on it at home. Asher, who primarily struggles to exchange individualized attention with classmates, sometimes also struggles with task attention because he gets overwhelmed by frustration, or with collective attention, because he can't cope when he really wants to share and doesn't get called on. Because of Asher's difficult time shifting his concentration away from his own salient emotional state, Mrs. Marshall recommends his parents speak with his pediatrician about possible causes.

In both preschool and gymnastics, there are some children who struggle with all three types of attention. Both Mrs. Marshall and Nick regard the presence of multiple challenges as indicators of more severe problems requiring prompt conversations with the child's parents. Given Jimmy's struggles with all three types of attention, Mrs. Marshall began documenting his issues in the classroom—in particular, his extreme difficulty in refraining from constant attention-seeking from adults and peers—as the first step toward securing a professional assessment of his needs. For Nick, it is clear that Rory struggles to participate appropriately during the stretching circle, as well as to look at and listen to her coach and follow directions. These inappropriate collective and individualized attention behaviors, in turn, prompt him to analyze whether her behavior is caused by a disability or whether she simply has not experienced the socialization that occurs when participating in a structured class context. Because at times she could comply with the rules—like when stamps were being provided and she knew she would only get one if she complied with Nick's expectations—he assessed her inappropriate behaviors as ones he could extinguish through more consistent reinforcement in his gymnastics class.

Yet, despite these similarities in how Nick and Mrs. Marshall come to identify certain children as outliers, specific steps of the process differ in a number of ways.

These differences across sites owe to the differing nature of the content area activities and their organizational structure. For instance, it is easier for Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill to notice particular outlying social behaviors like extreme difficulty sharing because their daily schedule involves 20-minute sessions of free play. During this time, children are expected to select their own toys and playmates, and to negotiate play without the help of adults. At gymnastics, in contrast, there are limited opportunities for children to share. The only issue with sharing that regularly arises is when children vie for foam squares of a certain color at the beginning of class. However, because Nick has access to an entire stack of foam squares with many of each color, he is able to rapidly resolve the issue by producing a second square of the desired shade. Another difference is that the activities encouraged in gymnastics class permit easier identification of content area skills than do the preschool classroom. For this reason, it is far more likely that children with poor social skills will go unidentified in gymnastics than in school. In gymnastics, children physically jump off of things, climb ladders and ropes, and swing, rendering almost everything they do a data point for assessing their physical strength, flexibility, and fearlessness. It is much more difficult to observe children's academic knowledge, in contrast. A child's knowledge of how to count to 20, how to read, or how to sing the entire ABC song only remains latent throughout much of the school day, only becoming observable when a teacher asks them to demonstrate that skill. Because of this, it is more likely that a child's outstanding content area ability will go unrecognized in school than in gymnastics.

The organizational structure of each learning institution also importantly affects the accommodations teachers and coaches are able to secure for students who are outliers.

In the school case, there are only two half-day preschool options available for parents to choose from: one that meets three days per week on Mon, Wed., and Fri., and another that meets two days per week on Tues., and Thurs. This limits the how much Mrs. Marshall can group or separate children based on their particular needs. Moreover, in the school case, though there is a great deal of institutional pressure on teachers to maintain high enrollment, there is also pressure from NAECYS, which grants accreditation, to adhere to policies governing student-to-teacher ratio for children of various ages and capabilities. At Nordic Gymnastics, there are many other preschool classes and many other preschool gymnastics teachers. If a child is not capable of attending class independently, coaches can encourage the option of switching them to a Parent-Tot class, many which are offered at the same time as the Mighty-Tots classes, and for which the cost is the same. Also, for children who demonstrate advanced skill in comparison to others their age, there is also the Super-Tots class. However, the number of children who can be invited is limited by the small number of spots available within the Super-Tots class. As a result, only the children who are extremely ahead are identified and invited.

The process by which instructors determine outliers and accordingly differentiate their instruction or placement has important implications for equity. Instructors explain these decisions to retain children in preschool or to refer to them for special education testing and services as in the children's best interest, because they believe that strong social skills are of paramount importance for learning. As a result, they fail to recognize that the patterns in who they are disproportionately retaining (low income kids and kids of color) and promoting (affluent white kids), and the implications of such for children's actual outcomes.

Chapter 5

Student Evaluation and Placement: How Instructors Weigh Social and Content Area Skills

After Mrs. Marshall and Coach Nick have identified and accommodated the children whose needs differ markedly from those of their peers, their focus is freed up to analyze and accommodate differences among the remaining majority of children in their classes. In this chapter, I draw primarily on the explanations the instructors provided in in-depth interviews in late-February and April to understand the rationale for their formal categorization of children at end of the term. I analyze these explanations to understand the relative weight the instructors give to their evaluations of children's social skills and content area skills when making recommendations for post-preschool placement.

I show that for both instructors, assessments of children's social skills largely override assessments of their content area ability in decisions regarding promotion to kindergarten or recommendation to advanced-track preschool gymnastics. By the end of the school year and gymnastics session, the children who are regarded as having stronger social skills are recommended for promotion to kindergarten and to kindergarten gymnastics. This holds true even if they are weak in their content area skills. In contrast, children who are regarded as having weaker social skills are recommended for retention in both preschool and preschool gymnastics classes, even if they meet expectations for kindergarten readiness in the content area. However, because the institutional policies regarding mobility from preschool to kindergarten differ in the academic and athletic settings, teachers' evaluations and placement recommendations have different

implications for children's success in the school or sports relative to their peers. In the remainder of this chapter, I focus first on Mrs. Marshall's and then on Nick's categorization logic, followed by a comparison of the two.

How Mrs. Marshall Evaluates Students and Recommends Placement

In order to understand Mrs. Marshall's criteria for categorizing students as kindergarten ready, it is necessary first to get greater clarity about what she expects children to do to achieve that status. To do this, I ask, "I want to hear your thoughts on who's kindergarten ready, and what qualifies you as being kindergarten ready." In response, she explains to me the academic skills which kindergarten teachers expect the children to demonstrate upon entry.

- Mrs. Marshall: So, at our kindergarten, they want them to know all their upper case. They're not too worried about lower case, but they should at least know all of their upper case.
- Amy: That's good to know...in terms of the expectations, where they're trying to be by the end of the year.
- Mrs. Marshall: Yep, and they should know 1 through 20.
- Amy: Written or just counting?
- Mrs. Marshall: Just like identifying and counting.

During this conversation, Mrs. Marshall mentions the expectation that before kindergarten, children should be able to recognize letters and numbers, and have the ability to count to 20. She estimates that about 90% of her students begin preschool already knowing the colors of the rainbow, basic shapes, and how to sing the alphabet, but that this is definitely expected by kindergarten. They also should be able to identify common animals and the sounds they make. The social skills she notes include how to share, how to be patient and wait their turn, and how to use their words to ask for something they want or need.

Because Mrs. Marshall's students range in age from 3 - 5, only nine of the 18 are age-eligible for promotion to kindergarten in the fall. Mrs. Marshall considered five of the nine – Dekari, Lily, John, Hadley, and Faith – to be “kindergarten ready” and encouraged their promotion to kindergarten in the fall. She did not regard the other four students – Vann, Bella, Brian, and Asher – as “kindergarten ready,” largely due to difficulties with social skills. Mrs. Marshall encouraged Bella, Brian, and Asher's parents to delay their kindergarten entry for a year, in a process known as kindergarten “redshirting.” Mrs. Marshall did not encourage Vann to delay kindergarten entry because, having attended preschool for three consecutive years, he had already taken his “redshirt” year, and would be nearly 7 years old upon beginning kindergarten were he to wait another.

Table 1. Mrs. Marshall's Students Who Are Age-Eligible for Kindergarten in Fall 2018

Child	Social Skills	Academic skills
Vann	Weak	Adequate
Bella	Weak	Strong
Brian	Strong/Adequate	Weak
Asher	Weak	Weak
Dekari	Strong	Strong
Lily	Strong	Adequate
John	Strong	Adequate/Weak (fine motor)
Hadley	Strong	Adequate
Faith	Strong	Adequate

Red cells = children are categorized by Mrs. Marshall as not ready for kindergarten and/or recommended for retention (“redshirting”)

Green cells = children are categorized as “kindergarten ready” and recommended for promotion.

Students who struggle with social skills and their placement recommendations

In this section, I focus on the children whom Mrs. Marshall does not regard as “kindergarten ready⁸.” Discussing Vann, Bella, and Brian each in turn, I show that Mrs. Marshall bases her kindergarten readiness decisions largely on the children’s ability to pay and seek attention appropriately during the social interactions required of them in the classroom.

Among the children about whom Mrs. Marshall voices misgivings about going to kindergarten in the fall is Bella. Bella is a bilingual Polish-American girl with curly blond hair she often wears in high pigtails. After meeting her and her mother for the first time at the Meet & Greet event, Mrs. Marshall laughingly remarks, “Bella’s a chatterbox.” By our November interview, both Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill have gotten to know her better and offer more in-depth analyses. They speak diplomatically of Bella’s signature shrill vocal tone that never reduces itself to the decibel level of an inside voice, and her dramatic story-telling. “She has a very, very strong personality.” Mrs. Jill adds, “She’s what I’d call, I’d describe her as passionate. It’s like when she likes someone, the whole world has to love it. And when she doesn’t, it’s kind of, you have to hate it.”

By February, it is Bella’s dramatic communicative style, her difficulty with self-regulation, and her inability to share toys that gives Mrs. Marshall pause about her kindergarten readiness. These concerns prompted her to discuss her misgivings about

⁸ I do not discuss Asher here because his exceptional behavior and Mrs. Marshall’s response to it was addressed in the last chapter.

Bella's kindergarten readiness with her mother in the early spring, to forestall surprising her by such a recommendation later on.

Mrs. Marshall: This one, Bella, I have told Mom, cause we're not going to meet until after conferences cause they're going on vacation, my reservations about her going into kindergarten, is because she is so dramatic and has a hard time self-regulating her emotions. Um, the other day, she had three crying meltdowns. Over that whole, sharing, Claire situation. And just crying, and uh, god. You know what I mean. I just have concerns about that. And being, like Mom says, "Oh yeah, totally dramatic." But like I said, "learning what to be upset about."

Amy: Yeah, *so* upset about.

Mrs. Marshall: Right? I mean you can be sad, right, and you can be disappointed and frustrated, but is that something to really cry about? Are you physically hurt? I mean, you can cry when your emotions are hurt, too, but... So that's really hard to explain to a three or four-year-old what's appropriate and what's not to cry over. Because we don't want to think well, just because someone hurt your feelings, you can't cry. But over someone not sharing in 5 minutes?

Amy: Yeah. Or not giving up the toys they were playing with because you asked them to, when they're still playing with them.

Mrs. Marshall: [*nodding*] When they're still playing with them. So that's been the trickiness, and my concern for her for kindergarten. And socially.

Amy: It's interesting, because how do you teach that. I've seen you do those things...you know.

Mrs. Marshall: You know? You just gotta keep reminding them, but I don't, it's not sinking in.

During our April interview, I commented to Mrs. Marshall that the class seemed to be managing their social interactions more independently than they did during the first half of the year. She agreed that on the whole, that was true, but pointed to Bella as the lone exception. This excerpt of our conversation illustrates her continued concern over Bella's social skills:

Amy: They're talking to each other more, they're, you know, they're negotiating their play, on their own terms. and they're almost completely self-sufficient in doing that.

Mrs. Marshall: The only person that's still struggling with that is Bella. She for a little while was getting better there. Her and Claire are no longer really butting heads, but Bella still has to do a lot of negotiating and play around that baby and that phone. It's fascinating.

....

Mrs. Marshall: Mom and dad are going to send her to kindergarten. I was kind of on the fence about that because socially she struggles. Because maturity and emotional regulation, she's just, the whining... I mean, she still has three more months, but she's a summer birthday, so she'll be on the younger end. But I just get a little concerned about her going to kindergarten and making friends.

Amy: Yeah, definitely.

Mrs. Marshall: I think cognitively she'll be fine. But I do think that she might struggle with peers and developing friendships, so hopefully though. And mom realizes it

and knows about it too. Mom and Dad know that her personality in general is kind of more draining for people. More intense, she's always so much more intense, so, but yeah. She's kind of the only one that I would like to see a little bit more progress before the end of the year, but...

Here, Mrs. Marshall expresses ambivalence about Bella's beginning kindergarten in the fall. She mentions, almost in passing, that Bella's cognitive performance meets the standard for kindergarten readiness. Indeed she demonstrates her remarkable verbal skills almost constantly, telling elaborate stories to adults, and trying to impose truly imaginative play narratives upon her friends. She goes on to describe Bella's struggles to share the most desirable toys with other girls in the classroom, and notes her social struggles, her immaturity, and her difficulty with self-regulation. She also voices concerns about Bella's ability to develop friendships in kindergarten. Nonetheless, parents do not have to follow her placement recommendations, and in this case, Bella's parents have decided not to heed her advice. Because of this, Mrs. Marshall tries to show support for their decision by making an effort to express some optimism about Bella's ability to make social progress before the end of the year.

Vann, too, was a student for whom Mrs. Marshall expressed concern with regard to kindergarten entry in the fall. Mrs. Marshall noted, that, like, Bella, Vann's social skills – not his academic skills – were the source of her concern. Vann is an English language learner, whose parents have come to the United States from India. His father works in IT, and his mother stays home with him and his younger sister. During the year I observed, he was in Mrs. Marshall's half-day preschool class for the third time, and, at 4 years, 8 months old in September, he was the second-oldest student in the class.

Mrs. Marshall's primary concerns about Vann's kindergarten readiness center on his social skills and task attention behaviors. While she acknowledges

that he has made some progress, she remarks that he often “spaces out” and stares, and he continues to struggle with task completion.

Mrs. Marshall: Okay, so Vann, I've had for three years. He's making huge improvements in his final year. I still have some concerns about him socially. He's talking more, but he's... Jane and I [think]... he's still kind of adrift... On Wednesday, he was doing staring more. And he wasn't here today. So I don't know if he was coming down with something, he was getting tired? I'm wondering if that's the pattern? But he was a lot like that last year. But we still see—he's still—it takes a long time for him to finish tasks. I still haven't been able to pinpoint what's going on with him.

Amy: Cause the task-completion thing shouldn't have anything to do with language? I mean, like, you wouldn't think it has anything to do with like understanding directions or like the verbal part, right?

Mrs. Marshall: I think it's more with like cognitive processing and attention. Because by now, if I hand him, let's say a coloring sheet. After three years, and how old he is, he should be able to color a small picture, like if it's a person with pants, a shirt, and shoes, he should be able to color that. Do you know what I'm saying? Well, were you here when we were still doing the puppets? And [he made] the black one? It took him the whole class, almost the whole free play to do that and he didn't even finish it. So it's just those kinds of things, I'm like, well..... I don't know why you're not able to complete that. You know what I mean?

Here, Mrs. Marshall provides evidence of the social struggles which give her pause about Vann's readiness for kindergarten. Describing his trouble with task completion, she refers to a day during “Family week” when the children created stick puppets of family members out of popsicle sticks, markers, and pre-cut felt “clothing.” Vann, seeming to find satisfaction in coloring part of his popsicle stick as inky-black as possible, over and over again for twenty minutes, never finished coloring the entirety of his stick-man's legs. This occurrence was not unique. Vann struggled to complete other tasks, like washing his hands after playing with gooey glurch, for instance. After ten minutes or so in the bathroom with the water running, his hands would remain as far from clean as they were before he left the activity table.

During our interview at the end of April, Mrs. Marshall, discusses additional concerns about Vann's social skills. Reiterating her concerns about his struggle with task-

completion, she adds that she is also worried about his ability to gauge other children's emotional responses when he attempts to interact. She explains:

Mrs. Marshall: I said that to Jane last week, I said, I am concerned about his cognitive processing. It is so slow. I just can't put my finger on it. I don't know what it is. But I have never had a child that had that slow of processing. Like he'd sit down to do any kind of project, he just takes like 15 minutes, and he doesn't even sometimes complete it.

...

Mrs. Marshall: And I think he tries to engage sometimes with Asher. And Asher gets so mad at him. And he doesn't know. He can't process when Asher's like starting to get irritated, like when it triggers something or he's setting him off. And he'll try to engage with him and Asher just will scream at him. And I'll just be like, "Vann, Asher needs time right now."

(Pause.) But he still hasn't really bonded with anyone. I noticed though, that he does try to get in there with Jake and John when they're building or putting those cars down the tubes. But he really doesn't verbalize to engage... He's a nice kid. He's sweet. I just feel bad for him. And he's not going to go to St. C's next year. Cause this is his third year of preschool. So it's too bad. It would be too bad to see.

Amy: So is he gonna be in kindergarten next year in public school?

Mrs. Marshall: (nods)

Amy: Oh wow. Do you think he could have a hard time?

Mrs. Marshall: *Yeah.* (emphatically) Yeah.

Here, Mrs. Marshall describes her worries that Vann will have a hard time forming friendships with peers. She notes his inability to gauge other students' reactions to his attempts to interact. She refers in particular to Vann's frequent disregard of Asher's body language— putting both hands up to hold off his approach; or looking, turning, or moving away—and his attempts to communicate verbally—whining or shouting, “leave me alone,” “no,” or “stop.” Rather than respecting these signs as indicators that Asher doesn't want to play, Vann often persists in trying to add blocks to Asher's tower, wave colorful scarves in his face during music, or hold on to the back of his tricycle during recess, prompting an angry response from Asher.

Despite Mrs. Marshall's concerns about his social skills, Vann seems to be doing reasonably well academically. Mrs. Marshall expresses confidence in his knowledge of the ABCs, and his ability to recognize all the capital letters. She is less confident in his awareness of phonics. During our February interview, she speculates about his academic preparation in the home. Her inferences are based on generalizations from her experiences with other Indian students and draw largely upon stereotypical tropes about Indian cultural orientations toward schooling.

Amy: So what about letters and stuff with him? I know his vocabulary's pretty good.

Mrs. Marshall: So I'm gonna have to test him, assess him [formally] on Monday, but I think he's pretty good at that. What's interesting with [my Indian students] is that they usually know the letters very early, because in their culture, it's very academic. Like, it's all by memory, it's not by absorption and understanding. So they'll be able to spit it out, but they don't know and understand the concept behind it. Even though they think that they've learned it, they don't really know it. I'll be like what letter is that? "A" "B". Okay, what sound does A make?"
Shrug.

Mrs. Marshall: ...what can I say about the stages? He's not progressing as far as I wanted to socially, and communicating with peers. He tries to start a little bit now engaging and laughing. And he understands what they're doing, but I still think, verbally, he doesn't know what to say, he doesn't know what to do to engage with them, to talk to them.

Despite her uncertainty about the depth of his understanding of phonics, Mrs. Marshall describes his ability to recognize capital letters as pretty good. After this perfunctory discussion of his academic skills, she returns to assessing his social skills. Again, she recognizes that he has made progress in joining in play with peers, but mentions her ongoing concerns his low ability to converse with them. In informal conversation, she acknowledges that he has good vocabulary skills⁹, but laments the

⁹ Indeed, on several occasions, I heard Vann using quite advanced, if atypical, English vocabulary for a five-year-old. For instance, during "I" week when the kids were brainstorming words beginning with the letter "I," he suggested "iguana" and "igloo." Another time, he asked me for help in zipping up his "parka."

amount of time it takes him to formulate speech. The other students, she notes, don't have the patience to wait for him to figure out what to say or how reply to them. Given Mrs. Marshall's recognition of Vann's academic preparedness for kindergarten, it is clear that her concerns about his social skills are significant enough to override her beliefs about his content area skills in her ultimate judgement of his readiness.

While concerns about students' social skills generally make Mrs. Marshall reluctant to recommend a child for kindergarten even when their academic skills are adequate or even above average, some students' academic weaknesses alone are enough to warrant her recommendation of preschool retention. Brian is one such student. Despite Brian's age-eligibility for kindergarten, Mrs. Marshall recommends that his parents delay his entry for another year. This recommendation stems largely from Mrs. Marshall's concerns about Brian's academic progress, though, she notes a few social skills she would like to see him develop more before beginning kindergarten as well. Brian's mother, a former kindergarten teacher herself, plans to heed Mrs. Marshall's recommendation to "redshirt" him.

The main reason underlying Mrs. Marshall's recommendation that Brian delay kindergarten entry another year is his weak performance of academic skills. Among the skills he struggles with is a slight speech impediment for which he has been receiving services from a private company.

Amy: What about Brian? How's his speech?

Mrs. Marshall: Brian, his speech is getting a little bit better. I'm trying to remember now if they did speech with him for a little while...

He is also clearly capable of recognizing the numbers one through ten, though he seems to struggle to recognize numbers in the teens or higher. This became apparent when I played with him and Makayla at using numbered keys to unlock matching locks. When Vann tried to use the number 15 key to unlock lock number 5, Makayla pointed out his mistake.

Amy: They have it, like here at school they have speech, or they took him somewhere?

Mrs. Marshall: No, I think they were taking him somewhere. He won't, he's not bad enough to qualify. He'll have to get services privately. The school district will say no. I mean I literally had one child that I was like, you will definitely qualify, they didn't even still qualify.

Mrs. Marshall goes on to explain that due to a shortage of speech pathologists in the school district, it is often difficult even for students with severe speech impediments to qualify for services. Brian's struggle with pronouncing certain sounds is relatively minor. Nonetheless, his parents have been proactive in seeking out private speech instruction to help with his articulation, and Mrs. Marshall notes his improvement.

Speech is not the only academic challenge Brian faces. In terms of his ability to perform content-area tasks, Mrs. Marshall compares Brian to the twins Brandon and Jake, who are not only three months younger than Brian, but who also perform more poorly on academic tasks than their youngest classmates, Eden, Ethan, and Kayleigh. Here, Mrs. Marshall describes his ability to recognize numbers and letters.

Mrs. Marshall: He's gonna struggle cognitively. Things are not gonna come easy to him.

He's just a little bit slower, and that's okay. He's more down here (pointing to the twins - age wise).

Amy: Like letter-wise and number-wise?

Mrs. Marshall: Right next to these guys. Does that make sense?

Amy: Well these two, also...

Mrs. Marshall: Right. So... And that's okay.

Amy: They seem younger.

Mrs. Marshall: But he's doing well socially. So hopefully things will just come. His sister Anna was the same way. Struggled up until the end of pre-K. So Brian will have another year. So, that's coming.

As Mrs. Marshall expresses here, Brian's letter and number recognition, along with his ability to say the alphabet and count independently, are weaker than those of other children his age. She states that the same was true for Brian's older sister, Anna, until the end of pre-K, when she eventually caught up. She hopes another year of school before

beginning kindergarten will likewise do the trick for Brian. Nonetheless, Mrs. Marshall acknowledges that Brian is doing well socially.

In another conversation, when I note how willing Brian is to take direction, Mrs. Marshall concurs. She adds that he's also really playful and loving with his siblings and has been a helpful big brother to Theodore, the new addition to their family.

Amy: [Brian] seems super easy going to me. Like he's just, like he'll be doing something wrong, and you'll tell him what he needs to do instead. And he's like, "okay." and then he just does it. And I love that.

Mrs. Marshall: Yeah, very easy little kid. And he's so sweet with his little sister Ellie, he gives her a kiss and a hug. And I know he's close with Anna. Like today he said Anna and I go in the backyard and eat snow.

Amy: I asked him what he calls his baby brother, and he's like, "We have a bunch of names for him. Like Teddy Bear, Baby Theo, and his dad--I forget what he said his dad calls him, Tad, whatever his middle name is. He's like Tad, James, Taddy Jim?"

Mrs. Marshall: Theodore? Yeah. His middle name is James. Teddy James? maybe?

Amy: It seems like he's really loving being a big brother again.

Mrs. Marshall recognizes Brian's strengths at interacting with others—like his siblings—who primarily follow social norms and engage in appropriate social behavior. However, she notes that Brian struggles to stand up for himself when confronted by children—like Asher—who play rough and fail to respect Brian's boundaries (as described in the previous chapter). Mrs. Marshall explains:

Mrs. Marshall: But we also kind of notice about Brian is that he can kind of, he can sometimes be physical, but then Asher will take it to a next level and it makes Brian uncomfortable. So when it happens, he sometimes doesn't know how to stop it. Or he says, "Stop," cause he has told me, "I told Asher to stop, and he's not stopping." And it makes him uncomfortable, it doesn't make him feel safe. So, I think it's kind of like a combination: he wants to engage with him (Asher), a little wrestling, you know... But he doesn't know how to... I think Asher can take it too far. And then he (Brian) gets upset, and then he doesn't have that trust situation.

In this exchange, Mrs. Marshall identifies Brian's difficulty in communicating with classmates. Not infrequently, Brian engages Asher in rough-and-tumble play, but

becomes uncomfortable with Asher's intensity. When Brian tries to communicate in a way that is likely effective with his siblings—by shouting, “Stop!”—Asher fails to heed his request. Asher's refusal to stop wrestling or otherwise physically engaging makes Brian feel uncomfortable and unsafe. So often does this happen that by Spring semester, Brian goes through weeks of reluctance to come to school. Of course, the fault in this case lies predominantly with Asher. But, it is possible to see how Brian's initial enthusiastic engagement could be misinterpreted, especially by a child with very little understanding of consent. And, since Asher is likely not the only bully Brian is likely to encounter in his childhood, Mrs. Marshall hopes to equip him with stronger social skills to help improve his confidence in his ability to put an end to or exit from situations that make him feel unsafe.

These examples show that for Mrs. Marshall, weak social skills are enough of a reason to recommend that a child delay kindergarten entry, regardless of academic strength. For both Bella and Vann, who have met kindergarten readiness standards on tests of their academic skills, weak social skills were the decisive factor in Mrs. Marshall's judgements about their readiness. For Brian, academic weaknesses were the primary reason Mrs. Marshall recommended preschool retention, though she also noted areas of concern regarding his social skills. In addition, Asher, whose issues were discussed in the last chapter, struggled with both social and academic skills, and consequently, was advised to delay kindergarten entry.

Students who excel at social skills and their placement recommendations

The students whose parents are encouraged to sign up them for kindergarten in the fall all exhibit strong social skills. Whereas Mrs. Marshall praises all five for their

superior social skills, her assessments of their academic ability vary a great deal. Only Dekari performs particularly well on academic assessments. The others—Lily, John, Hadley, and Faith—have average academic abilities. Aside from noting that John struggles with fine motor skills, Mrs. Marshall reports no major concerns about their cognitive skills.

Beginning his second year of preschool at 4 years, 9 months old in September, Dekari is the oldest student in the class. He is well liked by his classmates, and he enjoys building with various types of blocks, often with John, and the twins, Brandon and Jake. Dekari's father is Kenyan and his mother is white. His father, a nurse, works nights and stays home with Dekari and his younger brother during the day.

Mrs. Marshall: He's definitely made the same improvement. What's interesting is when you see the ones that I had last year, just very shy (Dekari), very shy (John), [*pointing at kids on the list.*] And now, we get a whole different, they were telling stories, they're talking, they're engaging with other kids. Yeah, so Dekari, huge difference in his self-confidence. I still, I asked him today when I was testing him who was his favorite person to play with, his favorite person to play with he said was John. I think because they both like to build a lot. Um, they still really play with those magnet tiles. I want to take him out and see what else they would find to do. So I want to take those cars out for Ethan to play with, and those building magnets for Dekari and then when they come back from Spring Break, I'm tryin' to see what other things that they can gravitate to to play with. I still don't see Dekari initiating play...right? I think they just kind of start playing together. Does that make sense? They start playing and then they integrate.

Amy: okay. mm hum. and then they start...

Mrs. Marshall: They start parallel, and then they start doing cooperative play. Is there any other questions about him?

Amy: That's an interesting strategy. Well, he's way ahead academically too?

Mrs. Marshall: Yes.

Amy: So like, just if you could say some of the skills he has, like can he count to 100?

Mrs. Marshall: Oh yes.

Amy: Easy?

Mrs. Marshall: Well not easy. I mean like so I noticed he skipped like the 10s. He'd be like 4...? He couldn't remember 40s, but then he got the concept. So I'd say 40, and he'd be like, oh 41, 42, 43...So he'd forget the name of the 10s, but no, yeah, he's very smart.

Amy: That's a cool, like, stage in the progression, where he knows the pattern.

Mrs. Marshall: He knows the pattern. He understands the concept, he just couldn't remember the name.

Amy: What about reading wise?

Mrs. Marshall: Reading-wise, he knows his letters. He knows uppercase, he knows most of the lower case. There's a couple tricky ones. But otherwise, that's pretty good.

As this exchange illustrates, Dekari exceeds Mrs. Marshall's academic expectations for kindergarten readiness. Being able to count to 100, even if he needs prompting to remember the words indicating multiples of ten, is markedly beyond the requirement of being able to count to 20. Moreover, in being able to recognize and name almost all of the lower-case letters, he knows nearly twice as many characters as expected.

In terms of Dekari's social skills, he so clearly excels at sharing, waiting his turn, and using his words, that they go without saying. Mrs. Marshall only mentions the areas in which she has had concerns either previously or currently, and her goals for him aspire to help an already very socially adept student even better. For instance, she notes improvements in his self-confidence and his use of language to tell stories and engage with classmates. Still, she'd like to see more growth in his willingness to initiate cooperative play. She notes that he chooses John as his favorite person to play with, and to further encourage his comfort in initiating, she brainstorms new activities to introduce that may help foster their connection. Given his academic and social strengths, Mrs. Marshall has no qualms about recommending to his parents that he begin kindergarten in the fall.

Another child pronounced "kindergarten-ready" by Mrs. Marshall is John. John is a die-hard Green Bay Packers fan, much to the delight of Mrs. Jill, a die-hard Minnesota Vikings fan, who gets a kick out of stoking the rivalry. On any given day, you can find him wearing sweatpants and a sports-themed t-shirt or jersey. His dad works for a large national paint company, and his mom stays at home. John has two older brothers and a younger sister whom his parents have

just adopted from China. Though John is among the older students in this class, he has a summer birthday, and will still be among the younger children beginning kindergarten in the fall.

Mrs. Marshall notes that John has grown a great deal socially since the previous year, especially in terms of his interactions with other students in class. By February, she has no major concerns about his social skills, but she hopes that he will develop even more confidence in initiating play with others during playtime throughout the remainder of the year.

Mrs. Marshall: Yep, so now John. John is still playing more by himself. And I was kind of hoping by now in his second year, halfway through the school year...and stay and play... that he would be... Now in stay and play, he engages better with Gracie and Claire and them—they play together more. But in regular class, he still kind of more does his own thing. He doesn't really engage with them as much.

So [last year], he was the youngest of three boys. All he wanted to do was tackle the boys in class. And they would go around... Right? Can you see him doing that? Now, you don't see that kind of interaction; it's now more mature, like I'm playing, I'm interacting with toys. So it'll be interesting by the end of the school year how much these two [*she points to Dekari & John on my list*] start doing more cooperative play rather than starting with parallel into cooperative play.

Here, Mrs. Marshall notes that John has made progress since the previous year in how he interacts with the boys in class. Rather than rough-and-tumble play-wrestling, he now more often plays with blocks and cars beside (and occasionally *with*) Dekari, Brandon, and Jake. During Stay-and-Play, where there is a much smaller group of children, he has become comfortable engaging with Faith and Claire, though the girls usually initiate the interaction.

By April, Mrs. Marshall notes that John has made a great deal of progress toward this end. She describes how, not only has he continued to come out of his shell, but recently she has even had to remind him not to get too silly when playing with Noelle and Faith.

- B: [John]'s been really giggly lately. And he's been the real goofball lately. I've had to like kind of calm him down, and calm Noelle down.
- A: Oh, wow! Noelle, too!
- B: (She nods). And Noelle, too. And Faith! Oh, I think that, I think those girls have such a crush on him.
- A: That's so funny.
- B: Oh, goodness. He's just a little funny guy, I guess.

So, according to Mrs. Marshall, John has exhibited a great deal of social growth and seems much more comfortable by year's end interacting with his peers. She notes that he seems to enjoy entertaining the girls with silly antics. When I observed playtime at the end of April, he and Dekari were laughing on the floor in hysterics while playing blocks together. While building, they were singing and one-upping each other's mixed-up lyrics to the *Bubble Guppies* theme and the children's song, "We Go Together."

However, despite his social strengths, John is not ahead academically. Mrs. Marshall notes that though his knowledge of letters, numbers, and colors is acceptable, he is not confident in his ability to give the right answers. He tries really hard but seems anxious about making mistakes. Moreover, his fine motor skills are weak, and this makes writing and crafting more difficult. Mrs. Marshall describes his academic performance like this:

Mrs. Marshall: He's very timid. When I was testing him today, I think he he's really proud of himself when he would get it, like when he got the color. He's like, I would say, what color should it be, orange or yellow? He's like yellow. And I was like, Yes! And he's like, Yes! [she imitates his gesture by making a fist, bending an elbow and bringing her arm in quickly to her side]. You know what I mean? But I think he's nervous to get it wrong. So I can see that little anxiety. I think he's just has some anxiety about those kinds of things. You know he was so cute, when he'd get it, he was so proud of himself.

Mrs. Marshall: I noticed that his fine motor skills, his writing—(aside) his scissor-cutting is better—but his writing, he still wants to write like this [she holds up a fist with her thumb on top, with an imaginary pencil pointing down at the page]. . . . Not even with his fingertips, this whole grasp. Right? So I'm a little concerned about that. And I noticed when he does stay-and-play with Breanna, he doesn't really want to do a lot of the

art, and Breanna thinks he kinda starts to get, he wants it to be perfection. So then he gets frustrated.

I think he kinda avoids art stuff, but I'm literally gonna have to ask Kay, what do we do? Do we have to suggest some physical therapy? You know, for his hands? I've never sent a child [to kindergarten] holding a pencil upside down with full grasp.

Mrs. Marshall expresses here that her major misgiving about sending John to kindergarten is his inability to hold a pencil correctly. She notes that both she and Breanna, John's teacher for Stay-and-Play, have observed him to demonstrate symptoms of perfectionism and anxiety about making mistakes. Mrs. Marshall worries that his poor fine motor skills are contributing to his frustration about not being able to create art projects that live up to his high standards. She is eager to get him help to improve his fine motor skills in order to prevent this frustration and hopes that this intervention will curb his tendency to avoid art and other activities that require writing or drawing. Nonetheless, this concern does not prompt her to recommend that John's parents delay his kindergarten entry.

Lily is a white girl who wears fluorescent pink glasses and more often wears Twins t-shirts and leggings than dresses. She has curly blonde hair and is good friends with Claire outside of school. She has two older brothers, and her dad works for a major agricultural company. Discussing her social skills, Mrs. Jill effusively praises her: "She's a delightful girl. And she's the most popular, everyone wants to sit by her." Mrs. Marshall agrees, and notes that "Lily's parents are just very involved. Very involved." She elaborates, "Very hands-on. They play outside a lot." Mrs. Jill adds, "And they're very into living simply and eating the right things and that kind of stuff." Indeed, when it was Lily's day to bring the class snack, her mom brought clementines from Trader Joe's.

Like John, she demonstrates relatively strong social skills and average academics.

Mrs. Marshall compares her to her brothers when assessing her abilities:

Mrs. Marshall: Lily's doing well. She's still really good buddies with Claire. I've noticed that she's wanting to break away from Claire sometimes when Claire and Bella are struggling. She kind of separates herself and she's starting to do more cognitive activities at the table.

Amy: Good for her. (laughing)

Mrs. Marshall: And mom's been kind of encouraging her to do that. I've had conversations with Mom about it and she said, "Lily, stay away from the drama." You know what I mean? Stay away from the drama when her and Claire are having conflicts, just do your own thing and go from there. So, um.

Amy: Is she pretty far ahead academically?

Mrs. Marshall: Ummmmm...(hesitantly), not as far as her brothers. Her older brothers are very smart. The middle one, he could do a 1000 piece puzzle when he was in preschool. Right? He loves puzzles. So they made him a cardboard on rollers so he could pull it under his bed and push it in underneath his bed to work on it, and push it in so they wouldn't have all this puzzle stuff all over the place. So things came really naturally to him. Where Lily's just kind of just right now is average. Socially she's better though, than the other two. She's still a little shy. And if you ask her questions, she'll answer you, but she's not really wanting to answer you too much. Like, she'll just give you the bare minimum. So socially, she's doing better than her brothers.

Here, we see that Mrs. Marshall finds Lily to be doing well socially despite being a little shy. She approves of Lily's strategy of separating herself when Claire and Bella squabble over toys, and of Lily's mom's encouragement to "stay away from the drama." This allows Lily to engage in more cognitive activities, which Mrs. Marshall is also pleased about. Though Lily's social skills are stronger than her brothers' were in preschool, Mrs. Marshall still wants to encourage her to feel more confident talking to adults. In contrast to her brothers, who are both extremely advanced cognitively, Mrs. Marshall regards Lily's academic skills as average.

Hadley is a white girl who prefers floral dresses and leggings and often wears her red hair pulled back into a flower clip. She is a loving big brother to Jake, who is mischievous and likes to sneak into the preschool crowd huddled on the ABC carpet and

listen along to Mrs. Jill's end-of-school story reading when he comes along to pick up Hadley. Her dad teaches at a local public school, and her mom works part time at an upscale grocery store.

When I ask about Hadley, Mrs. Marshall tells me she has no concerns about her academically. She is quick to note and elaborate on her social growth over the past year. Like John and Dekari, Hadley was shy in her first year of Mrs. Marshall's preschool class, but has really become more comfortable socializing in her second. As Mrs. Marshall describes:

Mrs. Marshall: Hadley's come a long way. She was also very timid and shy last year. This year she started off shy. She's starting to become really close friends with Nora, which is really nice, and I think they're bonding because they're kind of the same reserved personality, and they're quieter. And they are just, I don't want to say sensitive, but, it's their demeanor -- just reserved. They're not... I think she (Hadley) can be silly, right? and I think she... Mom says Hadley can be silly and I think Nora can be when she's really comfortable, like at home. So I wonder if like they had a play date, I bet they would be silly together.

As this example shows, making at least one friend is a key indicator to Mrs. Marshall that a child is socially well-prepared for kindergarten. She notes that Hadley and Noelle, who are both more reserved, have started to become close friends. Mrs. Marshall regards this as a good pairing because of their similar interaction styles.

Mrs. Marshall explains further why she feels this is important not only for Hadley, but also for her other students, like Noelle and John, who were shy upon beginning preschool:

Mrs. Marshall: I [wish the] same thing for [Noelle] as I wish for Hadley and John, is that more initiative to engage in play. To start initiating play. And start their ideas and be a little bit more assertive. But at least these two are playing a lot more. You know, she's finding someone to play with, instead of wandering. You know, after doing these table activities, she's not really wondering to see how do I get in, how do I join the play. Cause, what I was talking about with Hadley, Hadley was like "what do I do now?" And Noelle was standing there,

and I said, “Hey, why don't you play with Hadley?” Or, you know, and then they started playing together.

Here, Mrs. Marshall indicates that she wants her shier students to feel comfortable initiating play with their peers and sharing their ideas. Especially given that some of their classmates, like Claire and Bella, have no problem imposing their imaginary worlds upon their playmates, going so far as to regularly assign them the less desirable roles in their make-believe, Mrs. Marshall feels that it is important for Hadley, Noelle, and John to share their own ideas and creativity. She also emphasizes the importance of empowering Hadley to join in or invite others to play with her, rather than standing idly by and feeling left out.

Faith is a white girl with dishwater blond hair. According to Mr. Peterson, the gym teacher, she has really excellent physical coordination. Faith’s mom, who stays at home with her kids and usually drops Faith off, knows Mrs. Marshall well, since her older son Frankie was in half-day preschool last year. Very involved and frequently at school to help out, she tends to dress casually in jeans and sweatshirts, older and faded, but name-brand. She also has a good sense of humor and shows her appreciation for the work the teachers do for her children. For instance, during parent-teacher conferences, she brought Mrs. Marshall a “thank you” lunch bag full of “juice boxes,” aka single-serving bottles of red wine. When asked about Faith’s kindergarten readiness, Mrs. Marshall tells me:

Mrs. Marshall: Faith, she's doing great. [In the beginning of the year], I think she was overwhelmed with Bella and Claire and Lily and all of them already playing. Especially [since] Lily and Claire [had a] bond already, and she didn't have anyone to bond with in class. I think she was struggling to find her voice and her bossiness. Cause she can be very bossy. She does the Tuesday and Thursday afternoon class, and her friend Ava is in there. And I'll sit there while I'm doing my report time, and I'll be listening, and

she can be kind of controlling a little bit over Ava. And Ava's had to learn to say No. So, she can be very bossy, and before I couldn't see it. I was like, "Well, she's not like that in the classroom." Well now I can see it.

[But] I think she can be someone who includes people. Better than someone like this [*she points at Claire's name*]. [*Claire*] can be one that'll be like, "Mm mm, [*She gives me the hand, mimicking Claire's exclusion*] We're playing with this." [I'm like,] hmm, "Can't you give her something to play with, so she can join in?" You know?

In assessing Faith's social skills, Mrs. Marshall compares her behavior in Stay-and-Play, to her behavior in the classroom. She makes no mention of the fact that Faith has mastered the basic social skills required for kindergarten entry: like sharing, waiting her turn, and using her words. Because Faith doesn't struggle with those things, Mrs. Marshall focuses instead on the areas in which she's hoping for growth. She notes that when interacting with her best friend Ava, Faith is comfortable and assertive to the point of being bossy. Regarding some bossiness as a positive sign of comfort in interacting with peers, Mrs. Marshall remarks that, in the classroom environment where Faith was the newcomer to other girls' already-formed social circle, it was hard at first for her to break in and make friends.

Explaining Faith's social intelligence further, Mrs. Marshall gives me this example:

Mrs. Marshall: No, not in the regular class, but in the Tuesday-Thursday class, what was interesting was Brianna was having a hard time with the two, with Faith and her friend Ava excluding another girl, Gaby. They were being very exclusive and would say things to her like, "You can't play with us." And like, really not very nice words. And so Brianna had to tell Faith's Mom, you know, "She's not saying very nice words to Gaby," and there's only three girls in the whole class. So it's just the three of them.

Amy: Three's a hard number.

Mrs. Marshall: Three's a hard number. And those two, you know, [Faith and Ava] get together all the time for playdates outside of school. Their families are tight. They sit with each other at church. And here of course is poor little Gaby. And she's not as girly-girl as the other two. Her dad plays, is a hockey coach for Mounds View, and her brothers play hockey, and she's the girl. So she's kind of more of an in-betweenener.

Amy: Is Faith kind of a girly-girl do you think?

Mrs. Marshall: Uhhhh, not too much. But she'll play a lot of babies with Ava, you know what I'm saying. The kitchen... Whereas Gaby's not really into that kind of stuff much.

Amy: What does Gaby do?

Mrs. Marshall: That is a good question. What do I see her do? Sometimes she does some tabletop activities. She'll try to play with them, and then the three of them will get up and then will do something else. And then they'll start engaging in that, and then Faith and Ava will go back to the babies, and then Gaby will stay there, like playing with the glurch. Sometimes Brianna and I are like, "Did they do that on purpose?" Like, were they planning that or did it just happen? Did they just like, "Oh let's all go do this?" and then they leave her?

Mrs. Marshall: I know Gracie would be smart enough to do that. It's better than just saying, "Well, you can't play with us."

In this case, Faith and her friend Ava had formed a close bond prior to beginning Stay-and-Play in September. Gaby, the only other girl in Stay-and-Play, has tried repeatedly to participate in their activities, even though she seems to prefer tabletop activities to make-believe. After getting in trouble for excluding Gaby, Faith, with the complicity of Ava, seemed to employ a new strategy of exclusion. Appearing to acquiesce to Gaby's requests to play, Faith and Ava would accompany her to the activity tables and play with her for a short period of time. Then, once Gaby was thoroughly engaged in the activity, Faith and Ava would leave the table and return to playing make-believe without her. While Mrs. Marshall was unsure if this subtle exclusion was purposeful on Faith's part, she believed Faith to be socially cunning enough to devise the strategy.

Instances like this illustrate why Mrs. Marshall regards Faith's social skills as quite advanced. However, regarding Faith's academic skills, Mrs. Marshall notes that she is not as far ahead as her older brother was the year before. She discusses this when I inquired whether Faith had siblings at home.

Mrs. Marshall: Yeah, so it's Frankie, who's in kindergarten, and then Faith. And Frankie, academically everything was very easy. Knew letters, knew numbers, knew everything I teach by the end of his first year of preschool. But socially, trouble.

Mrs. Marshall notes that she has no academic concerns about Faith, but that she is not as far ahead as her brother. Despite having mastered the academic skills taught in the preschool by the end of his first year, Faith's older brother remained another year to improve his social skills. Faith, on the other hand, was on track to master the academic skills by the end of her second year of preschool, but demonstrated greater mastery of social skills.

These examples show that for Mrs. Marshall, strong social skills are enough of a reason to recommend that a child move up to kindergarten, even if he or she demonstrates minor areas of academic weakness. For Dekari, who demonstrates exceptionally strong social skills and exceeds standards on academic skills tests, his "kindergarten readiness" is clear. Mrs. Marshall's recommendation that Lily, Hadley, and Faith begin kindergarten in the fall is based largely on their strong social skills. While she has no concerns about them cognitively, they merely satisfy but do not exceed academic standards for kindergarten readiness. Finally, Mrs. Marshall recommends John for Fall kindergarten enrollment on account of his strong social skills and in spite of his weak fine motor skills and consequently low abilities in writing, drawing, and cutting.

Part 2: Preschool gymnastics coach's assessment of student behavior and his recommendations for institutional placements

While Mrs. Marshall's advice to parents about when to begin kindergarten may not always be heeded, it is a different situation one town over at Nordic Gymnastics. In the elite private club, only about half of children attend preschool classes before beginning the recreational program's kindergarten classes. Parents can sign their elementary-school-aged children up for the first level of the recreational program without ever having taken a preschool class. Newly enrolling five-year-olds are automatically placed in the preschool program if they have not yet begun kindergarten; they are automatically placed in the kindergarten class if they have. As a result, Nick's evaluations of children's "readiness" for kindergarten gymnastics classes do not influence the timing of their placement in them. They are, however, very important in determining whether a child is invited to participate in the advanced-track preschool group.

Nick's expectations differ regarding what preschoolers and kindergarteners should be able to do upon beginning class. These differences are largely social. As he explains to me in our formal interview:

A: So if we're thinking about five-year-olds, whether it's shooting stars (kindergarten) or (Mighty-Tots) preschool, what do you expect them to be able to know and do before they start?

N: My expectations are very, very low. I expect you to be able to walk, and I expect you to be potty trained. And that is it. Those are the only things that I expect you to be able to do by yourself; I will teach everything else.

A: Is there like maybe a slightly higher bar that you think that most kids come in being able to do?

N: It depends whether or not they have already been through kindergarten. So, cause Mighty-Tots 5 implies that they are not in kindergarten; Shooting Stars implies that they are in kindergarten. So if they are in kindergarten, I expect them to already be able to follow, to listen when your teacher is speaking, and to actively try to do what you're asked to do. Whereas with a preschooler, it's more, can you follow with the group? And can you interact with me without shutting down. And that's about it.

As Nick articulates, preschoolers should be able to walk and go to the bathroom independently. They should also be able to follow along with the group and interact with the coach without shutting down. He has additional expectations for kindergartners. In addition to being able to follow along with the class, he expects those enrolled in the kindergarten group to listen when the teacher is speaking and actively try to do what they are asked to do. He will teach them everything else. Nick's does not expect children beginning either group to demonstrate any additional physical abilities or knowledge of the sport, beyond being able to walk.

Though Nick's initial expectations for children's abilities were low, his goals regarding the skills children should master over the course of one year's instruction are very high, judging from the "Start Charts" given to parents as a report card each session. Star Charts are big posters listing 40 skills grouped into eight categories. Seven of the categories include athletic skills, and one category includes social skills. Each session, children were given shiny star-shaped stickers to place next to the skills they've mastered. To determine the relative importance of social skills and athletic skills in his curriculum, I asked Nick specifically if the high proportion of athletic skills meant that he emphasizes them more strongly or regards them as more important than social skills.

A: So, if you look at the Star Charts, it's like 35 things that are gymnastics-related, and then there are like 5, or something, that are social skill-related. Do you see that as being representative of the balance of what you teach?

N: For me, personally, no. But I do a lot more ... social work? type of stuff than a lot of coaches do.

A: In what sense?

N: They just need to run through class. Because once they can correctly follow the class, the skills will come afterwards. But if they can't correctly follow the class, there's no guarantee that the skills will come.

A: Can you briefly go through the skill set that is required to successfully run through class?

N: So, if you can grab a square when we grab our squares. If you can listen and interact when we're asking questions, like in the beginning. And if you can

follow with the class from event to event without reminders and without issue. Basically, if I can run your class and only talk to you about the gymnastics stuff and not have to bring up anything else of where they should be, where they shouldn't be. How to follow, either if it's moving from one event to the next or switching from station to station. Once all of that is baked in, then the gymnastics can start.

Here, Nick explains to me that, despite seven-eighths of the assessment categories consisting of athletic skills, he actually emphasizes the teaching of social skills more heavily in his class. Though he regards himself as atypical among coaches, he does a lot more of what he calls “social work” in teaching children to follow along with class. This consists of making sure that children can independently select a square upon entering the class and keep it with them throughout, listen when it's time to listen and participate when it's time to participate during stretching, and be in the correct place doing the correct thing at the correct time on the events. He sees these abilities as prerequisites to learning gymnastics. Once a child has learned to navigate the class routines, Nick's focus shifts to improving their ability to perform athletic skills.

Given these high expectations for learning, I asked Nick about how he assesses children's growth with regard to social skills and gymnastics skills. He explained to me the types of behaviors that he looks for as indicators of progress:

Amy: In terms of either Shooting Stars or Mighty-Tots, how do you like assess what kids have learned, both in terms of the intrinsic, sort of more, I don't know if you want to call it social skills or soft skills—like those kind of things—and how do you assess, like, gymnastics.

Nick: Um, the gymnastics is easy, cause either they can do it or they can't. Um, like if they're spotting it will feel easier, or they can actually do a skill. And that depends on the quality of skill. For the more intrinsic stuff, it's still pretty obvious. Kids that cry when they first go out to class, you can see success when they don't cry when they go out to class. You can see success when you don't hit anybody out in class today. You can see success of, whether or not the parents are like, "Hey, they listened today!" or something like that, so. Sometimes I don't always see the success, but the parents will. Oftentimes, I try to gauge that success level based on the feedback of the parents. 'Cause I could see success

sometimes and they don't, and then I try to inform them that success has been made, and point out what it was. Either they couldn't do something and now they can. Or, there wasn't an effort level before, and now there is an effort level. Or just, there were no problems today.

As this exchange makes clear, Nick finds it somewhat easier to assess the progress children make toward mastery of gymnastics skills than the progress they make with regard to social skills. A good cartwheel looks obviously different than a sloppy one. And even a sloppy cartwheel looks very different from the attempts of a child who has not yet grasped the cartwheel concept, who tries to put the wrong hand down first or never gets their feet off the floor. Progress on other skills is evident from the amount of help required. Pullovers, for instance, in which a child must bend their arms to pull their chin up to the bar, and then kick their feet up and over the top of it in a backward-rolling action with the bar at their hips, are often spotted for months or years before a child learns to execute the maneuver independently. In this case, it may not be obvious to an observer that a child is getting closer to performing the skill alone, but it is clear to Nick, who can gauge decreases in the amount of his own effort required to assist.

When it comes to assessing social skills, Nick notes that it can still be fairly obvious when progress is being made. He can gauge a child's comfort level by whether or not they cry when initially separated from their parent at the beginning of class. He can observe decreases in the amount of misbehaviors, such as hitting or other inappropriate physical contact with classmates. And, he can infer children's progress in their ability to follow along with class and their effort by observing whether their behaviors are on-task and whether they try to implement his corrections on skills.

Since children automatically move up to the kindergarten class when they begin kindergarten, Nick's evaluations do not affect when children transition. However, they

are extremely important in determining whether a child is invited to move up to the advanced track “SuperTots” preschool group¹⁰. The SuperTots class meets for one hour per week, 15 minutes longer than the 45-minute regular preschool classes. It functions as a pre-team program to prepare children identified early as having talent to transition to the competitive team program. To better understand Nick’s selection criteria for the Super-Tots class, I asked him to explain how he chooses which children to invite.

A: How do you decide who gets to be in Super-Tots?

N: Part of it's just how, if they can already accomplish everything in class, like, if they can get to the point of what I would want them to be for Shooting Stars, before they're age eligible to be in Shooting Stars. Or if they just have an above-and-beyond natural talent.

A: So, when you say "what you want them to accomplish before they can be in Shooting Stars" and before you said "Shooting Stars should be able to walk and go to the bathroom", I'm assuming you have higher standards for the kids you're deciding to put in?

N: My standards versus my expectations are different.

A: Okay, okay.

N: I don't expect. Cause Shooting Stars can start without ever having taken class; whereas Super-Tots, since it's invite only, you are already above and beyond the curve.

A: In a perfect world, what would you like them to be able to do when they come in to Shooting Stars, like just your typical preschool kid?

N: They should listen, follow, and be able to make a correction on the first try. Being in the invite-only one, it's a separate set of expectations.

Here, Nick explains to me his criteria for selecting children to invite to the Super-Tots class. First, he mentions that he wants them to achieve a state of what he would consider “Shooting Star-readiness” before they begin kindergarten in school. When he describes “what [he] wants [the children] to accomplish before they can be in Shooting Stars,” in a perfect world, he lists the abilities to listen, follow, and make a correction on the first try.

¹⁰ The next few paragraphs overlap with the “Outliers who show exceptional skill in the content area” section of Chapter 4.

For most children, it takes one year to check off all 40 of the skills listed on the Star Charts for 3-year-olds, another year to check off the skills listed for 4-year-olds, and a third year to master all the skills listed for 5-year-olds. But some children learn more quickly and demonstrate mastery of all 120 skills before they begin kindergarten. Nick regards these children as having “an above-and-beyond natural talent.”

The relative importance of gymnastics and social skills in this decision becomes more apparent when I ask Nick about any behaviors that would eliminate a child’s chances of being invited to participate in Super-Tots.

A: And with these kids who are invited, are there any red flags, or any things that would make you say, like, absolutely not?

N: If they can't follow corrections. Or if they are unable or unwilling to listen. If I have to spend time with behavior, it's a red flag. Cause that's a waste of time later. Um, if I as the coach can just work on gymnastics and not on the other stuff, then that's usually a good sign. If I ever have to think that maybe they couldn't, they can't.

A: So, it's just a definite...You can be pretty choosey.

N: Yeah, I can be very very choosey.

A: How many would you say, do you invite, and how many do you accept?

N: Um, I would say on average, I invite--it's been a little less lately, 'cause I haven't had as much time to run things--I'd say like probably 20 a year, in any given year. And probably 15 out of those 20 initially accept. 10 will continue for any given period of time, and like 5 to 7 will actually finish through [when they age out of Super-Tots upon beginning kindergarten, they enter the Developmental, or “Devo” group discussed in the next chapter].

Nick explains that because there are so few Super-Tots classes, he can be extremely particular in selecting whom to invite. For that reason, from among the pool of athletically talented children, he selects children who are already socialized into the role of student and consistently listen to directions, follow the rules, and implement corrections. By selecting children who do not require further social skills instruction, he is able to optimize the amount of instructional time devoted to the children’s learning and improving content-area skills. This makes it clear that, while strong athletic skills may be

necessary for selection into Super-Tots, they are not sufficient. Strong social skills, however, are.

As illustrated in the previous chapter, Bailey is one such preschooler who demonstrates both the athletic and the social skills competencies necessary to earn Nick's invitation to Super-Tots. Indeed during her preschool classes, the corrections he gives her deal exclusively with gymnastics technique and form, never with her behavior. He often praises her for being on-task and making corrections.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I have drawn primarily on interview data to illustrate the connections between instructors' assessment of student behavior and their recommendations for institutional placements¹¹. Instructors of both preschool and preschool gymnastics recommend promotion (to kindergarten or advanced-track gymnastics, respectively) for the children who demonstrate strong social skills, not only for those who are above average in terms of content area ability, but also if their skill in the content area is average or even slightly below. In both preschool and preschool gymnastics, children who demonstrate advanced skills in the content area are not recommended for promotion if their social skills are inadequate.

This means that the same students—those who begin classes with strong social skills (defined as behaviors regarded by their instructors as appropriate for navigating

¹¹ In both school and sports, almost all students with high social skills also demonstrate sufficient mastery of content area skills to meet instructor standards for kindergarten readiness. On the other hand, the majority of children who struggled with social skills throughout the instructional period also fail to demonstrate content area readiness by the end of the term, and the teachers accordingly recommend that they reenroll in preschool for another term before beginning kindergarten. Nonetheless, in justifying their categorizations of children, both Nick and Mrs. Marshall emphasize their strong or weak social skills, rather than their academic or athletic skills.

institutionalized early learning environments)—are likely advantaged in both preschool and preschool sports settings. Instructors explain decisions to retain children in preschool, to promote them to kindergarten, or to refer to them for advanced-track gymnastics classes as in the children’s best interest, because they believe that strong social skills are of paramount importance for learning. As a result, they likely fail to recognize patterns in who they are disproportionately retaining (low income kids and kids of color) and promoting (affluent white kids), and how children’s actual outcomes are influenced by these decisions¹². Nonetheless, these patterns have implications for the reproduction of social class inequalities.

These findings also have theoretical implications for how we understand the role of schools and sports in the reproduction of social inequalities. They suggest that preschool learning institutions do not merely extend to a younger age group the processes of social reproduction which are well-documented in institutions serving older children. That is, if later schooling helps to transmit social class advantage from parents to children by transforming cultural capital into academic achievement which is recognized and rewarded¹³, in preschool, the process works differently. In preschool, no such transformation happens. The “hidden curriculum” of later grades is the explicit curriculum in preschool. Students are categorized, instructed, and promoted explicitly on the basis of their possession of the social skills required to navigate the system. These social skills, learned (or not) primarily in the home, constitute what passes for cultural

¹³ In later schooling, cultural capital manifests as a highbrow manner of self-expression which is misrecognized as “merit” in student writing and rewarded by higher grades (Bourdieu 1984; Khan 2012), or, alternatively, cultural capital secures advantages for students in the form of more teacher attention and help, which in turn yield more academic growth (Calarco 2017, 2011).

capital in preschool. Preschool teachers and coaches, in fact, understand it as their primary job to supplement the skills of students who come in lacking.

In later levels of schooling and sports, institutions make formal placement decisions (including grade promotion and retention and ability-group tracking decisions) based almost entirely on criteria that reflect content area ability. With the underlying the assumption *that everyone's social skills are the same*, sorting based on content area ability is misrecognition of the role played by cultural capital in creating the ability that is recognized. (This is after all, why the “hidden curriculum” is said to be “hidden,” in the more contemporary sense in which the term is used¹⁴.) In preschool, however, children's social skills are regarded as so important that they overshadow actual content area mastery as the determining factor for subsequent formal group placement.

Figure 1. Comparison of social reproductive processes in preschool and later grades

Social Reproduction in Later Grades



Social Reproduction in Preschool



¹⁴ I discuss the original and contemporary usages of the term “hidden curriculum” in my “Hidden Curriculum of Sport” article.

Because of the differences between what is rewarded in preschool (social skills) and what is rewarded in later grades (content area skills), preschool attendance and preschool gymnastics participation have the overall effect of reducing gaps in content area skills, because both preschool teachers and coaches view teaching children to master social skills—not content area skills—as their primary responsibility. As a result, though they do encourage children with strong social skills to develop content area skills at a faster rate than their peers, this growth seems to pale in comparison to the enormous gains in social skills made by (some of) the students who initially struggled with them, since social skills are the main focus of instruction. That is, the curricula of both preschool and preschool gymnastics remain primarily focused on socialization, with occasional challenges offered to advanced students. Advanced students are not instead instructed to their capacity on content area skills like phonics or basic math skills, pullovers or basic tumbling.

Nonetheless, the students who begin the class with strong social skills get more positive feedback from instructors. They are held up as good examples for their peers, and their peers are more likely to give them positive attention. Students who struggle with social skills receive more negative feedback and attention from instructors. They are more likely to get time outs or reprimands. Moreover, they are more likely to receive negative peer attention. This pattern of feedback likely influences children's developing attitudes toward school and institutions, teachers and authority, learning and self-as-learner.

Chapter 6: A Supplementary Analysis

Post-Tracking: Gifted and Mainstream Classes in School and Gymnastics

In this chapter, I compare the differences between a regular and an advanced track third-grade math class to the differences between a regular and an advanced track gymnastics class for 5 – 9 year-olds. First, I show how the ability-tracked elementary school classes differ in their content area instruction, rules, and rule reinforcement. Then, I show how ability-tracked gymnastics groups differ from one another on those dimensions. Finally, I identify several commonalities in how the regular-track groups differ from the gifted-track groups in both school and sporting sites. I argue that tracking is a mechanism that works similarly in both sites to exacerbate inequalities in both schools and sports.

Table A. Cultural Differences Across Ability-Tracked Classes

	Mainstream Classes	Gifted Classes
Content Area Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very limited attention span expected; activities short - Loss of time in transitions - Limited semi-structured time to work with neighbors; off-task conversations in group work - 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More time on each activity - Little time lost in transitions - Lots of time on semi-structured partner and group work; even jokes are on-topic - Emphasis on explaining logic; showing different ways of problem solving
Rules & Reinforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frequent teacher reminders to follow rules/praise for following rules - Tons of external incentives/rewards/contests - On-task behavior and attention are praised and rewarded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frequent student verbal contestation of rules; teacher justification - Incentives/rewards/contests are inherent to the activity - On-task behavior and attention are expected
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Less time to practice sustained attention - Less time to practice extended peer interactions - More micro-managed directions means less ability to practice completing tasks independently from start to finish 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More time to practice sustained attention to tasks, more nuanced understanding of concepts/ability to perform skills - More time to work collaboratively - More time to complete projects from start to finish

Elementary School

Field Site

Persimmon Creek Elementary is a public school serving approximately 600 children in kindergarten through fifth grade. It is located in a suburb of a major midwestern city, within 10 miles of both St. Cecilia and Nordic Gymnastics. Attendance among students is extremely high at Persimmon Creek: of the students who are enrolled, 95.6% attend school 90% of the time. While demographic information is not available at the elementary school level, Persimmon Creek feeds into a middle school in which approximately 80% of the students are white, 6% are Hispanic or Latino, 5% are Black or African American, 5% are Asian, and 5% are mixed race. Approximately 1.6% of students at the middle school are English language learners, 16.3% receive special education services, and 16.7% receive free or reduced lunch.

At Persimmon Creek, I observed two third-grade classes – one mainstream, and the other “gifted” – on alternating Wednesday afternoons throughout Fall semester 2017. The primary focus of my observation was the portion of the day devoted to math instruction, although I was able to observe physical education in the mainstream class as well. The mainstream class was taught by Mrs. Chan, a veteran teacher in her 50s, and consisted of 26 students of varying academic ability. The gifted class, part of a “school-within-a-school” program for the highly gifted, was taught by Mrs. Zielinski, a teacher in her mid-30s with extensive experience. This class consisted of 28 students, 15 of whom scored at the 99th percentile on their MAP (Measure of Academic Progress) assessment. The other 13 were all in the 95th or 92nd percentile, so overall, she explained, the class was quite homogeneous in terms of their academic ability.

Mrs. Chan's Mainstream Math

Mrs. Chan's classroom is packed to the hilt with learning materials, posters, books, and supplies. There are seven tables with four students each. Each table is labeled from above by a picture of a continent and its name. In the back corner, there is an extra teacher's desk where the student of the week gets to sit. This week, it's Tyler, and he gets to be the boss. Atop the students' tables are stacks of books, folders, and pencil cases, some more orderly than others.

The walls celebrate Mrs. Chan's students, and cannot be looked at without learning. A "Book it Reader Roster" is posted on the wall and Molly N. already has earned her star for October. Nearby, beneath the American flag and a globe, there's a Daily News Corner with local news articles featuring Persimmon Creek taped up. A class birthday list celebrates each student's completion of another trip around the sun. Where the walls are not dedicated to the young occupants of the classroom, they make every effort to seduce their wandering eyes and minds with interesting information. A poster about estimation hangs near the "class number grid." Clearly the class is studying butterflies, as there are a wide assortment of colorful photographs of butterflies in the wild on display, along with a poster proclaiming "Monarch miracles," and an illustration of butterfly life stages. There are also a lot of bright, inspirational posters to catch the eye and invite a positive attitude. There's a "THINK before you speak poster" mounted on the wall by the door. It asks, "Is it...True? Helpful? Important? Necessary? Kind?" A large cartoon of Garfield announces: "Respect. You gotta Give it to Get it." Another proclaims, "Make Way for a Great Day!"

Content Area Skills - Metric System Measurement Lesson

On one Wednesday afternoon in December, I observe Mrs. Chan teaching her third graders a lesson about measuring distances. She introduces the concept of units, providing examples of units the class is likely already familiar with like inches and feet and showing them how they are related. She also engages the students in practicing the skill of measuring using a ruler as a tool.

Mrs. Chan announces to the class that today, they will be talking about meters, centimeters, decimeters, feet, inches, miles, and so on.

“Kilometers,” Matthew says, trying out the word on his tongue.*

“Kilometers,” Mrs. Chan repeats.

“Kill a meter,” he laughs to Tommy, in gray at Australia.

“My husband has a flooring business. Measures every day. Uses feet. Square feet.

“Maisey, can you go put that away?” Mrs. Chan asks. She gets up and places a marker on the ledge beneath the white board. Mrs. Chan continues picking up a gigantic ruler, “He made this for me. And he made these for lots of teachers. If you look at your ruler, you have permission to look at your ruler right now. Can everybody use two fingers to show how big an inch is?”

She models this with her own fingers. The class copies.

“Who can tell me, how many inches are all in one foot? How many inches does a grasshopper have to jump to get all the way to one foot. Lana? Look at your ruler, darling if you don’t know.”

She waits, a bit.

“Can anybody help?”

I cough. “Excuse you,” says Matthew, loudly. Earlier he’d crawled out of phy. ed like a snake.

No one answers.

“Let’s count.” She leads the class in counting to 12.

“12,” she repeats. “Can everybody say, 12 inches in a foot?”

They all repeat it.

“Is the smart board bigger than a foot?” Mrs. Chan asks.

“Yes,” the class choruses.

Mrs. Chan teaches them that there are three feet in a yard. She asks the children to all repeat this three times. “If you repeat things three times,” she says, “it helps you remember it. That is why my favorite number is three.”

Then she begins to tell the class about their next activity, in which they are to identify three things in the room that are about an inch long: “You are only responsible for finding three things. Number 1, 2, and 3...”

After she finishes speaking, it is clear that some of the students weren’t paying attention. While the rest of the class rushes up from their seats to begin, Tommy, Joey, and Hailey remain sitting at their table.

“Do you need the directions one more time?” Mrs. Chan asks them. To Joey, she says, “Can you put it down please? That’s probably because you were playing and you weren’t listening.”

Joey puts the eraser he was playing with back on his desk.

Matthew makes noises with his ruler against the edge of the table. Then he starts humming. He seems to have lingered to listen to the directions one more time.

“Matthew, you with us?” Mrs. Chan checks. “Uh huh,” he assents. He quiets a little, and she continues, “Today, we are only going to go on an inch hunt. You’re going to do it by yourself. You can whisper to your friends if they have some ideas about things that are an inch. Now, before you begin, I’m going to go on a hunt for something that’s an inch. She dramatically looks around the classroom. She spots a magnet. Then she measures it. It’s almost an inch! She explains that they’re allowed to count things that are almost an inch.”

Having set the four stragglers straight, Mrs. Chan surveys the room. “I love the way Abby is looking. I love the way Nathan is on a hunt.” Mrs. Chan says.

Matthew and Elizabeth come to measure things at my table. Matthew writes something down, but I didn’t see him actually pull out a ruler. Troy, a boy in a yellow Hansen jersey, and his friend Devan, wearing black Adidas pants and black and red football hoodie, check out the posters at the back of the room. Hailey, wearing a pink and purple hoodie, and Emma, donning a sparkly shirt, climb up on the step ladder to get a closer look at the books. Matthew finishes quickly and sets his book down.

Amelia, athletically dressed in black and neon green athletic pants and a pink and gray long-sleeve shirt that says gymnastics around the sleeve, shows me her slap bracelet, which is in fact a ruler. She climbs on the step ladder.

“Only three inches,” Mrs. Chan reminds them. “How many are done with three?”

Lots say, “Me!”

Mrs. Chan instructs, “Whisper to a friend if you need a clue. Whisper to a friend if you need a clue.”

After a moment, Mrs. Chan claps, the class repeats, Clap clap, clap clap clap!

When the room is mostly quiet, Mrs. Chan congratulates, “I love the way you went on a hunt.”

Mrs. Chan uses a variety of teaching strategies to facilitate students’ learning of the new material about measuring. She links the new content of using a ruler to measure to the children’s prior knowledge about the approximate size of an inch. She tries to tap into the background knowledge of some of her students by asking if they knew how many inches were in a foot. To make her question clear, she uses the metaphor of a grasshopper hopping one inch twelve times to make the concept clear. When it is apparent that that none know confidently enough to shout the correct answer, she instructs them to look at their ruler, and leads them in counting aloud to twelve. While the

majority of the class is able to understand her verbal directions, Tommy, Joey, Hailey, and Matthew are confused about what to do, either because they weren't paying attention or perhaps because they struggle with auditory processing or multistep directions. To scaffold their understanding, Mrs. Chan models looking for something that's an inch, spotting the magnet, and measuring it. She also suggests to the class that if someone is struggling, it's okay for them to ask a friend for a clue. By employing these teaching strategies, Mrs. Chan enables all the students to complete the learning activity successfully.

Mrs. Chan uses a variety of strategies to motivate her students to learn. The children are generally enthusiastic about working with the classmates of their choice and moving around the room, so active learning components like those used in the measurement lesson are a frequent occurrence in Mrs. Chan's room. She also utilizes challenges, breaks, and rewards to motivate her students to learn.

One of the ways she uses challenges to motivate students involves the designation of time each week for a special series of contests incorporated into the students regular lessons. These academic games, which occur only on "Wow! Wednesdays," include games like the Wow word, and the number maze. For the Wow word contest, the children are given a vocabulary word in the morning that they're expected to listen for throughout the day. Here we see the Wow word – "launch" – making an appearance when the children least expect it: when Mr. Young, a classroom visitor unlikely to even know the Wow word, comes in to read from the BFG after lunch.

*"Those of you who want to come up can come up. Those of you who don't want to, that's your choice. But if we're not listening up here, guess what?" he pauses for effect. "I will disappear like the wind."
The children's eyes widen and they smile.*

“Hey, Mr. Young. You forgot to do this.” The boy in Antarctica with the maroon world t-shirt points a fist at the side of his head and opens his fingers. This appears to be the disappearing-wind gesture Mr. Young has used before to accompany this phrase.

Mr. Young repeats the gesture dramatically, and then begins reading in a Queen Elizabeth voice: “Alright, no more crying. No sitting on the cat. On the count of 3, we will be in England. 1, 1 ½, 2, a, 3.”

As the kids finish their worksheet, they quietly move up to sit on the floor by Mr. Y. They giggle enthusiastically. The gross parts delight them. Some of the girls say, “Ew!”

Mr. Young reads, “Sophie spit pieces of snozzcumber into the air.”

“You mean,” Mrs. Chan interrupts, pausing dramatically, “he was launching them?”

30 hands shoot into the air.

“Is that a Wow word?” Mr. Young asks.

It is indeed, and Mrs. Chan declares Brayden the winner a second time. She congratulates him.

Here we see the children enjoying a Roald Dahl classic, performed by the extremely entertaining Mr. Young, who uses different voices for all the characters, and has genuine, grandfatherly rapport with the class. The story itself a beloved part of the week, a way to calm down and reacclimate to classroom life after a boisterous lunch recess, and the class often pleads for a few more minutes of story time when he announces that time’s up. When individuals are tapped to go into the hall to work one-on-one with parents helpers, they often ask to wait until the story is over.

In the midst of this already pleasurable experience, Mrs. Chan adds the excitement of the Wow word. The children are extremely competitive about being the first to hear the vocabulary word and raise their hand. There is a prize involved, but I’m not sure what it is.

Another Wow! Wednesday special activity that Mrs. Chan uses to motivate her students is the number contest.

Do I have a continent that is ready for the number game?

The kids all have their binders out to a number page. The smart board is on, displaying a similar image.

Mrs. Chan reviews the directions for the number game. "You have one minute to go as far as you can. Starting like a big, fast, dot to dot. Start at number one when Mrs. Chan says go, start to remember where to find number 2, and number 3, and so on."

Mrs. Chan reminds the class of the record: "Beth was the star last week. She's got our top score so far, of 35." She continues, reminding them that even though they have a goal to beat, the objective is not simply winning. "Do you think Jordan's gonna get to 35 today? Probably not." Jordan's a new student, who's never played the number game before. Shrugging, her eyes full of possibility, she says to Jordan, "But maybe you will..."

Then to the class, she says, "Do you guys remember your first time? Even to be in your 30s? This might be the class to get to 60. The biggest # is 60 on this page. If you get to 60, that means you get to a new number every...?"

"Second" Madalyn completes the sentence.

"We do it twice. To see if we get further the second time." Mrs. Chan finishes her explanation, both to inform Jordan how the game is played, but also because her provision of the directions has become a bit of a ritual, building suspense.

"Can we get two minutes?" asks a boy at the North America cluster.

"That wouldn't be fair, because then we wouldn't keep it consistent. Do you know what that means? That means we keep it the same every time."

Mrs. Chan passes out worksheets while the kids whisper to themselves.

...

On the second round, the kids focus even more intensely, truly racing. Everyone seems super engaged in this task. A boy with an uncanny resemblance to Draco Malfoy rips his hair out with two fists looking for #26.

After one minute, Mrs. Chan calls time and instructs the class, "Go to your next number and circle it. Play fair."

Landon exclaims, "Whoa, I got to 29!"

"I got 30!"

"Stand if you beat 10". Everyone. "Keep standing if you beat 15."

Everyone remains standing.

"20," Mrs. Chan announces. Everyone but Jordan remains standing.

"23." A few more students sit down.

At "28," Maddie sits, along with most of the class.

When Mrs. Chan says, "30 or bigger," 5 students remain standing.

"Last time there were only 2!" she exclaims.

Mrs. Chan checks with Landon, to see how far he made it.

"60," Landon says, shrugging sheepishly. "I kinda missed some numbers."

"It's okay, you were going wild. You were cruisin, weren't you?" Mrs. Chan reassures him.

"Who made it to 35?" Mrs. Chan asks. Matthew and Brie are the only two left standing. "You and Brie have the record," she says, acknowledging Matthew's progress.

"I'm gonna beat it next time," Matthew declares.

This number contest is a class favorite. Each week I observe, the children get better and better. Mrs. Chan points out their growth since the beginning of the year, and judging from their exclamations of surprise and satisfaction, as well as their devotion to the task itself, even those who don't win seem to be proud of their accomplishment and motivated by the activity.

Finally, another strategy Mrs. Chan uses to keep her students motivated and on task is to break up her tests into three segments of about ten minutes each.

Today, our target is to do a little bit on this page. I like the way Jack is listening, most everybody in this team (North America) is ready for the second page.

"Say excuse me if you're not here. Stretch our hands up. Feel all that oxygen flowing up to our brain. We're gonna learn all about our brain later this year. Hands down. Bend em up. Make a fist, shake them out. Warmed up, blood is flowing."

Tyler, "Where should I put my poster?"

"Stop right here. Right where the red line is. That's where we stop. Where should we stop?"

The whole class repeats the directions.

Mrs. Chan explains what the equals sign means, using a picture on the whiteboard. On one side, there's a square, in the middle there's an equal sign with a little picture of a scale underneath it, and on the other side there's another square. The two squares appear to be balanced.

Beneath the image, there's an equation with a blank square on the left, an equals sign, and a square on the right with an 8 in it.

"If this side is 8," she asks, pointing at the 8 on the right, "what does this side have to make?" She points to the square on the left.

Madalyn, Jordan, Malfoy, raise hands. She doesn't call on anybody, but says, "Everybody?" They all respond 8.

On the next line, there's a similar problem. This one still has an 8 in the box on the right, but has a 13, a minus sign, and a blank square on the left.

"What do we need to do? Add 5 or take away 8 (from 13)."

She shows 4 examples. Each time, she asks the whole class to repeats what the left side has to equal. They seem to understand the pattern that it always has to equal the number on the right.

After explaining the next section about identifying the common rule, Mrs. Chan instructs the class, "You may begin. Work your best. We never settle for less than our best."

The class gets to work.

“If you have a question, raise your hand.”

Jordan asks a question.

“You don’t have a rule there,” Mrs. Chan says to Tyler.

Some of the children start to finish, but they seem to have forgotten what to do when they’re done.

Mrs. Chan tells them, “Oh, oh, oh. You shouldn’t be up out of your seats. All you have to do is reach under your chair and grab your poster.”

Not long after, she says, “Friends, there are several reasons why we are not having a brain break right now. Right now, we have a couple friends who are still testing. It’s really disrespectful to interrupt people who are still testing. It’s really hard to concentrate on a test if people are talking. Let’s be respectful to those who are still testing.”

The classroom gets really quiet. Lots of the students whisper, but really quietly.

“Nice job. Thank you for being respectful.”

When everyone is done, Mrs. Chan announces, “Since we’re doing bullying posters right now, this is the perfect time to do this. If you are a person who is dressed in orange today, in any orange at all. We are going to take a picture of all the people who are wearing orange to support stopping bullying. If you have any orange on, come on over. Please stand. If you’re not wearing orange, don’t worry, because tomorrow, we are going to take a class picture out on the slide.”

Most of the class goes over for the picture.

Mrs. Chan instructs one boy, “You need to sit, because your orange is on your feet. Come on guys, who are united against bullying. I need you squeezing. In front of the smartboard is nice. I’m sending this to Mr. Carlson.”

The boy wearing Under Armor sits on bookcase and holds up his orange-socked feet. Thomas, beside him, puts his arms up and his mouth is open wide.

“Thomas, Thomas, smile!” Malfoy says.

The class choruses, “Unity day!” when she snaps the photo.

“Okay, we have one more part of your test!” Mrs. Chan announces. The class seem reluctant to refocus, so she uses a clapping technique to get their attention. “One two three,” Mrs. Chan says, and then they all clap together with her. “I know it’s hard at the end of the day. I know it’s hard. When we’re done, I’ve got a story to share. I just got this book. She holds up a book called Halloween in Minnesota.

In this example, we see that Mrs. Chan breaks up her tests into three parts. For each part, she explains the directions, models several problems, and takes questions, before allowing the students to begin. The students are allowed to take as much time as

they need, and if they finish early, they have art projects to work on quietly until their classmates finish. Once everyone is done, Mrs. Chan calls the students wearing orange – symbolizing their commitment to anti-bullying – down to the carpet to pose for a picture for Principal Carlson. Recognizing that the students are having a hard time paying attention, Mrs. Chan encourages them to stay focused for the final segment of the test. She promises them a Halloween story to look forward to when they're done.

This section illustrates several of Mrs. Chan's strategies for keeping the class motivated and interested in learning. Not only does she incorporate active learning lessons to keep children moving and engaged. She also plans fun, low-stakes contests and challenges to show children their progress and keep them driven to get ahead. Finally, when she tests them on a content area skill, she tries to ensure that they are not fatigued, unfocused, or unclear about the directions by breaking the test into smaller sections, giving them cognitive breaks and keeping them physically active in between, and by explaining the directions and modeling examples.

Rules

Mrs. Chan frequently reminds her students of her expectations for their conduct. These expectations align with the school-wide use of consistent language and expectations to teach children how to act in different spaces and to acknowledge them when they're succeeding. According to the school website, Persimmon's motto is "'We Are Hawks'—We Have respect, Act responsibly, Work together, Keep positive, and Strive to do our best." Accordingly, Mrs. Chan reminds her students when, for instance, they behave poorly in the hallway or distract their friends who are taking a test and praises them when they are quiet and respectful. She also has complicated incentive

structures in place that complement school-wide programs to reinforce HAWK-like behavior.

On the whole, Mrs. Chan seems to spend a great deal of time and mental energy thinking and talking about student behavior. She mentions it when giving directions for the class's upcoming activity as they walk through the hallway:

Mrs. Chan pauses at the corner by the library to give directions in hall. While the students at the front listen attentively, a number of the stragglers continue chatting even after they catch up. Midway through her explanation of what she wants the class to do upon entering the room, she stops announces, "I'm looking to see who can be good listeners. Who can be a good Hawk....?" As they resume walking, she says, "I see lots of good listeners, especially Joey." Two girls hold their hands up high in a circle. One of them, wearing an orange pumpkin bow in her hair, beams when Mrs. Chan says, "Rachel's got my Hawk." Her friend lights up when Mrs. Chan says, "So does Chloe."

The students are expected to be good listeners during this time. A student explained to me what was going on with this "got my Hawk" phenomenon, and why the kids seem to value it so highly. She informed me that every time an adult catches someone demonstrating HAWK-like behavior (by having respect, acting responsibly, working together, keeping positive, or striving to do their best), they write that person's name down on a colored piece of paper. Different colors correspond to different grades, and there's also a color for teachers and lunch ladies, she explains. At the end of the month, the principal draws one slip of each color, and the people whose names are on them get to enjoy a pizza lunch with Principal Carlson. The adults get a different prize, like their choice of a really big piece of candy, she speculates. When Mrs. Chan uses this peculiar phrase later on in the classroom, it seems to spur the children to diligent compliance:

The kids begin getting out their math materials after returning from phy. ed. Some of them get to work immediately, without prompting.

“I love how Joey has started. Joey gets my hawk,” Mrs. Chan recognizes. “So does Emmett and Abby,” she adds, noticing that they’re starting to work as well.

By encouraging the children to compete to “get Hawks,” Mrs. Chan rewards their good behavior in a manner consistent with all the other teachers at Persimmon. In addition to the school-wide incentives, she also uses class-wide incentives for good behavior. Mrs. Chan has created a marble system where, if the class earns 100 marbles, they get to plan a party, usually with a theme. Marbles, however, are not only given, but can also be taken away. Consider this example:

“Boys and girls, I know you’re antsy, I can tell. We’re going to take a break. Close binders. There is no homework on Wednesdays. Whoa, whoa, whoa. Am I gonna have to remove another marble? We might have to do that. And we were not very good walking in the hallway. We might have to practice that. We’re at 99 right now. We’ll have to build that back to 100 by the end of the day, and then we’ll have to plan an event.

Mrs. Chan creates other, shorter-term goals for the class as well. For instance, at the beginning of the day, she tells the children that she will give them a certain amount of “wiggle time” at the end of the day, provided they earn it through their behavior. Wiggle time, as I describe below, is a time when the children can choose their own individual or group learning activities from a number of options, including electronic learning games on the class iPads. However, if the students are poorly behaved, they can lose minutes of that time. We see the use of this strategy one day, when Mrs. Chan compliments the class on their transitions between activities.

“I like the way you guys are transitioning. Very good job,” Mrs. Chan says enthusiastically. She pauses for a second, before adding, “Are you ready Lana? We’re waiting. Are you ready?”
When Lana realizes she’s the only one talking, she stops.

Then Mrs. Chan says to the rest of the group, “Have you guys noticed, you still have your 15 minutes up there? You guys are having a really good day. We even had really good bathrooms today.”

In this example, we see that Mrs. Chan uses “wobble time” as a reward the students can earn through their behavior. Because it can be taken away, it serves as both a carrot and as stick, and she uses it thus to motivate students throughout the day. On other days, she provides this as a spontaneous reward, when the children are efficient in getting their work done. Consider this example of a day when students earn “wobble time” by finishing their math work ahead of schedule.

Mrs. Chan announces, “Clean up your area, put everything away, get your science and health out, then you can wobble for 2 or three minutes.”

“Can you wobble on an iPad?” Matthew asks. She assents.

“I need a volunteer. I need someone who is getting their science and health out to go out in the hallway and take Fred with them. Fred needs a taxi service. I’m gonna find somebody. I’m looking for someone who is doing the right thing. I absolutely love the way that Nolan is picking things up off the floor. I love the way Molly finished taking her stuff out really quickly. I would like them to take Fred out into the hallway.

Another teacher pops her head in. “Where’s Jack?” Mrs. Chan steps out to let her know.

The class eagerly engages in individual or group learning activities. I count 5 iPads. Matthew shows Joey something on his. A group of 2 boys and 3 girls at N. America circle around one. No, the boys are on the iPad, the girls are drawing together on a white board. Eli and Cash each have their own iPad out, and they’re playing game. A group of three girls, Madalyn, Hailey, and Emma are in a circle on the carpet drawing. One boy bounces a basket ball.

Sorry we’re out of time, friends, but Mrs. Jensen is on her way.

“Did I say that was okay?” she asks the boy who’s bouncing the ball.

Matthew makes the iPad play volume. “Put it away, Matthew. “

During this particular “wobble time,” the students are extremely enthusiastic about being allowed to use the iPads. This particular privilege seems to be highly enjoyable, especially among many of the boys in the class. Two pairs of boys use iPads collaboratively, and two boys use them individually. The girls seem equally enthusiastic

about having this time to “wiggle,” though they engage in art activities like drawing on whiteboards or creating art on paper. During “wiggle time,” Mrs. Chan takes advantage of the children’s independent engagement to clean up the room. But she doesn’t do this herself. Instead, she creates privileges for the students out of clean-up tasks like returning the CPR dummy “Fred” to another teacher’s room. By selecting Molly and Nolan, who are cleaning up and complying with directions, respectively, she transforms the task of returning “Fred” into yet another reward for good behavior. During “wiggle time” there are restrictions to the children’s freedom. For instance, indoor sports like basketball are prohibited, and Joey and Matthew are prohibited from turning up the sound on the iPads.

In addition to “wiggle time,” Mrs. Chan also employs a separate incentive system to encourage the continent groups in her room to compete with one another. This is clear from her comments:

“I sure like the nice listening in Africa. They are such nice listeners. You guys have earned a continent ticket.”

“Eli did a nice job, too,” recognizing a boy who, unlike the rest of his table, was quick to follow directions.

In this case, Mrs. Chan rewards the students sitting in “Africa” for demonstrating with their bodies that they are ready to learn. The students sit quietly, facing in her direction, even as the rest of their classmates are slow to find their seats and wrap up conversations. Mrs. Chan supplements this ticket system with verbal praise for the students, like Eli, who are unlucky enough to be seated at continents with less dutiful peers.

This continental reward system really does seem to work. On another day, Mrs. Chan has instructs the class to finish their worksheets before taking out a number sheet for the number game. She praises them for their speedy compliance by rewarding them with continent points:

When the kids finish they raise both hands.

“Good job, Jo, way to go!”

She tells Joey’s continent, “You guys are earning some JoJo points. Way to go! Could you make that worksheet disappear into here?” She points at the white binder, then continues, “And then find the number game.”

“I like the way that Cam knew exactly where the number games were and he knew where to find them. Oh, boy, do we have good transitions today. And I see Max studying it because he wants to do a good job,” Mrs. Chan’s excitement is contagious, and the students seem to feed on it. She goes on, “And our all-time record is 42. If we do, we’re gonna have to let Mr. Carlson know. He can make an announcement.”

“What if somebody makes it to 60? They’re gonna need the numbers to go higher!” speculates Trevor, a boy seated in North America and wearing a sweatshirt for the flagship state university.

“Maybe we can see how many times they can make 60?” Mrs. Chan suggests.

...

“Do I have a continent that is ready for the number game?” the students seem to race each other to get their binders out to a number page. The smart board is on, displaying a similar image.

Coupling the exciting activity of the number race with incentives like continental rewards and the prospect of having their score announced by the principal for all the school to hear, Mrs. Chan motivates her students to get on-task quickly, minimizing the amount of instructional time lost.

Mrs. Zielinski’s Gifted Math

In Mrs. Zielinski’s gifted class, things look a bit different. Her classroom may not actually be bigger than Mrs. Chan’s, but it feels bigger. There is more space between the 7 rectangular tables that serve as home base for three or four students each. There is also one larger, hexagonal table made of two smaller trapezoidal ones where a group of girls has set up shop to work on something collaboratively earlier this afternoon. The children’s desks are fairly orderly, with a pencil case, a free reading book, a clipboard with a worksheet, and a notebook on each.

On the board, there's a sign that lists learning targets for each subject: Reading, Writing, Math, Social Studies, and Science. By Reading, it says, "I can monitor my thinking while reading by asking questions. 30 minutes." By Writing, it says, "I can gather facts about a topic and rewrite the information using my own words." By Math, it says, "I can use parentheses in number sentences." The new targets for Social Studies and Science haven't been filled in yet.

Next to the board, there's a calendar, and beneath it the lunch menu. There's an American flag, a map, and a Class Rules poster between the calendar and the door. The Class Rules spell out the HAWKS acrostic. On the other side of the door there's a long counter with cabinets above and below. On the wall above the counter is a series of 26 wheels, each with a center circle and eight sectors. The sectors are colored in differently on each circle. They say the child's name in the middle, and in each sector, one school subject is named and sometimes illustrated. Posted on a tall vertical cabinet beside the sink is the word "Birthdays" and beside it, pictures of children grouped together by the month they were born. Next, there are bins of supplies, neatly labeled "crayons", "highlighters", "glue sticks", and so on. There are milk crates on the floor filled with notebooks, a file cabinet with bins of books on top, and a folding wall separating this classroom from the one next door. Along the back wall three bulletin boards are devoted to three subject areas, with "Thinking Like a Writer" on one side, "Thinking Like a Reader" on the other, and "Math" in the middle.

Content Area Skills – Measuring Distances Lesson

In mid-November, Mrs. Zielinski teaches a class about the measuring distances. While the content introduced in this lesson parallels that introduced by Mrs. Chan in her

mainstream math class, the lesson goes on for longer, addresses the concepts of measurement and units in more depth, and requires the children to engage in a more complicated measuring activity.

Mrs. Zielinski asks, “so which one do we use in the U.S.? The metric system, or a different system?”

Casey volunteers, “The metric system?”

Sensing her uncertainty, Mrs. Zielinski asks, “Would you like to call on a friend to help?”

She calls on Elizabeth. Mrs. Zielinski repeats the question, “What do we use to measure distance in the U.S.?”

Elizabeth answers, “We use rulers.”

Mrs. Zielinski probes, “What kind of units are there on the rulers?”

Elizabeth: “There’s inches, and millimeters, and...”

Other kids chime in with guesses: “Milligrams...”, “Miles...”, “Decimeters...”

Mrs. Zielinski asks them, “Tell your partner how tall you are. What units do you use? Talk with your table.”

They do.

“What did you tell your partner, when they asked how tall you are?” She looks around the room. “Nathan?”

Nathan says, “You’d say it in feet and inches.”

*“That’s right.” Mrs. Zielinski repeats his correct answer, using her own height as an example. “I’d say I’m five feet seven inches.” But she clarifies, “That unit of measurement is **not** the metric system. The metric system uses units of meters, decimeters, centimeters, kilometers... What do you hear in all those words?” She asks the class to discuss the answer to this question.*

After a few minutes of eavesdropping on their speculations, Mrs. Zielinski asks, “Give me five.” The children raise their hands and look up at her.

She explains, “They’re all gonna be in relation to a meter. When they’re in inches and feet and yards, we’re not relating it to a meter. But millimeters, centimeters, and decimeters are all related. We know that there are 12 inches in a foot, and 3 feet in a yard. But we haven’t actually measured anything using the metric system yet.”

She shows a ruler up on the smart board and asks what the unit up there is.

“Centimeters,” they all say.

Then she asks about the little marks.

Overachieving, Liam says, “There are 10 millimeters in one centimeter. And there are about 2 ½ centimeters in one inch.”

“Okay,” Mrs. Zielinski repeats, “so there are 10 millimeters in one centimeter. Does anybody know how many centimeters are in one meter? Think of centi- centi-. Does anybody know what that means? Talk to your partners.”

The third graders discuss this. Table 5 knows right away that the answer is 100, and takes up tossing around a triangular highlighter with a different color marker on each corner.

“Adrith, whose is that? I’ll take it. Did you get it from the school store?” She takes away the highlighter from table 5. He nods and hands it over.

After clarifying the meaning of the prefix ‘centi-’, Mrs. Zielinski moves on. “Then we have decimeters,” she says, revealing another line on the ruler projected on the Smart Board.

“Ooooh. Yay,” a blond boy at the table by the door says.

“10 decimeters = 100 centimeters. How many millimeters would you have if you have 10 decimeters?”

She waits a bit until about half the hands in the classroom are raised. Then she tells them the correct answer, “1000 millimeters.”

“How many decimeters are there in 5 meters? Tell the people at your table. Try to figure it out, and then raise your hand and tell me what you know.”

A girl at table 7 sniffs antibacterial soap.

After a group reports the correct answer of “50,” she asks another question: “How many millimeters are there in 3 decimeters? Talk together and figure it out.”

“Who can tell us. Adrith?”

“300,” he supplies.

“How do you know?”

He explains, “Because I know that there are 100 mm in one decimeter, so I just timesed it by three.”

After several more minutes of this, Mrs. Zielinski explains the directions for the next activity: measuring things using the metric system.

“3rd grade, give me five. Right now you’re working by yourselves. Henry just asked a great question. He asked if you should meet with your partner to decide what to measure first. You don’t have to, because everyone needs to get their own measurements first. Then you will check with your partner and see if you got the same answers. Then, if you have different answers, you have to work together to figure out why. Connor, did you hear what I just explained? So right now your volume is at zero because you’re working by yourself.”

Two boys, a blond boy wearing dark jeans, a gray t-shirt, and gray gym shoes, and another, rather flamboyant boy with dark hair that hangs diagonally in his face, wearing gray sweatpants and a blue t-shirt, measure the length of a marker up at the board.

At my table, a boy wearing a black UnderArmor Football t-shirt and another boy with glasses and a gray hoodie with red and black horizontal stripes measure two different kinds of crayola markers. “I say 12,” the boy with glasses says. The other boy goes along with it. “Okay, 12.” he says.

“Which person are you on in Wonder?” UA boy says.

“The second. I just started it today,” the boy with glasses says.

After measuring the desk, Braden asks Connor, “What did you get?”

“12.” Connor says. “What did Chase get?”

“12. We worked together,” Braden says.

Mrs. Zielinski, who is listening nearby, joins in this discussion, "What did you get when you measured it again?"

"Connor thinks it's 150," Chase reports.

"Do you think that? Did you measure it together?" she asks.

The boys explain that the desk, which is really a big rectangular table, is longer than the tape measure. They hold it along the desk, fully extended, and indicate, "It doesn't go anymore."

Mrs. Zielinski asks, "do you guys remember that trick that I showed you?" She shows them how to measure something that's longer than the tape measure by marking the point where it ends, measuring the remaining space, and adding the two distances together.

They do it together and get the right answer.

"It doesn't go anymore, but that doesn't mean that that space isn't there," Mrs. Zielinski explains.

Mrs. Zielinski looks around the room. Most of the children are done measuring. A boy in black Centennial sweatpants and a gray and maroon jersey style tee sits cross-legged on the floor, copying information off the smartboard.

She announces, "Go back to your seats please. You should have your books open to page 96. And you should have your homework put away." She walks around handing out blue slips of paper for the next activity.

"I'm on page 96," jokes Chase, showing Mrs. Zielinski page 96 of his free reading book.

Suspecting that other students may also have had trouble measuring items that were longer than the tape measure, she explains to the entire class what she just told the boys. Then she gestures up at the Smart Board. "When I unfreeze it, my measurements are going to be up there and they might not match yours and we can talk about why."

Some kids mull around, but eventually make it back to their tables. Henry (maroon sleeves, Centennial pants), answers the first question. He has a different answer than the one Mrs. Zielinski displays on the Smart Board. They figure out that they measured different math journals.

In response to the next question, Adrith answers that his marker was 14.5 cm long. Several students chorus that they got different numbers.

Holding up a Sharpie, Mrs. Zielinski asks, "How many of you measured this marker?" A bunch of hands raise. "How many of you who measured this marker got 12?" They all did.

Henry answers the next question about the length of his desk. He got 153 cm.

Mrs. Zielinski asks, "Did you measure exactly or did you estimate?"

Henry says they estimated.

Mrs. Zielinski explains, "We measured exactly and we didn't estimate. And it does say about, so it's okay. But we measured that extra part so we could get a better estimate."

Here, Mrs. Zielinski uses a variety of teaching strategies to introduce the concept of measuring distances to her third graders. First, she links the new information about

measuring and the metric system in the lesson to their prior knowledge about how to measure someone's height. Expecting them to be familiar with the units feet and inches as well as the tools used to measure – rulers and tape measures – she calls their attention to the other marks denoting the metric units on the ruler. She helps the class to visualize the relationships between different units using an image of a ruler projected onto the Smart Board. She draws upon their knowledge of word parts to identify “meter” as a root word and “centi-”, “deci-”, and “milli-” as prefixes, and upon their understanding of multiplication to explain the relationships between them in a different way. Then, she asks them to apply this knowledge by measuring a marker, a journal, and a desk in the different units specified by their workbooks. As the children work on this activity at first independently and then in small groups, Mrs. Zielinski walks around helping them to troubleshoot. Finally, she leads an extensive debriefing with the class that addresses common problems experienced by different groups. During this time, she helps the children to understand that different answers aren't necessarily wrong if people measured different objects. She also reviews the concept of estimation and how it differs from exact measurement.

In fact, Mrs. Zielinski devotes a great deal of class time to student discussion of the answers they got, the methods they used to derive them, and the mistakes they made along the way.

Mrs. Zielinski provides an overview of the work they will be doing and talks about the point. “Each time, at each level, it gets harder. Did you guys notice that?” Heads bob up and down all around the room. She continues, “So next time, Level 3 will be your homework.” She asks the class, “What is the goal of our challenge math? Talk at your tables.”

The kids begin to discuss. Rob, at the table beside me exclaims, “Do it!” He's not being sarcastic. It's just, like, that obvious to him.

Someone raises a hand to volunteer an answer. Mrs. Zielinski agrees, then rephrases her response: "Our main goal is to be able to explain how we do it. Is it okay if we make mistakes?"

"Yeah!" the class says in unison.

"What do we do if we make a mistake?"

Braden: "We talk about it."

"Why?" Mrs. Zielinski asks.

Braden says, "So you can see what was right and what was wrong and so we can know how to do it next time."

"That's it," she says. "Find the error. Error analysis."

Here, we see Mrs. Zielinski emphasizing the importance of not only being able to do the work correctly, but of being able to explain how. As Rob's response: "Do it!" indicates, despite the students' aptitude for standardized testing, a proclivity for explaining does not come naturally to all of them. This skill is useful for teaching others how to execute a novel task, and for troubleshooting when a process goes wrong. It normalizes the process of logically defending one's methods, providing and considering constructive criticism, and apply suggestions to strengthen one's work. In another example, we see that Mrs. Zielinski also emphasizes the importance of students' ability to explain how they thought through homework problems:

After announcing the homework, Mrs. Zielinski says, "You have ten minutes or so to work on it, but you can also work on it during your homework time throughout the week. So 'My mom or dad did it for me,' isn't gonna cut it. They can help you with it, but you need to be able to explain how they did it."

Here, Mrs. Zielinski underscores that it is also crucial for students to be able to explain their problem-solving process after receiving homework help from a parent. In this way, she teaches the children that their responsibility as students goes beyond merely completing assignments. In addition, they are expected to master the material. To demonstrate this mastery, they need to be able to talk through and defend the steps they took to get the answers.

Mrs. Zielinski and Mrs. Chan use similar strategies for teaching about units and measurement. They both make connections to students' prior knowledge, model examples, use images and diagrams to clarify concepts, encourage cooperative learning, and use hands-on activities to teach students tangible skills. Despite this similarity in the teaching strategies used, there were also several differences. For instance, Mrs. Zielinski tapped into more forms of background knowledge, building on familiar mathematical concepts like height, but also referencing reading skills like decomposing words to understand the terminology. In contrast, Mrs. Chan tried to draw on her students' prior knowledge that rulers are used for measuring to help them approximate the size of an inch with their fingers, and count the number of inches in a foot. She used the metaphor of a grasshopper hopping twelve times to help the children visualize.

Mrs. Zielinski's activity required the students not only to physically measure things, but also to draw upon their addition and multiplication skills in calculating the length of longer objects. Because items like desks were longer than the tools the students had to measure them with, students were encouraged to solve the problem on their own. Some did this by estimating, others tried Mrs. Zielinski's trick of measuring the desk in two pieces and adding them together, while still others figured out her trick all on their own. Mrs. Chan's activity, on the other hand, required the children to remember the unit word "inch," as well as its approximate size, to locate inch-long items in the room, and to confirm their length by measuring them with a ruler. So, Mrs. Chan's students also learned the concept of units of measurement, the sizes of and relations between the units of "inches" and "feet," and the skills of physically measuring things. However, they did not simultaneously practice addition and multiplication.

Finally, the activities used by the two teachers differed in the type of cooperative learning required of the children. Mrs. Zielinski's activity required children to first measure things independently, then compare their answers, and finally to problem solve to find the correct solution whenever their answers disagreed. This sort of collaboration required the children to work together to solve a dispute by taking turns explaining their own procedure and listening to classmates' explanations, and cooperatively making and implementing a plan to remeasure. After going through this process, the students were also encouraged to share what they did with the class, narrating how they solved the problem and determined an agreed-upon answer. Mrs. Chan's activity, on the other hand, required all the children to engage in the same task of finding things one-inch-long. The children were permitted to "hunt" with their classmates, and even encouraged to ask their friends for a "hint" if they got stuck. Though most of the children did not need help, the invitation to "hint" provided some children with the opportunity to verbalize clues like "look by the Smart Board", "lower", "hot!" and for others to follow them.

During the measurement activity, the children in Mrs. Zielinski's class are just as eager to work with their peers as in Mrs. Chan's class. Connor is so excited to get started that he starts looking for a friend to work with before the teacher even finishes the directions, let alone before he finishes the independent part of the assignment. And when working together, they do talk about topics other than math. Yet, most of the kids who are off-task have refrained from engaging in these behaviors until after their assignment was completed. Take Adrith and his friends at Table 5, for example, who start tossing around a highlighter when given time to discuss, because they all immediately knew the answer. Even Chase, Braden, and Connor, chat while measuring items as a group, if not

about math, at least about other schoolwork. Plus, by gossiping competitively about what chapter they've gotten to in their free reading books, they seem to motivate one another to want to read more.

In Mrs. Chan's class, there are actually students who are not paying attention and miss the directions, so that she has to issue them again. But, in the gifted class, the children only joke with their teacher about not following her instructions. When Mrs. Zielinski tells the class to sit back down to check their work, Chase smirks that he's on page 96... of his free reading book. By joking about complying with the letter of the law, but not with its spirit, he communicates to Mrs. Zielinski that he knows difference between the two. By afterwards opening the correct book to the correct page, he demonstrates not only his understanding of what she wants him to do, but also his compliance with that expectation.

Rules

Mrs. Zielinski often implements the restrictions on student behavior when she's introducing new material, in order to ensure the students' undivided attention to the lesson. The rules she enforces are primarily geared toward channeling children's attention and efforts towards learning specific academic concepts and skills. Generally it is enough for Mrs. Zielinski to merely make an expectation explicit for her students to follow it. For this reason, Mrs. Zielinski's primary response to off-task behavior is to identify differences between the behavior she sees and the behaviors she'd prefer to see instead. She almost never mentions behavior that is acceptable, and rarely praises students for following her directions.

A few examples demonstrate how Mrs. Zielinski enforces her rules to optimize the amount of time the children spend learning desired content. Earlier on the day of the measurement lesson described above, she encourages students to focus on the task she has directed them to complete: discussing their background knowledge about the metric system with their tablemates.

Friends, as I look around, I see different friends playing with rulers and different toys. That's not gonna help us learn anything. You're gonna have time to measure things and work with rulers, but right now we're supposed to be talking about metric units. So what did you talk about.

Mrs. Zielinski has given the class time to talk with the others at their table about the metric system, but some don't know much and turn quickly to other less-academic occupations. She chastises the individuals she sees playing with rulers, highlighters, and erasers, explaining that those activities are not conducive to learning. She reasons with them that later they will get a chance to use the tools they currently seem to be interested in using. She encourages them first to focus on the topic they were assigned to discuss.

Unlike Mrs. Chan, Mrs. Zielinski does not look around the room and praise the children who are not playing with toys at their table. Neither does she offer incentives like "continent points" to the tables that are all engaged in on-task discussion. Instead, the incentive she provides is merely the promise that once they finish this part of the lesson, they will get to do the active and cooperative assignment she has planned to follow. That is, once they are done with this work, they will get to do more work.

The students in Mrs. Zielinski's class do occasionally get louder than they should, and when this happens, they get reprimanded. Other times, students engage in behaviors that are not disruptive but are neither on-task. When these behaviors occur, they are often allowed, provided they do not go on for too long or involve other students in the class.

Consider the following field note, which describes the children's activity as they finish up checking in with their math partner.

Two boys -- the blue striped boy who talked to me at the beginning, and another Asian boy wearing gray and red-striped Adidas pants and a gray shirt with geometric pictures -- work together on a math project in the corner of the room.

Mrs. Zielinski checks in with some of the students who are doing other things besides math, to make sure that they've finished.

"Are you working on your math?" Mrs. Zielinski says to a boy with glasses wearing jeans and a gray t-shirt with red letters, who's reading a book at his table. He shakes his head and tells her he's already done. "It's such a great book. I understand why you want to read." He gets up and moves to a chair in the corner.

"3rd grade, freeze," Mrs. Zielinski commands. She reiterates the protocol for homework time: "Alright, during our homework time, though, friends, our voices are quiet. You can put the rest of your math away, if you feel like there's not space at your table."

Though most of the class stops what they're doing and looks up, the children sitting together on the floor in the back continue discussing something.

"3rd grade. Freeze again," she says. "It is very rude to keep talking when I'm talking. 4.8 is what you're working on for your homework when you're done checking in with your partner. Then we'll check in as a class."

"Are my friends in the back, are you working on your homework or are you working on your partner work?"

"Homework,"

"Then I shouldn't be able to hear you. If you have a question, I will be happy to help you." she says to the back of the room.

Mrs. Zielinski notices that Damian, opposite Liam, is playing with his ruler. She says, "That isn't how that tool is supposed to be used. How many rulers does it take to measure something?"

"One."

"And where do we put the rulers when we're done?"

He tells her.

"Okay. It sounds like you know what to do."

Zoey, dressed all in pink, sits up at the front of the room and erases a microscopic part of the bottom of the letter l in Dismissal up on the white board. The agenda is written on the board. She was reading, now she's perfecting the horizontality of the base of the letters. Then she stops and spaces out. Eventually she goes back to her seat.

The boy in the horizontal stripes reads a book in the back corner. A girl has claimed a papasan chair in the other back corner opposite him.

Once the children have finished their in-class math assignment, they are supposed to check in with their math partner, see if their answers are the same, and discuss them if

not. Once that is finished, they are expected to independently work on their homework: Section 4.8 in their math workbook. Mrs. Zielinski permits students to read instead during this time, but that means that the workbook section will need to be completed at home. They are responsible for completing each of the steps in sequence and following the different interactional rules required in each step. Mrs. Zielinski's homework time routine provides the students with regular opportunities to practice independently regulating their time-use. In contrast, during my observations, Mrs. Chan's class was never expected to responsibly occupy this much time without teacher direction.

Mrs. Zielinski checks in with individuals, ensuring that they are using their time effectively and as instructed. When she notices that the students in the back are talking while working on their homework, she tells the whole class to stop and repeats the rule. When the children in the back fail to stop talking during this announcement, she proclaims the behavior "very rude." For lesser infractions that don't rise to the level of disrespect, Mrs. Zielinski uses a questioning strategy to ascertain whether the children, in fact, know what behavior is expected of them. For instance, after stating that "voices are quiet" during homework time, she asks the boys at the back whether they're doing homework or partner work. And, when Liam's friend entertains the others at his table by playing with a ruler, Mrs. Zielinski asks him questions about the proper use of rulers, and lets him connect the dots that "what to do" is put the rulers away. Other students, like Zoey, who engage in non-disruptive off-task behaviors, like erasing the bottom of letters on the whiteboard, manage to secret a few seconds of non-productive work undetected.

In Mrs. Zielinski's class, the students occasionally complain about rules, and in particular, about rules that restrict their ability to socialize with particular friends in their

class. Yet, the gifted students, after registering their protest, tend to follow her directives without the need for any further teacher intervention. Consider what occurs when Mrs. Zielinski gives the class directions on their way back from phy. ed, and in the process makes it clear that everyone is to return to their assigned seats.

In the hallway, Mrs. Zielinski gives the kids instructions about what to do when they get back in the classroom. "Today, we're gonna get a new challenge packet. We're going to do number 1 together. Remember #1 is the easiest. Then you can begin on #2. Girls who were sitting over in the corner, you're going to go have to go back to your regular tables."

This is greeted with a chorus of "Awww..."

"Sorry to disappoint."

Once in the classroom, the girls pile up their notebooks and pencil cases spread out on the table I'm sitting at.

"Last time, our problems dealt with how much something cost. This time, it's all about balancing."

Katie calls out, "I'm not in my table spot." She's picking something up off the floor.

Mrs. Zielinski asks her, "Can you do that a different time? I appreciate you wanting to help."

She gets up and goes back to her seat.

"Elizabeth, are you choosing to kneel today?"

"Yep," a girl at the front of the room says.

"Okay."

In this example, Mrs. Zielinski first instructs everyone to return to their assigned seats upon reentering the classroom so that they can begin work in their math challenge packet. It is clear from the girls' response to being sent back to their tables that they value the privilege of getting to work together. Though they express their disappointment, they still heed Mrs. Zielinski's directions. This reluctant compliance demonstrates their awareness of the classroom expectations. Mrs. Zielinski begins the lesson, but temporarily pauses when Katie lets her know she's not ready. When Mrs. Zielinski thanks her for wanting to help clean up, but communicates her preference that Katie join the group for the lesson first, Katie wordlessly complies. Mrs. Zielinski then checks with Elizabeth to make sure that she's kneeling by choice, and not just because her chair is

elsewhere. It seems that Mrs. Zielinski wants to deal with all the interruptions to her lesson upfront. She seems intent on ensuring that all students are ready and attentive before introducing important new content.

On another day, another student protests the assignation of partners. After the students finish their math work, they are permitted to work on reading. A student named Charlotte, who is eager to work with a friend who is not her reading partner, opportunistically petitions Mrs. Zielinski for a change in reading time protocol:

*“Can we pick our own partners?” Charlotte asks.
Mrs. Zielinski replies, “Do you have reading partners?”
“Yes,” she mutters. “Awww...”
“That wasn’t a very respectful response,” her teacher says in a disappointed tone.*

Mrs. Zielinski replies to Charlotte using the HAWKS language of respect. By identifying the disrespectfulness of Charlotte’s request, she points out to her student that by indicating her preference for a different reading partner, she is disrespecting the partner she has already been assigned. Mrs. Zielinski refrains from spelling out why Charlotte’s request is disrespectful and manages to avoid calling attention to it. This subtle response is effective in persuading Charlotte to desist from her request and avoids hurting Charlotte’s assigned partner’s feelings.

Despite their protests and occasionally loose interpretations of the rules, the students in Mrs. Zielinski’s class typically only require gentle reminders to follow them.

Indeed so much stock do these children place in fairness that Mrs. Zielinski has encouraged them to devise their own rules for determining who goes first. I observed different tables using several inventive strategies when playing “Name That Number.”

The children employ creative ways to comply with Mrs. Zielinski’s request that they decide who goes first in a fair way. She tells me that one table keeps track of whose turn it is to go first from one activity to the next, so everyone gets the same

number of turns to lead. I observe another table using “Rock, Paper, Scissors” to decide. At still another table, the students each have designated days of the week for going first, and they all take turns on Friday.

The children are enthusiastic in following and enforcing their rules. As we saw earlier with Chase’s comment “I’m on page 96” comment, the students in Mrs. Zielinski’s class like to play with different interpretations of the rules. They like to push the rules, as we saw the boys in the back of the room doing when talking during homework time given the cover of classmates still checking in with partners. Moreover, they like to request exceptions to the rules as Charlotte does when asking for a different reading companion. What they don’t do is disregard the rules. Even the readers whose incapacity to tear themselves away from their pages only seem to be disregarding the rules, for they promptly comply when their fixation is interrupted. Overall, the gifted students seem to appreciate the existence of rules, to understand that making rules confers a sort of power, and to follow them.

Because of this, an elaborate behavioral incentive system is not necessary in Mrs. Zielinski’s classroom. Instead, as we’ve seen, if students finish with an assignment early, they are permitted to use their extra time working on homework. Alternatively, if there’s not a lot of variability in how long different groups or individuals are expected to take to complete an exercise, students are encouraged to do things like make up another problem similar to the ones in the assignment to challenge a friend. Here, we see Mrs. Garrett, Mrs. Zielinski’s share partner, extend this option to the gifted class.

Mrs. Garrett reads the review problem up on the Smart Board. “Six times what is going to get you close to 50 but not more? Henry?”
“Eight,” he says.
*“6*8 is 48. And how much more is going to get you to 50? Nathan?”*
Nathan says, “2.”
Mrs. Garrett says, “48 +2 is 50. Good.”

Rob sits at my table. He does the first problem, talking to himself as he works through the multiplication. Then he says, "It's actually kind of easy."

He rocks in his chair a little, looking around. Then he reads the next problem. He counts the remainder quickly on his fingers.

"When you get to the bottom, you can make up another one to try to stretch yourself. Or have your elbow partner solve it," she challenges the faster kids.

In this example, Mrs. Garrett models a multiplication problem with a remainder up on the board. She calls on students for the answers. After making sure the students understood her expectations, she released them to complete the problems on the page independently. Noticing that some students were flying through, and that others like Rob were exclaiming that the work was easy, Mrs. Garrett encourages the children to try making up their own, harder versions of the problems. Again, the children are provided with more challenging work as an incentive for finishing the work. The challenge assignment, while more difficult, has the added bonus of being a potentially social activity. Each part seems to motivate different students – some seem to be satisfied with making up challenging problems for themselves, whereas others who enjoy the social aspect make them up for their elbow partners.

Mrs. Zielinski's class is also provided on occasion with Brain Breaks, during which students are given the freedom to choose their own learning activities in the classroom, but in the time I observed, these were never tied to class behavior. Mrs. Zielinski's class also regularly engaged in fun activities like Lego Challenge, but due to the involvement of parent helpers, they were always built into the schedule and never contingent upon good behavior.

In this section, I compare teachers' instruction of content area skills in the regular math classroom and in the gifted math classroom. I find that the teachers use similar

methods: they link new content to prior knowledge, they model problems, they incorporate partner and group work, engage their students in hands-on, active lessons.

Elementary Gymnastics

Field site

Nordic gymnastics offers a recreational program and three competitive programs which differ primarily by the ability level of group members. In this chapter, I compare a group of 5-8 year old beginners in the “mainstream” recreational program to the most selective “developmental” group. The recreational program has 650 gymnasts who range in age from 5 – 12 years old, and the group of 8 whom I observe are drawn from that program. Over the course of my observations, the developmental group functioned as a competitive pre-team and was the only one of its type offered at Nordic. The 9 members were selected out of regular “Mighty Tot” and advanced-track “Super Tot” preschool classes for assessment by the developmental coaches. If the developmental coaches agreed that they would be a good fit for the program, they were invited to begin lessons.

In both classes, the girls range in age from 5 – 9 years old, however the athlete-to-coach ratio differs significantly. Whereas the Developmental group has nine girls and three coaches, in the Shooting Stars group, Nick teaches eight girls by himself. The groups also practice on opposite sides of the gym, with the Developmental girls customarily on the Team side and the Shooting Stars on the Recreational side. As noted in Chapter 2, the Team side has an abundance of high-quality equipment, while the Rec side is somewhat more limited. (Bear in mind, however, that this is an expensive club and both are really well-apportioned.)

Recreational

Content Area Skills – Stretching and Warm-up

Each recreational class begins with a 15-minute-long warm-up, during which the gymnasts perform basic movements and jumps to get their heart rate up, followed by a series of stretches to warm up their muscles. During this time, Nick reviews different stretches and what they are called as he breaks the ice with the young girls who only attend class once a week. These ice breakers often involved Nick's directing the girls to go around the circle saying their name, their grade, and the answer to a simple question: "What's your favorite flavor of ice cream?" or, "If you could have one super power, what would it be?" On days when the girls are particularly chatty, he would just talk to them about whatever topics they brought up, as in this case:

In the floor rec section, coach Nick and eight small girls form a circle. Nick swings his arms in circles, guiding them through a series of warm-up exercises.

He switches his movement so that now his arms swing across one another in front of him, and then behind him. Some of the girls notice and switch right away, but a few stragglers keep circling until one by one, they realize that everyone else is swinging their arms in a different direction.

"Are we gonna do jumping jacks?" Aria asks. "Are we gonna have stickers again?"

Nick begins bouncing up and down with his arms up. He tells her, "Not for another three weeks."

"Three weeks!" she exclaims, mimicking his straight jumps.

"That's when we go to Buffalo City," Phoebe, donning a hot pink leotard, says, jumping along.

Nick sits down on the floor.

"Mr. Nick, when are we gonna have Liam again?" another girl asks.

"He's going to be coming back in two weeks," Nick says, placing his legs in a straddle. One by one, the girls unfold their legs into straddles. They follow Nick in reaching toward their right foot.

"Mr. Nick, my brother's at kindergarten and I'm going to go to kindergarten at Persimmon, too!"

"Mr. Nick, did you know that our principal has to sleep on the roof all night long?!"

"Really?" another girl asks.

"Does he bring a pillow?" Nick asks. "Does he use a pigeon as his pillow? Does he need a sleeping bag?"

Nick pulls his legs together until they are stretched out in front of him in a pike. The girls copy.

A girl in hot pink and black asks, "What are we doing today?"

They all reach forward toward their pointed toes.

"I went to the doctor and got rid of my warts," one girl says.

"I still have mine!" Aria.

"Alright, pull your toes up," Nick instructs.

"It's a virus," Aria continues, piked over and pulling on her feet.

Grace raises her hand.

"Yes, Grace?" Nick asks.

She tells about a fun run she's doing to raise money for something.

"Oh, it's a fundraiser?" Nick nods, bending his arms behind him in a shoulder stretch.

As they follow along, several of the girls talk about getting money from the tooth fairy. They each explain which teeth are loose now, which ones they've lost in the past, and how much money they got for each. Some are better than others at following along with both the motions and the conversation.

Amelia, wearing a blue leotard with green piping, continues the wart conversation with Aria. She points to where her sister's warts used to be.

Aria says her sister's warts got frozen off. "They're all better now."

Grace tells about being number 30 in her race.

"I was 5, I wasn't 5 ½, when I had my tonsils out," Amelia tells Aria.

Nick does a cat stretch. "Cat stretch!" he calls out, and they all repeat, "Cat stretch!" in unison.

"Mr. Nick?" the girl in the hot pink leotard says. She tells him about getting something taken out.

"I have never had anything out," he answers. He leads them in stretching their wrists while doing a mermaid position.

Grace asks again which events they have today, leaning over in her mermaid stretch to try to read the schedule on the cover of Nick's binder. Nick says, "We are doing floor, bars..."

"I can read some of the words. Not all of them, though," she tells him.

Nick tells the group, "We've got to breeze through splits and bridges. How low can you go?" Nick gets up into a knee lunge.

"My brother can tell you the whole Bible in one second," Phoebe says, lunging along.

"King James or the other one?" Nick asks, sliding down into an unflexible adult's approximation of a split.

"Easter's three days after the caves," Phoebe summarizes. Her split is not much better than Nick's.

Having moved on to the other leg, the girls turn around in their lunges to watch what the older team gymnasts who are doing on the floor lines. They speculate about the quality of the "big girls'" splits and bridges.

"I can do them myself, and I never ever fall down," Amelia says of her own bridges.

Aria sneezes. "Go get a Kleenex, Aria. Get one fast. They're in the corner."

Elsie asks for a Kleenex, too.

"Do you want a Kleenex just because she got a Kleenex?"

"No!" she says, covering her nose.

"Elsie! 2 ½, 2 ¾, 2 ⅞, 3!" Nick says, hoping to speed her noseblowing.

"Bridge it up!"

The girls do a bridge, then come down and tuck and roll.

“We don’t want that, cause then your hair will get everywhere,” Nick tells Grace, whose hair has fallen out of its ponytail.

Nick helps Grace redo her updo as the other girls do another bridge.

Rocking and rolling, Aria says, “I can go higher and higher, and I can even go on my tippy toes!”

“Girls, rock and roll!” Nick reminds the others after their bridges collapse.

In this warm up, Nick makes the girls comfortable by chatting and joking with them. This teaching strategy establishes the joyful but constructive tone of the practice, while simultaneously distracting the girls from the potential discomfort they may feel while stretching tight muscles. In a number of other classes I observed, complaints about pain during splits or about the difficulty of pushing up into bridges was common. He also models the body positions he wants them to get into, and the motions he wants them to mimic. He teaches them the names for different stretches by saying them out loud, and having them repeat some of them. However, because the group performs the same stretches every week, the girls mainly learn what to call them through the regular repetition and do not have to be drilled on their names.

Nonetheless, a major component of the content of Shooting Stars is being able to match the names of skills to the positions they correspond to. The girls first learn to follow along with the lesson, which requires them to attend to many parts of their bodies simultaneously, and to configure them to correspond to the position Nick is demonstrating with his own body. Having mastered that, they are next expected to learn that certain bodily configurations have different names, and that those names are important to remember. After girls are able to name the bodily shapes they see, they are expected to perform the inverse task: upon hearing the name of a skill or a position, they perform the correct sequence of positions and movements with their own bodies. And

indeed, as the session goes on, the girls get better at remembering the sequence of stretches, and what they are called. Nick is pleasantly surprised when gymnasts remember the names of the skills they're trying to do. After only a few weeks, some of the girls anticipate Nick's stretches during warm-up, even beat

"Seal stretch!" he says. Then he lays on his belly, doing a push up with only the top half of his body.

"You guys remembered!" Nick is pleasantly surprised, as some of them manage to get into the position even before he does.

The second girl says "lunge" preemptively, seemingly egged on by Nick's compliment. After they finish their seal stretches, they do indeed get into a knee lunge.

Nick says, "Smell your knee, reach down your toes."

The fifth girl falls over, but promptly gets back into her lunge.

"Slide it down," Nick says.

In this example, we see that the girls remember how to do a seal stretch when Nick calls out its name. Encouraged by Nick's praise, the second girl identifies that the next position Nick gets into is called a "lunge." This is indeed an accomplishment for the kids in this beginner recreational class, and an important step toward mastering the content of the class. To achieve this mastery, the children are required to remember the names of the 40 new skills introduced and assessed in each recreational level. In the beginning recreational class, these skills are very basic, including things like forward and backward rolls, handstands, and cartwheels on floor; holding oneself up in a front support, hanging with one's legs tucked or piked, or hanging with bent arms on the low bar; and a variety of locomotions across the low beam: walks going forward, backward, and sideways, on relevé (tip toe), or while kicking or dipping (ice cream scoops).

The children learn to associate body positions and motions with their corresponding names through weekly repetition – as we saw in the warm-up – as well as through Nick's lessons on the other events. In one of these lessons, described below,

Nick demonstrates a split jump, and asks the girls what the skill is called. He quizzes them to see if they can remember the difference between a split and a straddle.

After they take their last turn, they follow Nick over to the trampolines. The girls all lounge prone on the red resi, propped up on bend elbows, with hands supporting their chins. Aria and Amelia are the exception, sitting in the back row by all the feet.

“Sit back from the gray,” Nick reminds them. They move.

He explains that on the first trampoline, they’re supposed to drop to a table, and on the other trampoline, they’re supposed to do a split jump. “Are any of my legs bendy?” he asks, demonstrating.

“NO!” they chorus.

He nods. “Even if your split is tiny, try to keep them as straight as possible.”

Amelia asks, “What do we do on that one?”

“Did you watch? Can anybody tell her?”

The girl with the circles on her leotard tries to get up and show her, but Nick squashes her attempt. “Use your words,” he mandates.

She repeats the thing about tiny splits and straight legs.

“Do we do a split or a straddle?” Nick asks.

Pink and black says, “Straddle.”

Nick makes a face, and based on his expression, several others exclaim, “Split!” He explains the difference.

Here, Nick shows the girls what he wants them to do on one of the trampolines. He tells them that that particular action he demonstrates – a really big jump, in which right as the jump reaches its apex, he thrusts one leg straight out in front of him, and the other leg straight out behind him, each at a 90 degree angle to his body – is called a split jump. Then he quizzes them to see if they remember what to do. The girls remember conceptually what he wants them to do – Amelia tries to get up and show him – but she doesn’t remember whether that kind of jump is called a split or a straddle. When she guesses wrong, Nick’s makes a funny face that communicates to the group that the skill is not in fact a straddle jump.

While Nick hopes that the students in his class will follow directions and be ready when it’s their turn, they quite frequently forget what they’re supposed to be doing and require prodding to actually take turns. Though he has to reexplain several times what

sort of motions are involved in performing skills when certain individuals still struggle to grasp the “skill concept,” Nick does so patiently. Those concepts, after all, are an important part of the content he hopes to teach them in this class.

Next, the girls walk over to beam and sit on the line. Nick explains the stations. First, the girls are supposed to jump off a springboard and land on the beam on both feet. He messes up his first attempt at demonstrating and laughs as he falls off. Then he shows a better second try. “Whoa, that was a solid one!”

On the second station, they are supposed to balance on first the right, then the left foot with the opposite leg extended forward. Then do the same thing in a passe, bending the leg that’s up to touch their opposite knee. The third station requires the girls to do straight jumps on the low beam. Nick shows them what to do with their arms as they jump--the same forward to up, down to the side motion as in the Level 3 competition routine; On the fourth station, Nick spots them on cartwheels on a floor beam.

Nick sends Ada and Charlotte to Station 1; Phoebe and Grace to Station 2; Aria and Amelia to Station 3; and Kayla and Elsie to Station 4.

Seeing that Aria and Amelia are not keeping their bodies upright while jumping, Nick adds hula hoops to Station 3, so that the girls now have to jump while holding the hoops overhead. He puts carpet squares on Station 2, so the girls would know where to stand. Then he begins spotting cartwheels. While helping Elsie, he smiles, “You need to go faster than that!” He moves to spot her partner. “Tada! Good!” he tells her.

He tells them which direction to rotate, explaining which girls should move to which station.

“Mr. Nick, what are we doing here again?” Amelia asks. Nick explains the balances.

Ada does three cartwheels. Each time Nick helps to remind her to finish with her arms by her ears. Charlotte goes next. Nick helps her extensively over the top, trying to get her to square her hips before coming down to the beam. “Oh, see, that one’s too slow. Gotta go a little faster than that,” he says. He helps her on about 5 more, then tells the group to rotate.

When the girls forget which station to go to, Nick clarifies first to one pair, “You guys just move over now.” They do, and he says, “Uh huh. “You guys are here,” he says to a different group.

“Phoebe, you stay. Grace, go over here.” He stops Grace in a handstand. “Kick your legs. Take a big step forward.” She does, but struggles. “Start on that side. It’s better.” She goes again. Before she does another one, Nick reminds her again, “You probably want to start on that side. Ah. Turn your hands to the side. That’s the difference between a cartwheel and a handstand.” She goes again. “Hands up!” He shows her, and she copies.

Then he goes to help Phoebe, who's been doing them independently all along. He reminds her to keep her hands up at the end.

Aria and Amelia run in circles, mildly exploiting Nick's attention to Phoebe.

Nick maneuvers Phoebe into position to land. Then he says, "Switch to our last rotation!"

During this beam rotation, Nick demonstrates each station to make sure the girls understand what he wants them to do. Then he assigns the girls partners to work with and stations to begin on. The girls are expected to remember what to do on all four stations, and to remain occupied on their assigned station, until he instructs them to rotate about three minutes later. When arriving at the new station, they are expected to begin working right away. We see here, though, that despite Nick's verbal instructions and visual demonstrations, some girls forget the order of the stations, as well as what to do when they get there. Because the stations are laid out in a somewhat circular manner, Nick only has to remind them which way they're rotating after their first station. During this lesson, Amelia forgets what to do on the balancing station, the carpet squares on the beam failing to trigger her memory. In both cases, when the girls forget, Nick patiently reexplains the order of the stations, and what to do on them.

In this example, we also see some of the girls struggling to actually do the skills required of them on their stations. In particular, Charlotte and Grace need a lot of help on cartwheels. Charlotte does not kick over the top fast enough, and she repeatedly falls onto her knees without ever going fully upside down. To help, Nick spots her repeatedly and gives her verbal reminders to go faster. Grace struggles with remembering which hand to put down first and which direction to point it in. Nick helps her out by getting her to start in a lunge position by telling her to take a big step. Then he asks her to hold her hands up high and point them to the side. He manually turns her fingers in the direction he wants

them to point. When giving the gymnasts corrections on the skills they are learning, Nick is kind, often issuing them as a challenge or presenting them as something they could do to make an already very good skill even better.

We see these kind corrections issued again during a floor rotation one day. Here, Nick customizes his tips and tricks to the individual athlete based on the specific problems he observes during their repeated attempts. In challenging them to do better, he uses a mix of constructive criticism and positive reinforcement.

The two smallest girls are working on cartwheels.

“Roll over, stand up. Do this again. Do this again,” Nick says to Kayla and Elsie, spotting them each through it a few times.

Aria and Phoebe receive detailed directions about what to do with their hands on forward rolls. Then, he issues more corrections after Aria rolls down the mat shaped like a wedge: “One leg is straight, the other is bent.” When she tries again, and this time correctly manages to bend both knees, Nick tells her, “Good! Stand up at the end.”

Kayla attempts a cartwheel after several failed attempts. This time, she manages to land on her feet on the other side. It’s not pretty, but it’s a definite improvement. “Nice, Kayla,” Nick acknowledges.

“Phoebe, you gotta reach to the green line. Push, push, push. Even when you think you’re gonna tip over, gotta keep pushing. Fingers up high!” Nick coaches Phoebe on a cartwheel.

When she tries again, she makes the same mistakes.

“Phoebe Sanders. Gotta put your front foot on the yellow,” Nick uses her full name in mock frustration.

Nick infers why she’s not starting in the same place, and asks, “Can you see the line? Want me to redraw it?”

She nods.

After he redraws it, she starts in the correct place and does a cartwheel that is actually pretty nice.

“That is a cartwheel,” Nick observes, half to Liam and half to himself. “That is acceptable as a cartwheel.”

When Kayla and Elsie are working on a station where they’re expected to do cartwheels in between two mailbox-shaped mats laid on the floor in parallel about two feet apart. The goal is to cartwheel straight enough to avoid touching either one. Kayla keeps landing sideways on her knees after she finishes her cartwheels through the mailboxes. Elsie keeps landing facing the wrong direction. Then Kayla knocks a mailbox over. She tries again and kicks it over again.

“No knocking it on the ground. No knocking it on the ground,” Nick teases her. “Keep the feet down, Kayla.”

Here, Nick provides feedback to girls on the skills that they're working on to encourage progress. Because Kayla has struggled with the cartwheel concept, when she finally manages to land one on her feet, he celebrates. In contrast, after Phoebe does several cartwheels in a row, all of which land on her feet but do not pass directly through vertical over the top, Nick gets frustrated that she is not making the correction he asked her to. Though he is frustrated, he does not hold Phoebe accountable for the mistake. Instead, he realizes that the reason she is not putting her hands where he wants her to is because the chalk lines drawn on the floor have faded too much. After he redraws them and reminds her to put her hands on them, she makes the correction and he praises her. When providing this sort of feedback to the girls in his class, Nick's tone ranges the emotional gamut from neutral to positive. If he tells a girl that something she does wasn't right, it's always with the encouragement to try again to fix that mistake. He reserves a truly negative tone ("mom voice") exclusively for responding to misbehavior.

Rules

In the recreational group, the rules are expressly designed to keep the class orderly and the gymnasts safe. First, the gymnasts must not wear loose clothing or jewelry that dangles, and long hair has to be tied back, to ensure that nothing will get tangled up on the equipment or impede the coach from spotting. Also for safety, gymnasts must always stay with the group, and if they are granted permission to get a drink or go to the bathroom, they must walk through the gym on the path marked by duct tape arrows. This prevents the "rec" kids from accidentally running in front of bigger, stronger gymnasts while they are tumbling or dismounting. Finally, other rules regard proper use of the equipment. Only one person is allowed to jump on the trampoline at a

time. On the other apparatus, the activity changes from day to day, so gymnasts are expected to wait to be told to begin an exercise until they are instructed to do so by the coach. Sometimes this patience is demanded because he needs to explain an activity, other times, he needs to set up the equipment.

Indeed, in a recreational class, verbal reprimands and punishments are only ever given when children fail to follow the rules of conduct. One of Nick's most important rules for the gymnasts in his classes is that they wait to be told to begin an exercise. Sometimes this patience is demanded because he needs to explain an activity, other times, he needs to set up the equipment. Consider this example from my field notes. On this day, Nick, the primary coach for the Recreational group, is instructing a new coach, Liam, who is shadowing him.

The girl in black leggings jumps to support on a crooked bar while Nick tries to adjust it. He tells her sternly, "Stop. The bar is not secure. I have not told you to climb on it. You will fall and it will hurt you and the other person at your station." As he says this, she stands stock still with her hands behind her back and doesn't move.

Nick explains to Liam the importance of setting the bars and double checking to make sure they're tight. He explains that sometimes other coaches don't tighten them and they slide down. "It's better to hurt me than them."

Here, we see Nick becoming stern with a gymnast when, in her excitement to get started, she fails to wait for Nick to finish adjusting the equipment before beginning. Nick's harsh tone communicates to the athlete the importance of following this rule, and, because it is uncharacteristic, seems to take her by surprise. This provides one example of how Nick consistently reinforces safety rules. He makes a point to pass along that value to his trainee Liam as well as to the children in his group.

To ensure compliance with these safety rules, Nick has created an incentive system involving stamps after each one-hour class, the provision of star stickers once per

session for all the new skills they learn, and a new star chart to stick them on each time they move up a level. Upon moving up a level, which generally takes about four sessions (one calendar year), each child receives a poster-sized star chart that lists all the skills they need to master to move up to the next level. Gymnasts typically learn about 10 new skills per session, and they receive the corresponding number of star stickers to add to their poster each session. When they complete the star chart by mastering all the skills listed, not only are they eligible to move up to the next level, but they also can have a parent take their picture with the coach to print out and glue onto a designated spot on their poster.

Each week, if children demonstrate good behavior in class, they are rewarded by the provision of a stamp. There is often some kind of choice involved, as in this instance, where the girls can choose which of two animals they prefer.

The girls line up and they walk over to get their stamps. Nick gives them a choice of a hippo and a unicorn.

“Hippo AND unicorn!” the first girls says.

“No, just one,” Nick tells her. “How ‘bout a hippounicus?”

“What’s that?” Phoebe asks. Nick stamps her with a hippo. She inspects her hand admiringly. Nick proceeds to pass out stamps to each girl in the line.

Here, Nick lets them decide whether they want a hippo or a unicorn. By providing each child with a choice, the reward is personalized and therefore heightened. Yet, by holding fast to his one-stamp-per-child rule, he reinforces this boundary for the gymnasts in his class. After attending gymnastics classes for several years, the girls become familiar with many of the stamps available, and often request their favorites, as we see in the next example. In this instance, though all children receive the same stamp, Nick allows each child to decide where on their body they’d like the stamp to be placed.

“What’s the stamp today? Can it be that rolly thingy?” Ada asks.

“Sure,” Nick tells her. “Hold out your arm. Upper or lower?”
Toward the back of the line, Kayla tells the other girls, “I’ve had it before. It’s really cool.” Nick asks the next person in line, “Upper or lower?”
Then the next, “Upper or lower.” And the next, “Upper or lower.” When Kayla gets to the front, she asks, “Can you do it this way?” indicating a vertical line from her armpit to her wrist. “Not today,” Nick tells her.

When Elsie gets to the front, she asks, “Can you do it like this?” Elsie makes a spiraling motion.

“I’m gonna go all the way around, either here or here.” He points to her wrist and her upper arm. “Okay,” she concedes, pointing to her upper arm.

The girls in this group are particularly decisive when it comes to choosing the placement of their stamps. These stamps visibly mark each child’s participation in gymnastics, and as such, are coveted among the girls. Because one’s stamp can be revoked if someone behaves badly, however, Nick’s threatening the loss of a stamp is an effective way of motivate children to behave when they are off-task.

Because developing the ability to perform new gymnastics skills also functions as a visible and valuable form of playground capital for some children, it serves as a built-in reward for participation. Nick addresses this one day as he instructs the recreational group on floor:

Nick asks Elsie, who is rolling down a wedge at the other side of the floor, “Are you able to show off your gymnastics to your classmates?”
“Yeah,” she replies. “But Peyton in my school can do flips and go all the way around,” she tells him.
“That’s cool,” he says. “That’s like a Level 3 skill.”

Elsie, it is well-known, loves to do gymnastics at recess with her friends. After she successfully performs a forward roll down the hill, Nick asks her if skills like this have come in handy at school. Elsie acknowledges that they have, but laments the fact that her friend Peyton was able to top her performance by showing off her back handsprings. Nick, in agreeing that back handsprings are cool, not to mention useful in competition, implicitly motivates Elsie to work toward learning them.

In this way, recreational gymnasts are given various types of rewards for good behavior, including getting selected to be the demonstrator or the line leader, verbal praise, weekly stamps, and big posters with star stickers once per session.

Developmental

Each developmental practice begins with a 15-minute-long warm-up and stretch, during which the gymnasts circle the floor doing various types of runs and chassés to get their heart rate up, followed by a series of stretches to limber up their muscles. During this time, the girls independently go through a sequence that they have memorized, with few interruptions by coaches. Afterwards, they form three lines for basic tumbling, with one coach assigned to each line and spotting each girl's first skill in her sequence of five or six repetitions across the floor.

Stretching and Warm-up

The girls stand arrayed in two parallel lines of four, all facing the same direction and equally spaced across the floor. Soliesse, who is in the front left spot, announces "Circle forward right!" and counts loudly to eight as they all simultaneously circle their right arms forward eight times. Next to Soliesse in the front row, Mikayla announces, "Circle forward left!" and counts to eight as they all circle their left arms forward eight times. Next to Mikayla, Mariah shouts, "Circle backward right!" and counts to eight as they all circle their right arms backwards eight times. Next to Mariah, on the left end of the front row, Cheyenne says, "Circle backward left!" and counts to eight as they all circle their left arms backwards.

The process repeats again, with Soliesse, Mikayla, Mariah, and Cheyenne taking turns counting for squats and standing pikes, ankle stretches, cat stretches, shoulder stretches, straddles to the left, right, and center, butterfly stretches, diamond stretches, pike stretches with feet pointed, then flexed. Beth, Annalise, and Alisa step in occasionally to poke a knee that's not locked, or an Achilles' that's lax, but primarily they just stand to the side and let the girls do their thing.

The girls continue rotating the count for a variety of split-related stretches first on their right leg, then on their left: lunges, lunges with back leg up, horses' bow, splits with chest down, splits with chest up, splits with arms up. Before middle splits, they do "Spidey" stretches, assuming a turned-out Spiderman crouch with one leg jutting out to the side, and body upright, alternating which legs bend and straighten. Then they do middle splits, first with their chests and knees pointing up, then lying like pancakes on the floor, and

finally rising up so that only their legs, splayed 180 degrees to each side, and their fingertips remain in contact with the carpet. After this comes bridges, first with both legs trying to straighten while on the floor, and then with their right, then left legs lifted. They simultaneously plop down out of bridges, tuck and roll three times, finishing the last roll on their feet, and then walk to the end of the floor. There they form three lines, one for each coach.

Soliesse says, "Ready, set, go!" She kicks up to a handstand simultaneously with the other girls who are first in line. Beth, Annalise, and Alisa spot them on handstand, split, level, finish for the first skill in the line. The girls proceed to do the rest of the line by themselves.

Next, they do handstand forward rolls. Annalise says, "And kick, Lily, all the way tall, head in. Tall!" Then she tells Harper, "Squeeze right here, right now. No arching, ribs in. Harper, do you get to bend your elbows? No." Harper does another. "Better, Harper," Annalise says.

"Ooh, that was better!" Beth encourages Mikayla who just fell into a bridge and collapsed.

"Bring your back leg in, Kiera," Annalise says.

"Harper, this coming up and dropping, letting our arms do crazy things makes it really hard on the balance beam," Annalise says.

For the next line, going back in the other direction, Lily's first. She's not paying attention. "Lily," Alisa reminds her. She says, "Ready, go." They do power hurdle roundoffs.

"My girl still can't do a proper hurdle," Beth says to Alisa.

For the next line, the three coaches spot each girl on a back walkover. Evy walks in late as the girls are halfway across the runway. They tell her to jump in whatever line she wants. The girls rotate through their three small lines, getting every back walkover spotted.

Beth says, "Gotta stay tight, girl! Get back here."

Alisa makes quiet corrections.

Annalise unleashes a near-constant stream of corrections: "Arms. Thank you. Push, push with your shoulders, tight, keep square, keep your hips square, finish." Then to the next girl: "Watch your back toe, watch your back toe. Point it. Whoa, were you squeezing or just hanging out?"

Then the girls get a free pass. Some of them do back walkovers, front walkovers, and round offs by themselves. Cheyenne does a round off back handspring. Kiera dos a round off. Brooke does a back walkover.

"Mikayla, Mikayla, you've gotta be aware of Brooke behind you," Annalise warns.

Evy does a back walkover to her head. "I knew that was gonna happen, you know why?" Annalise asks her. "Cause when you started, your hands were out here." She holds her arms up wide.

The girls get a drink and then line up. "Shortest to tallest. Scoot down so there's enough room. Good job. Getting faster," Annalise comments.

Here the girls are largely independent in completing a complex sequence of movements and stretches in the first 15-minutes of their class. During the next 15-minute segment, they are likewise expected to remain quiet and focused, although because this

portion of their workout varies, they are prompted by the coaches before each line of skills across the floor. This prohibition from conversation to ensure focus on the proper execution of the skills they're doing contrasts with the instruction provided to the recreational group: for them, Nick uses strategic distraction to direct their attention away from potentially unpleasant aspects of the warm-up like tedium or discomfort. In this example, it is clear that the coaches expect the developmental group to be able to remain on-task for an extended period of time while completing a sequence of tasks of varied complexity.

Content area skills

What counts as a content area skill differs between the two groups. Whereas for the recreational class, merely remembering the name of a skill and what it looks like is considered an important part of the curriculum, it often seems to surprise their coaches that the developmental girls don't automatically know the name of every skill, drill, or piece of equipment that they see. Not only are developmental girls expected to know what skills are called, they are also expected to be able to make a reasonable attempt at doing it themselves after merely glimpsing someone else doing it once.

In the developmental group, gymnasts receive punishment if they are not ready when it's their turn, or if they forget what skill they are expected to do. For instance, when the girls are vaulting, they get excited about a fun side station, and fail to heed the instructions for the more important station on the actual vaulting table. They receive punishment accordingly.

"Who's going first?" Soliesse volunteers, jumping up on the vault table. Annalise and Alisa have placed a wedge point up on the floor, tipped back against the table like a slide. On the bottom, there's a panel mat sticking straight out in front of the wedge. Soliesse prepares to descend this slide on her stomach, with her hands pointed downward at the panel mat. She lays on a carpet square--

fuzzy side down--and then zooms about six feet at a 75 degree angle down to a handstand. Then she does a forward roll to get off.

Harper goes next on the vault, doing a handstand flat back on the table.

“Girls, you’re not listening. The only person who had different instructions was Mariah.”

Mikayla also does a handstand flat back.

“Girls, go take a 5 minute time out,” Alisa tells Harper and Mikayla.

“We’re doing arm circle pop up. Don’t forget to arm circle,” she reminds them.

Brooke also does a handstand flatback and is sent to time out with the other two. The three girls sit on a springboard nonplussed.

When Harper does the wrong vault over the table, she receives a verbal reprimand from Alisa. Mikayla, seeing her, does the same incorrect vault, and Brooke, seeing Mikayla, does it too. The three of them are sentenced to a 5-minute time-out. Because the girls are eager to participate and eager to improve, having to wait on the sidelines is an effective punishment. However, because this sort of consequence is doled out frequently, the girls take it in stride, and it serves as a reminder to pay attention as opposed to a devastating moral opprobrium.

The developmental group is expected not only to remember the corrections they have been given on their previous turns, but also to make a good effort to apply them. If they fail to make the requested changes, they receive negative feedback from their coaches, regardless of whether they manage to successfully complete the skill. We see this here in an interaction between Beth and Lily on the trampoline bar.

Brooke and Lily each take a side and throw the blue mat off the trampoline. Brooke takes a turn without the mat, trying also to bounce to handstand on the other side.

Lily tries one without the mat, then tells Annalise, “It feels better with the blue mat.”

“Then put it back on.” Soliesse jumps in an advisorial role: “Well then you can put it on your turn and take it off for Brooke’s turn.”

Lily pulls the mat back for herself, then takes a turn with bent arms. Beth tells her, “Lily, straight arms.”

Annalise says, “I already told you that once. If you’re not making the changes, that tells me that you don’t want to be here and that you don’t care.”

After her next turn, Annalise says, "Lily. Lily. Sit down." She does. About two minutes later, Annalise asks her, "Are you okay now? Every time we have an issue, you're gonna have to sit down. We're all out of warnings."

In this case, Soliesse helps Brooke and Lily solve the problem of them both preferring a different mat set-up for the drill. When Beth observes Lily's turn, she tells her to try the next one with her arms straight. When Lily tries again, she fails to straighten her arms, and Beth chastises her for not attempting the correction. Annalise, overhearing, acknowledges that she too has asked Lily to straighten her arms on the drill, and sentences her to a two-minute time out.

The requirement to make corrections is apparent yet again when the girls are practicing their basic tumbling on the tumble track, a 30-foot-long, narrow black trampoline.

After Mariah executes a tumbling pass with her feet slightly apart, Alisa reminds her, "Everything has to be perfect."

Brooke goes next. After her turn, Annalise pulls her aside to work on backward rolls off a block, as a lead-up to a more difficult pass.

Unlike the other girls who have done their back handsprings in a row, connected, Harper takes a turn of round off back handspring, stop back handspring. She looks frustrated afterward.

"That's okay, Harper. You're gonna get it," Annalise says.

Lily goes and she tells her, "Much better hurdle. Everything was better that time, minus your takeoff on the back tuck."

Brooke tries the harder pass which ends in a tucked back flip, but whips a little on her take-off. "Brooke, watch your hands next time. That's all you focus on," Alisa instructs. "Wow!"

Annalise tells Lily, "Before you can twist, you've gotta show me a tight layout."

Lily makes a face. Beth tells her, "Hey, Lill. I know you're getting tired and you're hungry, but you've gotta fight it."

"If we're resting in here, then we don't need to rest in there," Annalise says to the group.

Harper asks when Soliesse's done with her break. Beth explains, "She's done with her break when she's ready. We didn't give her a time out. She decided to take one. She'll be done when she's ready."

"Better!" Beth says to Brooke. "You might lose the nickname if you keep doin' it like that!"

"No... I like Pockets!" Annalise teases.

"Whoo hoo! That was amazing!" Annalise says after Brooke's next turn.

"That was like a real half!" Alisa adds. "Give me five!"

*“James, did you see that?” Annalise asks.
Lily asks Beth something though tears. Beth says to her, “Crying does not work. You know that’s gonna get you nowhere. You have to talk to Annalise. You cannot cry.”
Brooke does another half. “Nice, Brooke!” Ali says.*

For the developmental girls, it is taken for granted that they will be able to approximate something they’ve seen once, even if they miss the verbal part of the directions.

Rules

While the “Rec” rules primarily maintain the order necessary to keep the children safe, the rules for the “Devo” group do that plus a whole lot more. For the “Devo” group, there seem to be rules about everything: how to line up, how to stand, how to wait, how to chalk up, how to demonstrate with your body that your mind is focused, what to eat, how to eat, when to sit, where to sit, when to solicit feedback, and so on. For the Developmental group, absolute compliance is expected, in lining up, listening to directions, remembering not only skills, but the corrections you were given, etc. Ostensibly, the purpose of these rules is to limit the time spent off-task in order to foster faster skill development.

For devo, directives are issued right and left, and punishments ensue for disregarding them or failing to comply quickly enough. Reprimands are given out for everything. From how you stand in line, to how quickly you go to the bathroom, to the food your mom packed you for snack. Definitely also behavior – in terms of standing in line and being ready, to not talking when the coaches are talking. But also in terms of behaviors related to skill performance: finishing your set of conditioning, because not to is cheating; making the correction because otherwise you’re disrespecting your coach and “that tells me you don’t want to be here and you don’t care”; if you’re talking when

somebody is trying to focus, you're not being a good teammate; if you're complaining that your hands hurt, you're not focusing on the skills you're trying to improve.

Consider what goes on one afternoon while the girls are practicing beam:

The girls wait their turns sitting on the resi. Meanwhile, Mariah pounds out series after series, Cheyenne does straight jump back handsprings, and Brooke practices her back walkovers.

"None of you should be sitting down," Alisa reminds them.

Soliesse gets up and goes tentatively for a back walkover on high beam. She falls off to the side without getting either foot on.

"I shouldn't have to push you! Go aggressive!" Annalise tells her. She goes harder on the next one, bobbles, then falls.

Lily walks behind Cheyenne who is about to do a back handspring.

"Lily! If you get kicked, it's because you're not paying attention!" Lily continues to look like she's about to cry until it's her turn. She gets on the low beam and Annalise talks her quietly through a series of corrections. She does three back handsprings.

The girls continue to rotate through both the drill station and the low beam.

The next time Lily gets back in line, she avoids getting in anybody's way.

Cheyenne does a back handspring that finally jumps, and manages to keep her arms straight. We all see it and cheer for her.

Annalise spots Mariah on front walkovers.

"Margot, Margot, Margot. Control your body in line," Annalise tells her, pushing her away before she can step over the beam.

"Soliesse, if somebody's trying to focus, jumping around is not going to help," Annalise says. "Be a good teammate. Stand still back there," Beth says.

Mackenzie does a nice back walkover with weird fingers at the end. Annalise beams. "She's tight. We'll take it. We can fix this later!" she mimics the Edward Scissorhand-finish.

Soliesse finally sticks a back walkover on high beam and calls out to Beth.

"Soliesse, if you ask me to watch, I will always be watching. You need to just trust us and do your gymnastics," Beth tells her.

"Eyes, mind, and body. Soliesse! Keep your eyes at the end of the beam. I don't know how you do all the things you do while you're looking around all the time. That tells me that we need to be doing something harder," Annalise tells her. She smiles like she's heard this before.

Here we see the end of a beam rotation, in the course of about 5 minutes, the girls receive near constant reminders of what they're doing wrong, and what they should be doing instead. Like in the Rec group, some of these things have to do with safety: Lily walks across the low beam where Cheyenne is tumbling; she's supposed to go around to

avoid getting in her way and getting kicked. Soliesse is reminded to look at the high beam she's on, rather than around the gym, while in the middle of her back walkovers. Certainly this will enhance the safety and success of her attempts.

But other "corrections" given are not so clearly about safety. For instance, when girls are waiting for their turns sitting down; they're told to stand. Then, when they're on their feet, Soliesse and Margot begin to jump around. Annalise alleges that they're distracting others on the beams in their vicinity, and encourages them to "be good teammates" by standing still and controlling their bodies in line. (Dubious tone:) It's possible that their behavior in line might affect others' concentration, except their teammates do not actually appear to be distracted by their behavior. More likely, sitting down or jumping around – as opposed to waiting primly – evinces a lack of the decorum appropriate for a high-level gymnast.

Other coaches' comments make it even more clear that comporting oneself "like a gymnast" is the governing principle behind many of these the rules. For example, when Soliesse is proud of herself for performing her skill successfully and asks Beth to watch, she is reminded not to solicit attention. Beth tells her she is always being watched, insinuating that she will provide praise when she determines that something is impressive enough to warrant it. This rule illustrates suggests that appropriate behavior for a developmental gymnast includes a proper orientation toward the coach. This relationship, it would seem, is marked by a clear power asymmetry, at least when the girls are practicing.

Here, we see the girls lining up, shoulder-to-shoulder, in height order, to receive instructions.

The girls get a drink and then line up. "Shortest to tallest. Scoot down so there's enough room. Good job. Getting faster," Annalise comments.

By systematizing the line-up process, the coaches give the girls the opportunity to practice lining up as they will have to during competitions. They also ensure that the girls are demonstrating their active listening skills by remaining silent and making eye contact with the speaker. This minimizes the need to repeat directions.

The coaches also deliver reprimands when the girls waste resources or time. For instance, Annalise comments on how the girls chalk up:

Margot does a handstand instead of a plank at the side station. Then she goes to chalk up.

"Whoa! It's a snowstorm!" she says.

"It shouldn't be a snowstorm. That's too much chalk!" Annalise chides.

Here, we see Margot using too much chalk too far away from the chalk bin and creating a snowstorm. Not only does this improper chalking method make a mess and waste chalk, but from the point of view of her coaches, it also wastes Margot's time. The time she spends clapping her hands and watching the chalk clouds dissipate would be better spent planking on the bar. Considering that she did the wrong exercise at the side station, it may well have been better spent watching what her partner Brooke was doing – correctly – on the floor bar station.

The girls also receive instructions about how to perform a number of other social skills: Monitor your tone of voice, hold the door, help with the mats, line up properly. When doing sprints, run the whole way from the wall to the end of the runway, and on the way back, stop before you hit the wall. These corrections about the sprint are telling them how to do it better, but also refer to a more universal set of expectations that are

always applicable: start and end every exercise properly; don't take short cuts: that's cheating.

"Who else didn't help with the mats yet?" Beth asks.

"Lily and Harper."

Harper jumps up and starts dragging the mat without waiting for Lily to get a good grip. Lily yells out, "Wait!"

"Lily, I don't like that attitude. You can ask them to slow down, but don't yell at your friends."

Mariah jumps down off the rope and inspects her biceps. "Yep, your muscles look good, Mariah," Annalise laughs.

"Hold the door for each other," Alisa reminds them. They all do, even if it means waiting awhile for the next person to catch up. As we walk across the gym, Annalise tells me that this is deliberate. So is the collaborative mat moving.

When we get to the vault area, the girls work together to move the big resi. Annalise helps them verbally, suggesting that the girls get along the back side of it. Then the girls move the yellow hand mat and Alisa moves the board for them. Lily straggles a bit and doesn't get to any of the equipment in time to help the rest of them.

"That one needs like five warnings," Annalise laughs to me about Lily.

"What happens if they run out of warnings?" I ask.

"They sit for five minutes."

When they're done moving mats, the girls line up against the resi in height order, backs against the wall.

"Backs against the wall," Alisa reminds. "Lily!" Lily snaps to attention and is temporarily chastised. Annalise explains to the girls that they will be doing partner sprints next. They will be racing two by two to the wall.

"Don't run into the wall," Annalise laughs.

"No cheating," Alisa stands in front of Harper to prevent her from starting before she says go. "My cheater girl."

In this example, Lily receives a reminder to make requests of friends politely.

Then Annalise tells the group more generally to hold the door for one another. When they've all returned to the gym, Alisa directs them to line up properly, and when Lily fails to heed this instruction, Alisa calls her out for not listening. Then, when the girls begin to sprint in pairs, Alisa monitors Harper to ensure she doesn't start the race early. While the developmental group does not have an elaborate system devised to encourage good behavior, the coaches frequently praise good listening, teamwork, or things like sharing or helping others.

In contrast to the recreational gymnastics coaches, developmental coaches provide more frequent incentives than the recreational coaches to encourage faster skill development. For instance, if one gymnast does something correctly when the rest of the group makes a mistake, that individual is often chosen to demonstrate her proper execution to everyone else. Or, if a gymnast learns a new skill, the coaches often call over another coach or a parent to watch her show it again. For a particularly outstanding skill, the coaches would post videos of the gymnast completing it on Instagram. Less frequently, exceptionally well-performed skills are also rewarded with trampoline time, contests, or games (taught by being rewarded with these things that these things are fun.)

Girls in the developmental group who have done a skill particularly well are chosen to demonstrate it for the rest of the group when they require remediation.

On donkey kick snap down pike roll to hollow, Mackenzie does a tuck bounce hand instead of a donkey kick. Annalise spots her on the next one to help her feel the difference.

“No, Soliesse. You’re cheating. Get your hands back. Better!” Annalise says. She asks, “Margot, does your head hit or do your hands hit?”

“Hands,” Margot says.

“See? Her body does not want to hit that shape,” Annalise says to Alisa, who’s spotting Mackenzie on another one.

“We’re gonna do a little donkey kick lesson,” Annalise says. She uses Mariah to demonstrate what she wants the rest of them to do. Then they all try.

“Nice, Mariah! Tighter donkey kick, Lily!” corrects Annalise. To Margot, she says, “Your butt doesn’t get to come up on your donkey kick. Get your heels up!”

“Better, Mackenzie. You’ll get it,” she says. Next, she announces, “Cartwheel from your knee, walk backward on our tippy toes.”

“Margot, are you a leftie or a rightie?”

“I’m a leftie,” she says, in a knee lunge on her right leg. She does a right side cartwheel.

“You have to choose,” Annalise insists.

“She’s a rightie, I think,” Alisa says.

Other forms of attention are also used as a reward. For instance, when someone does a new skill for the first time, the developmental coaches often ask the coaches of the higher levels to watch.

Annalise stops them to change the drill and meanwhile Mariah practices drills on the end of tumble track. With the wedge gone, now Mariah lands on the orange block, and adds a back tuck off. Cheyenne is still a million miles away from getting her feet back to the orange block.

Mariah does another one. Annalise explains, "Your eyes are down, which makes what happen? Your butt sticks out." She demonstrates and points at her butt. Mariah nods, seeming satisfied with knowing how to fix it.

"Soliesse, run over there and see if your mom needs you."

"Brooke, there's no being silly over there. I know it's fun," Annalise tells her as she slides.

"James, can you watch this?" Annalise wants to get James's opinion of Mariah's Yurchenko.

"Daddy, can you watch me?" Brooke bids for his attention.

Annalise asks James what she should tell Mariah to stop her from throwing her head out. Then Mariah goes.

"That's a real vault!" James says, appreciatively. "I hear the whistling when she's moving!" To Annalise, he says, "See if she starts to push into the horse, that's 'cause she threw the head. That's the problem with starting Yurchenkos too early." He goes on to explain, "So, you can do these two drills." Using Mariah to demonstrate, he shows Annalise how to stand behind her when she's balanced with one knee raised and push her shoulders forward so she falls into her hurdle on the round off. The second drill is a round off rebound up onto a panel mat. She does it, then he fixes her position to get "more lean back, head in, piked, almost."

Evy goes and Annalise comes over to watch. She brings the energy and gives her excited, enthusiastic corrections.

In this case, Mariah does a really good Yurchenko timer, and Annalise calls a higher-level coach, James to watch. He praises it appreciatively, and then puts Mariah through a few more drills himself to teach Annalise strategies for fixing a few of her minor mistakes. This attention from James – who coaches elite athletes, is an invaluable reward.

The girls are rewarded with a few minutes of free time at the end of each workout, provided they do not lose it for engaging in inappropriate behavior. The girls typically use this time to play with even harder new skills on the trampolines. Here, we see Annalise dangling free time as a reward if they get going on their conditioning and finish it efficiently:

“We’re going to start with conditioning so we can have free time at the end.” She sends four girls to get a blue block, and four to get a yellow one. Then the girls stack them. The remaining two girls, she sends to get a hump. They assemble a station for leg lifts on the stall bar. On one station, they go all the way up, so there are no mats required. On the other station, they sit atop the stack of mats, with the red hump mat behind their shoulders. Then they lift their toes from sitting up to the bar they hang from.

The girls cheer for each other on leg lifts. “Come on, Lily! Come on Harper!” Annalise and Alisa give them corrections and count. Beth encourages them, “Nice Margot. Like those tight legs!”

Later on, they wind up having about five minutes left at the end of practice for free time. The girls use this time to practice skills that they are close to getting, as well as other fun and social activities like pit races and dropping from the high bar into the foam pit below. Unlike during the rest of practice, the feedback provided by the coaches during free time is almost exclusively positive and encouraging. The girls are not given corrections for their execution, but instead to try new things however sloppy they may look.

At this point they have 10 minutes left of practice. They get 5 minutes of free time, and will come together to stretch for the last 5.

At free time, Mikayla, Soliesse, and Harper do a pit race. Margot swings on pit bar and drops in. The other two copy her.

Brooke practices handstand walking.

Nick teaches Alisa how to spot Lily on a front mill circle. Cheyenne works on back handsprings on a small brown beam pulled to the center of the floor. Kiera gets Annalise to spot her on cartwheels on resi beam. Alisa helps Lily with cast hands. She asks her, “You wanna show Tristyn?”

“Tristyn, Lily wants you to watch!” He walks over and sits on a panel mat to see the show. She does a cast to cut, front mill, front hip circle by herself.

Lily comes over to give Tristyn a high five and winds up taking a bite out of his right sleeve.

Cheyenne does back walkovers on high beam. Mariah, Lily, and Kiera work on presses from clear on beam. Now Margot does fronts on trampoline and Mikayla works on split jumps and just bouncing. Brooke goes to beam and works side handstands. Harper and Soliesse stand in line with Beth's high school group to take turns on tumble track. Harper does a round off four back handsprings.

"Whoo hoo! Way to go girl. Tighter legs next time!" Beth tells her. Soliesse does round off back handspring back tuck.

The opportunity to earn free time at the end of practice is the most regular reward used by the developmental coaches. As we see here, this reward performs the dual functions of encouraging focus on their assignments throughout the workout and of providing the girls with regular opportunities to experiment with more difficult skills and to build up their courage before they are expected to do them in practice. In essence, like the gifted math class, the developmental gymnasts are rewarded for doing good work with the opportunity to engage in harder work.

What counts as a content area skill varies between recreational and developmental gymnastics. In recreational gymnastics, merely being able to recognize the names of skills and what they look like—let alone how to do them—is part of the content being taught. Failure to follow directions is not regarded as rule-breaking, but instead more as a failure to understand which skill to do or how to do it. In contrast, for the developmental group, the skill expectations were much higher. The developmental coaches expect gymnasts to be ready when it's their turn, and not only to execute the correct skills, but to remember and apply the corrections they received on their last turn. They were expected to do so while resisting fear, frustration, and fatigue.

Recreational gymnasts have a few simple rules designed primarily to enable the class to remain orderly and safe. Their rules include things like permitting only one person at a time on the equipment, waiting for a coach to give you permission to begin trying a station ("no random gymnastics"). This contrasts markedly with the millions of

rules the Developmental group is expected to follow, regarding everything from what they eat, to how they stand (stomach sucked in, hands down at their sides, lined up shoulder-to-shoulder with their teammates, facing forward, making eye contact with the coach).

Discussion

When the instructional system demands children to behave in ways they are unaccustomed to, their behavior in response is often categorized by teachers as disruptive. In third grade, as in preschool, disruptive behavior is often elicited by activities or lessons that go on beyond children's attention span, when expectations are not clearly expressed or directions are too complicated, when activities are not interesting or clearly beneficial. In highly selective gifted classes and developmental gymnastics teams, most kids have already been selected out. Those without reasonable attention spans, motivation, self-discipline; and in the case of school, intelligence; in the case of gymnastics, flexibility, strength, and bravery, are classified as "mainstream" and excluded from the upper-ability track groups. By selecting out the children who do not have the attention span to handle the long lessons or the intrinsic motivation to complete multi-step directions independently, the advanced-tracked teachers do not have to devise elaborate reward systems for managing behavior. In the classes where these "unexceptional" children remain, elaborate behavior management systems are used to incentivize attention to lessons and classroom-appropriate behavior.

As a result, there are more similarities by ability track, than by content area. That is, in terms of preparing children to navigate the hidden curricula of the most selective environments they may inhabit in the future, recreational gymnastics is more similar to

the mainstream math classroom than it is to the advanced track gymnastics class. And gifted math and advanced track gymnastics have a number of similarities distinct from mainstream groups in either content area that have not been previously acknowledged.

The lessons used in recreational gymnastics and mainstream math are much shorter in duration. For instance, Nick's recreational gymnastics group typically spends 15 minutes on each event, whereas Annalise's group spends an hour. Sometimes within that hour, the developmental group would spend 15 minutes focusing on the same skill. Even with stations lasting only two or three minutes, sometimes the girls in Nick's group would get bored with the prescribed activity and make up their own (as we saw with the girls playing chase on beam). On the other hand, developmental gymnasts frequently begged to continue working on a skill they felt they were close to mastering, even after spending 15 minutes on it. In school, a similar pattern emerged. The typical math lesson in Mrs. Chan's class lasted about 15 minutes, whereas the one in Mrs. Zielinski's class took about 45. In addition, recognizing some of her students' challenges with sustaining focus, Mrs. Chan would even break up sections of her tests into sections of 5 – 10 minutes each, separated by fun activities. In contrast, Mrs. Zielinski often struggled with the opposite problem: her students did not want to stop what they were doing to transition to the next activity.

As a result of the different lengths of time of each lesson, the complexity of the content taught also varied across ability tracks. In both gifted math and developmental gymnastics, the extra time spent on each individual topic requires children to concentrate for an extended period of time on the details of the lesson content. These long lessons are structured to include numerous components that make connections between the new

material and the students' prior knowledge of various subject areas. For instance, in the gifted math measuring lesson, connections were made to what the students had already learned about multiplication and addition, and even to reading by talking about word parts, and geography by talking about where different measurement systems were used. To measure the desk and report its length, the students had to use all of these more basic skills. In the developmental gymnastics group, for instance, the new skills the girls were learning on beam required them to have the flexibility developed through their daily stretching sequence, the strength developed by repeating their conditioning exercises, and the mastery of those basic skills on a line. To be able to do a back handspring on the beam, one must already have the flexibility to decent splits on the floor, the leg strength to jump high and the shoulder strength to support one's body weight in a handstand position, as well as the proprioceptive awareness of one's body in space required to execute a back handspring on the ground.

Not only are these differences in content apparent, but there are also differences in rules. For instance, in both recreational gymnastics and in mainstream math, there are elaborate and regularly occurring reward systems to encourage good behavior. But in gifted math and the developmental gymnastics group, these systems take up much less class time to explain, enforce, and reward. This seems to be because, in both school and gymnastics, the selectivity of advanced-track classes means that children who exhibit undesirable social behaviors do not make the cut. Though Mrs. Zielinski mentions that the children in her gifted math classroom vary much more in their social skills than they do in their math ability, you still do not see any "troublemakers," or any children who disrupt their classmates frequently or excessively. Similarly, in the developmental group,

while there is a great deal of variability in the gymnasts' skill level, there is likewise no one who is excessively disruptive, or who slows the pace of the lessons.

So, just as ability tracks in schools are known to differ in the norms, values, and beliefs they transmit to students, so too do different ability tracks in gymnastics. For the recreational group, safety is valued most highly. It is seen as necessary to accomplish two other imperatives: fun most importantly, and then learning. This sort of instruction prepares children for success in non-competitive, fun, low-stakes environments. In both the mainstream math class and the recreational gymnastics class, activities were kept brief and highly interesting. They seem to function almost like commercials for the content, as a way to entice them to desire more exposure to the content, or at least not to turn them off from learning more. Yet, they barely scratched the surface of the content when contrasted with the instruction provided in the gifted and developmental classes.

For the gifted math class and the developmental gymnastic class, the emphasis is on skill acquisition, and the characteristics and demeanors prerequisite to the development of skills are of paramount importance in elementary instruction. For this reason, the developmental gymnastics group teaches children that a high degree of self-control is necessary to learn difficult skills safely. While learning new skills is of paramount importance, it is also supposed to be fun, so that girls persist in the sport despite its difficulty. This type of environment prepares children for highly competitive, stressful, high-stakes environments.

Differences

Advanced-track gymnastics involves a different kind of emotional socialization than gifted math, owing to the physical nature of the activity involved. While in both,

children must work to overcome things like fatigue, frustration, and boredom, gymnastics alone involves fear and pain. For that reason, at the elementary age, gymnastics instruction includes a great deal more explicit socialization to teach appropriate ways of processing and expressing these experiences.

The developmental group is expected to engage in a great deal of emotional self-regulation while performing advanced skills on each event. They're expected to try their best to do the skills correctly, even if they're tired, frustrated or afraid. As this example shows, the girls are required to remain standing in line, despite their fatigue:

"Lily, did you ever feel like you were pushing through your feet like you were against the wall?" Annalise asks. Then, noticing the girls sitting down while waiting for their turn, she says, "Girls, stand up. You know better."

Next they do round off, back handspring, back tuck.

"I can't do that yet," Lily says. "Can I try?"

"Everyone can try," Annalise says.

Next they do front limbers. Harper and Lily put thick, pink elastic bands around their wrists.

"Harper, try harder," Annalise says. To me, she comments, "She likes to think she's not flexible, so she uses that as an excuse for everything. She's just really weak."

Mackenzie does a gorgeous front walkover. Annalise calls my attention to her long thin legs pulled gracefully into a full split.

"She's never worn a leotard without shorts before. I always thought her legs were pretty, but wow."

On the next pass, the girls do front handspring stepouts in a row.

"Do I still have to wear this?" Lily asks, holding up her conjoined wrists.

"Yep. keep it on."

Here we see the girls sitting down on the side of the tumble track as they wait for their turns on a hot summer day. Annalise reminds them of the "no sitting" rule in between corrections. Because Harper and Lily struggle to keep their arms narrow, Annalise hands them thick rubber bands to place around their wrists. She explains to me that Harper's refusal to correct her wide-arm front limber is due to her belief that she's inflexible. In

suggesting that Harper uses inflexibility as an excuse, she seems to imply that Harper has a fixed mindset about her ability to improve her shoulder flexibility. She contrasts this with Harper's lack of strength, perhaps implying that she was in denial of her own weakness, and avoidant of its well-known antidote: more conditioning.

In the developmental gymnastics group, children are explicitly socialized to overcoming fear. The coaches acknowledge that fear is an ever-present factor in learning increasingly more difficult skills, but they're careful not to provide too much comfort, lest they normalize the gymnasts' giving in to fearfulness.

Brooke takes a turn on the low beam. Then Cheyenne gets back up and does two more back handsprings. Brooke gets ready for a back walkover. Then she gets scared and asks Annalise for a spot. Mariah goes.

"Just do it by yourself," Annalise encourages Brooke.

"I'm scared," she says. She continues standing on the beam with her arms raised for several minutes.

Eventually, Annalise comes over and spots a few for her. She says, "You've got to keep your butt tight and push. Then you'll be fine."

Brooke does a good one by herself and Annalise is enthusiastic. "That's huge for you! Way to go! Feel how good that was?"

Cheyenne gets a spot. After a few without making corrections, Annalise sends her to go do back handspring drills onto the resi.

Then Evy does back walkovers with a spot.

Mariah tells Annalise she's ready to connect back handspring, back handsprings. She stops on the first one. On the second, she misses her hand a little.

"That's the worst that's gonna happen," Annalise tells her.

She goes again and sticks.

Annalise spots Harper on back handsprings. They're super high, but controlled and tight.

"Alright, rock star. Show me a good one," Annalise tells Mariah.

The girls set up a drill with Alisa. It's supposed to make them jump into their back handsprings and step out onto the beam.

Here, we see that Annalise is willing to acknowledge Brooke's fear, but still acts reluctant to spot her. When Brooke stands on the beam with her arms up for several moments, Annalise judges that she's too scared to do the skill by herself, and she spots her on a few back walkovers. After successfully doing several with a spot, Annalise again

encourages Brooke to try it by herself. She reminds her what to focus on, and Brooke completes the skill successfully by herself. Mariah is also scared, but of a much harder skill. She's working to connect two back handsprings, and stops after the first one on her first attempt. After she misses a hand on her second one, Annalise assures her that nothing worse will happen. Again, her encouragement is effective, as it motivates Mariah to try the more difficult series. When she manages to complete it successfully, her confidence seems to grow visibly.

Not only do the developmental coaches socialize the gymnasts to push through fatigue and fear, they also teach them how to combat their own perfectionism.

During beam, Annalise calls Lily over for a chat. Lily stands with her feet in a wide straddle, playing with her hair and looking down and away. Annalise tells her to sit down until she's ready to tell her why she's crying. Lily sits down against the mini wall and wipes her eyes. Then she loosens her tuck and puts her elbows on her knees, propping her chin on the back of her hands. Annalise goes to check on her again after giving Soliesse and Cheyenne a few handstand corrections. Lily doesn't yield, refusing to explain.

Annalise moves the group on to cartwheels.

Eventually Lily tells Annalise that what's bothering her is that "I just can't squeeze my butt and everybody keeps telling me to, and I just can't do it!" This is why she's crying.

Annalise explains to me that Lily tends to get pissed at herself whenever she gets really frustrated. It's been happening more since Mariah started working out with them. Before, they were all chasing each other, but I'd be better than her at this, but she'd be better than me at that, and so on. When Mariah started, she was so much better than all of them, it was hard for a few of them to deal with.

During this workout, Lily gets frustrated with her own imperfect handstands on beam. Annalise doesn't move to comfort Lily, but instead reminds her of the "no crying on the equipment" rule. Lily has to sit down and calm herself before being allowed to get back up on the beam. In order to be granted permission to return, she had to tell Annalise why she was crying, which eventually she does. Annalise recognizes that Lily's frustration with her own performance is borne of a sense that she just cannot compete

with a more-skilled, older peer. She explains to me that it has been hard for some of the extremely competitive girls in the developmental group – girls who have grown to love contests, because their near-matching ability levels have given many of them nearly equal odds of winning – to cope with having a more advanced teammate to compete with.

The outcome of the social pressure to succeed among developmental gymnasts and gifted math students can be perfectionism and it can cause children to getting down on themselves. This emotional socialization that transpires in the gifted settings (prompting one, first, to become a perfectionist and then to deal with those tendencies in a constructive way) may be more similar to what happens in gifted math. Kids who see gymnastics or math as “their thing,” an activity that they (and many other people who care about them) identify as being good at, are surrounded by others who feel the same way about the activity, and this lends to the environment a sense that performance in the activity is a contest with high stakes. As a result, kids in both settings are more likely than their mainstream peers to get extremely frustrated and upset by struggles that they perceive as failures in the activity. We see this here, as Annalise comforts Lily on beam.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Categorization and Boundary Formation in Institutions of Early Learning

Symbolic boundaries, the types of lines people draw when they categorize others, are instrumental in justifying unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources, and as such are considered by many cultural sociologists to be the cornerstone of social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984; Edgell et al. 2020; Lamont 1992). Symbolic boundary theory postulates that symbolic boundaries are formalized into social boundaries when the symbolic distinctions drawn among groups are used to justify policies that distribute material resources or political rights unequally. Accordingly, many contemporary cultural sociologists consider symbolic boundaries to be a necessary but insufficient condition for the existence of social boundaries (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002). Assuming the tight coupling of social and symbolic boundaries, boundary research has tended to focus on either their content or their effects, but rarely on the relationship between them (Edgell et al. 2020).

Some scholars, however, have questioned the premise that symbolic boundaries necessarily codify into social boundaries. For instance, research shows that people can hold prejudicial attitudes without practicing discrimination (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Others have found that strength of the coupling between the symbolic boundaries people draw and their support for social boundaries varies among social groups (e.g., Edgell et al. 2020). Moreover, symbolic boundaries don't always precede the creation of social boundaries. Because symbolic boundaries create "packages of assumptions about others" (Edgell et al. 2020:309), they are sometimes used after the fact to justify creating the very social boundaries responsible for the disenfranchisement of certain groups (Alwin and

Tufiş 2016; Gelman 2009). For one particularly illustrative example, consider Jane Elliott's infamous 1968 experiment in which she induced discriminatory behavior among her third grade students by providing them differential treatment based on their eye color (Peters 1985).

Perhaps the most influential applications of symbolic boundary theory to the study of education have been conducted by Pierre Bourdieu¹⁵ and his collaborators. In studying the French education system, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), showed how symbolic boundaries function in schools as a way of justifying the assignment of lower grades to students from working-class backgrounds. For Bourdieu, the content of the categories distinguished by symbolic boundaries is cultural capital—a set of cultural signals like attitudes, preferences, tastes, and styles necessary for entry into high status social groups, organizations, or institutions. Families with great amounts of cultural capital tend to produce children with certain skills and demeanors that are privileged in schools. For Bourdieu, the “natural differences” that affect teacher assessment are those of taste: wealthy children exposed to high culture in the home demonstrate a style—in

¹⁵ Bourdieu defines capital as the physical form of accumulated labor that can be appropriated as private property. Capital comes in three forms: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. Because amassing capital is the ultimate objective in society's economic game, groups employ various strategies to manipulate the relative value of the forms of capital so that transactions of capital conversion are favorable to those endowed with the form they possess (Bourdieu, in Szeman 2010: 82).

For Bourdieu, an individual's family of origin provides them with a specific amount and composition of capital. One's possession of various types and amounts of capital structure one's taste for various kinds of cultural products—what Bourdieu refers to as the habitus, or in other words, “systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu 1977:95). As such, habitus is a sense of what feels normal, natural, desirable, and appropriate, (and also abnormal, unnatural, undesirable, and inappropriate) that is derived from day-to-day experience. Habitus can be both structured and structuring because the field of social positionings, each position within which supplies quotidian experience, is homologous to other fields in which people are cultural consumers. As a result, the act of preferring one cultural product over another involves not only classification of the field in which it was produced, but it also simultaneously allows observers to classify the classifier on the basis of their preference.

their way of being and in their writing—that is recognized by teachers as more refined, ingenious, intelligent, and subtle than that of their peers (1998). They consequently receive more praise and encouragement, better grades, and more prestigious academic prizes and placements. Through a process called “misrecognition,” teachers fail to perceive that the true basis for their positive perceptions of these students and their work is their shared taste for high culture. Thus, by rewarding students already well-endowed with cultural capital, schools help to reproduce a stratified class system by providing the dominant social group with more¹⁶, in the embodied form of knowledge and dispositions as well as the institutionalized form of the academic degree.

In this dissertation, I have extended Bourdieu & Passeron’s research on symbolic boundaries in schools to children’s earliest experiences in them, to determine whether the process works in the same way in preschool. I also explore whether the process unfolds in a similar fashion at the preschool level in the field of sport. Unlike many studies in this tradition (e.g., Calarco 2018; Lareau 2011; Streib 2011), I focus solely on the *process* of social and symbolic boundary creation, without gathering the socioeconomic background

¹⁶ The flip-side, of course is that those lacking the requisite cultural capital are excluded. Bourdieu notes that exclusion is one of the most pervasive forms of power, producing “dehumanization, frustration, disruption, anguish, revolt, humiliation, resentment, disgust, despair, alienation, apathy, fatalist resignation, dependency, and aggressiveness (1961[1958]: 161 quoted by Lamont & Lareau 1988: 159). Cultural capital excludes individuals by four mechanisms: self-elimination, overselection, relegation, and direct selection (Lamont & Lareau 1988). Self-elimination is the process whereby individuals adjust their aspirations to their perceived chances of success (Bourdieu 1974[1966]). Overselection is a process in which individuals with less-valued cultural resources are subjected to the same type of selection as those who are culturally privileged and must perform equally well despite their cultural handicap, which in fact means they are asked to perform more than others (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979[1964]). Relegation occurs when individuals with less-valued cultural resources end up in less desirable positions and get less out of their educational investment, as via early, often ill-informed decisions, forced choice, and lost time (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979[1964]). Lastly, direct selection is the exclusion resulting from “elective affinities” based on similarities in taste.

information about students that would be necessary to tie boundary creation to broader processes of social class reproduction. Nonetheless, by exploring how expert teachers and coaches categorize, instruct, and sort children, I gain novel insights into the relationship between social and symbolic boundaries in the formal instruction of preschoolers. Primary among these insights is that at the preschool level, while the *process* and *content* of categorization and sorting that results in the formation of social and symbolic boundaries is similar, in preschool, instructors do not misrecognize the content of their categories. In fact, preschool teachers and coaches explicitly acknowledge and deliberately instruct children in the development of social skills, such that they constitute a nascent form of cultural capital.

With this goal in mind, I opted to observe teachers and coaches with many years of experience and strong reputations among parents and administrators for being effective educators in the particular types of institutions that employ them. In that sense, Mrs. Marshall is an ideal-type experienced, Catholic, preschool teacher; and Nick is an ideal-type experienced, preschool gymnastics coach. The same holds for Mrs. Zelinski, Mrs. Chan, and Coaches Annalise, Beth, and Alisa, who are all recognized as excellent instructors by their respective communities. They are by no means a random sample. But by observing how this very unique group of educators goes about categorizing, teaching and sorting students, I gain insights into how the process functions under nearly optimal conditions (for more on the utility of studying extreme cases, see Stinchcombe 2005). Since these teachers are held up by their peers as exemplars even within their own institutions, other teachers (who have less experience, or who struggle) are encouraged to emulate them. For this reason, the classification, instruction, and sorting process I

describe in this dissertation generalizes to other preschools and gymnastics clubs, but its practical implementation likely varies in other learning environments.

In the section that follows, I review my analysis of the process by which teachers and coaches classify, instruct, and sort preschoolers, and I explain the utility of conceptualizing this process as a case of social and symbolic boundary creation.

Afterward, I summarize my findings about the content of the categories teachers and coaches create, and theorize social skills as a nascent form of cultural capital. I address how teachers and coaches use differentiated instruction to shape children's nascent skills into slightly different, field-specific cultural capital, in accordance the small differences in their sorting criteria. Finally, I discuss the implications of this research for understanding broader processes of social reproduction, the limitations of this study, and directions for future research.

The Process: How preschool teachers and coaches categorize, instruct, and sort students.

Based on my observations of these exceptional educators, I find that in preschool, teachers and coaches come in with expectations for what students should know and be able to do based on prior experience and their own education. They are also mindful of the expectations held by kindergarten instructors and, in the academic case, state standards for what children should know and be able to do upon beginning kindergarten. With those expectations in mind, instructors plan the structure of class time and space and daily routines, and design a curriculum to move students from entry-level to kindergarten-ready. Teachers and coaches alike understand the primary objective of their

job to be facilitating children's accomplishment of kindergarten readiness, and they are mindful that this development takes longer for some children than others.

When children show up on the first day of preschool or preschool gymnastics, they have to learn how to perform the social skills demanded in three micro-interactional contexts of the structured class environment. These contexts include those that require students to focus primarily on tasks, those that involve participating in group settings, and those that involve interacting with peers and adults one-on-one. Mastering the skills demanded in each of these social contexts is dependent on students' learning how to pay and seek attention in ways deemed classroom-appropriate by the instructor. As children work on learning these social skills, teachers and coaches classify¹⁷ them on the basis of their efforts.

Using these categories, instructors are quick to identify children who are outliers in terms of their ability to navigate the system. Behaviors such as struggling to complete simple tasks, to attend to a speaker and refrain from distracting classmates in group settings, and to share, take-turns, and interact in appropriate ways with classmates are often interpreted by teachers as indicators of a child's special needs. The parents of students thus classified are encouraged to consult their pediatrician, and the children are sometimes also referred for professional needs assessments as well.

Even as they are making these classifications, instructors continue to informally assess all students' abilities as they navigate the activities, transitions, and interactional routines of the school day. On the basis of their expectations for child behaviors,

¹⁷ In this sense, categorization of students is not grounded theory. Teachers' categories preexist their impressions of the children.

instructors classify some children as weak in particular areas and develop remediation lessons to bolster their skills. These targeted interventions, by and large, involve reteaching expectations and the behaviors that accord with them, rewarding class-appropriate social behaviors, and providing negative consequences for inappropriate ones. Instructors classify other children as strong in particular areas and develop enrichment strategies to provide additional challenge. By and large the challenges provided are social, designed to encourage leadership, confidence, and cooperation¹⁸.

While occasional content area challenges are provided—for instance, when Mrs. Jill reads a book to several children during book & puzzle time, she may ask Ethan to read a short sentence; or Nick might let Bailey bounce higher than the other kids on the donkey kick station—they are not incorporated into the curriculum on in any sort of regular way. More often, children with strong content area skills are given social challenges (e.g., getting to demonstrate how to do a project at one of the activity tables or a gymnastics skill on a station) that foster leadership or encourage cooperation by facilitating a classmate's learning (such as Makayla did by helping Vann with the lock and key activity, or when Nick pairs Kayla who struggles on cartwheels with Elsie, who excels, so that she can give her pointers).

Finally, both teachers and coaches draw upon these categories when, after assessing child abilities and progress at the end of the term, they make placement recommendations for each individual for the following session or school year. For both Nick and Mrs. Marshall, age-eligibility is a necessary but insufficient condition for actual

promotion to kindergarten. The ultimate determining factor for both instructors is whether or not a child can navigate the three micro-interactional social contexts of the class. That is, whether they can attend to simple tasks until completion, participate in group learning settings, and interact with other individuals one-on-one in classroom appropriate ways. Both instructors hold a very low bar for content area skills (for instance, being able to speak intelligible words, or being able to walk without going on tiptoe)—so low, in fact, that they refer the children who struggle to master them for special needs testing. In contrast, students who clear that hurdle but still struggle with other basic content area skills (like holding a pencil correctly or understanding the cartwheel concept) are promoted, provided they demonstrate the social skills necessary to inhabit the structured class environments of preschool and preschool gymnastics. In both school and sport, readiness in the area of social skills is a must-have for promotion to kindergarten-level classes.

With only a few notable differences, the process of categorizing, instructing, and sorting children unfolds remarkably similarly in the preschool class taught by Mrs. Marshall and the preschool gymnastics class taught by Coach Nick. As described, Mrs. Marshall and Nick employ very similar logics for understanding the relationships between how they categorize children, and how they instruct and sort them. The primary differences have to do with how placement decisions are shaped by the broader institutional structures of St. Cecilia's and Nordic Gymnastics Club. Whereas the similarities allow us to theorize how this process works, in general, in educational institutions serving preschool-aged children, the differences across sites help us to

understand the contextual factors which influence how the process is implemented in practice.

Theorizing Preschool Categorization, Differentiation, and Sorting

I theorize the process by which preschool teachers and coaches categorize, differentiate instruction, and sort students as two concrete instantiations of symbolic boundaries being translated into social boundaries. As adults who are immersed in the culture of preschool instruction, Mrs. Marshall and Nick both draw on the social norms of their profession when classifying children. That is, they attend to the dimensions of difference among individual children which they have learned through their preparation to interpret as symbolic indicators of a child's level of socialization into the role of student or athlete. This is evident from the planning they do prior to the start of the school semester and gymnastics session. In anticipation that children will demonstrate a particular range of abilities, they construct a daily schedule that organizes space, time, and social interactions in a way that will allow most children to remain in their "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky 1978). Then, drawing on their past experience with other children of the same age, instructors assess each child's possession of the knowledge and abilities they have learned to value.

These early assessments lead both instructors to differentiate their instruction. That is, for the students they classify as low-ability with regard to the symbolic indicators of kindergarten readiness, they prescribe remediation activities and lessons. For the students they classify as high-ability, they provide enrichment. This differential treatment is equitable in the sense that both children are being provided with instruction at an appropriate level for their abilities. Nonetheless, the outcomes are different. Children

classified as low-ability on completing multi-step tasks (like putting on their winter gear or running through a multi-activity tumble trak circuit), for example, are provided with remediation in the form of verbal cues to remind them of the sequence of smaller tasks they must complete to be successful. In contrast, children who are classified as high-ability at completing multi-step tasks may finish their own work early and afterward be encouraged to help a low-ability classmate remember what to do next. In this sense, the differentiated instruction provided helps all children to grow, but it furnishes the high-ability children with additional social competencies.

By the end of preschool, the different competencies children have been encouraged to develop are often those taken into consideration when instructors are determining where to place them for the following year. This formal sorting means that the children initially classified as “low-ability” are more likely to be recommended for preschool retention or “redshirting,” and those initially classified as “high-ability” are more likely to be recommended for kindergarten promotion.

Sorting vs. Tracking

This early sorting—assigning some children to repeat preschool and others to begin kindergarten—can be thought of as instantiating a social boundary in the sense that children are divided formally into groups that receive different (primarily instructional) resources depending on their grade level. Whereas children in preschool attend school only three days a week for either half-days or full-days, children in kindergarten attend school five full days a week. The kindergarten curriculum is also far more attentive to academic skills that go beyond basic literacy and numeracy and include structured lessons on reading and math. In gymnastics, the difference in resources between

preschool and kindergarten groups is perhaps even more notable. Whereas the preschool class meets each week for 45 minutes, the kindergarten class lasts an hour. Moreover, children moved up to the kindergarten class (like the “Shooting Stars” group described in Chapter 6) practice on an entirely different set of equipment that more closely approximates the standard competition equipment, upon which they work to master a much more athletically challenging curriculum. Though they may have occurred, I did not observe children enacting strategies to defend the symbolic boundaries separating kindergarten from preschool, perhaps because all children, at some point, eventually participate in both.

Indeed, for this reason, sorting into preschool or kindergarten differs from the “tracking” that has been the subject of much investigation by sociologists of education. Tracking, as it is typically understood, occurs when children are divided and assigned to paths that lead to different destinations. Tracking by ability means that mobility from higher-level tracks to lower-level tracks is possible (and often permitted), but that mobility in the opposite direction generally is not. Moreover, because the skills demanded by the tracks diverge rapidly, it becomes increasingly difficult to switch tracks the more one progresses along one or the other.

The supplementary analysis presented in Chapter 6 extends the academic and the athletic case studies to older children in order to examine tracking into ability groups as an example of a social boundary. In the academic case, I observe two third grade math classrooms—one for students of mainstream ability, and one for students enrolled in a gifted school-within-a-school program. In the athletic case, I observe two gymnastics classes for children ages 5-9—one for children enrolled in the non-selective recreational

program, and the other for children selected into a high-ability, developmental pre-competitive program. Analysis of this fieldwork in Chapter 6 shows how the social boundaries created by assigning children to different ability-tracked classes result in unequally distributed resources.

While I did not conduct ethnographic research of meetings held in which children were formally tracked into the gifted program, an informational interview with Mrs. Zielinski sheds some light on how such determinations were made. At Persimmon Creek, admission to the gifted program is dependent on a child's scores on the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) standardized assessment (Northwest Evaluation Association 2020). In Mrs. Zielinski's class, 15 out of 28 students have scored in the 99th percentile on the math portion of the MAP test. The rest are all in either the 92nd or 95th percentile, so still extremely high as well. Mrs. Zielinski described to me that the children who score in the 99th percentile are considered Tier I applicants and offered the option to participate in the gifted immersion program first. Next up for consideration are the Tier II students whose scores range from the 95th-98th percentile, followed by Tier III students with scores in the 92nd-94th percentile. As Tier I and then Tier II parents accept the invitations, their children fill the available slots. There is a complicated system in place for breaking ties among Tier III applicants who exceed the small number of remaining slots. But, according to Mrs. Zielinski, the ultimate selections are made during a meeting of the applicants' 2nd-grade teachers, the 3rd-grade gifted teachers, and the gifted program administrators. These determinations, she explains, often come down to issues of "fit" – for instance, judgements about which students can handle the pressure and the pace of the gifted class without breaking down or experiencing excessive anxiety.

At Nordic, the process for admitting children into the developmental program was far less consistent or formal. Children were generally participants in the recreational program whom Nick or the other recreational coaches identified as talented and referred to Annalise for further evaluation. As a family-owned, small, business without consistent overall enrollment (numbers vary widely depending on the year's proximity to the Olympic Games), Nordic's class pathways were far less rigid than those of Persimmon Creek, as a public school. (For instance, in some years, a SuperTots program for talented preschool-aged children existed as an alternative conduit to the developmental group described in Chapter 6.) This flexibility meant that children who passed the initial skills evaluation could try working out in the developmental group to see if it was a good fit, with the provision that they could always return to their previous group if it was too hard or stressful. For instance, two 6-year-olds who tried training with the Devo group struggled to keep up with the others and were moved into the less-selective entry-level team group as a result.]

In Chapter 6, I illustrate how formal tracking into different ability groups creates a new social boundary between groups of children. Not only are the children provided different amounts of resources depending on which group they are placed in, but also very different learning experiences. Because the groups interact rarely, their interactions center around defense of the symbolic boundaries between the two groups. My research suggests that these resource differences can in turn can be generative of symbolic boundaries and strategies to maintain them, in ways that differ importantly from those prompted by the sorting differences into kindergarten.

In comparing the ability-tracked groups in schools to those in sports, I find that there are more similarities by ability track than by content area. At the beginning of the year, there is little difference in the skill level of the strongest students in the mainstream math classroom and the weakest students in the gifted classroom; likewise, there is little difference in the skill level of the strongest “rec” and the weakest “devo” gymnasts. But the high and low ability tracks in both sports and schools differ markedly in their hidden curricular expectations for relationships to authority and to work, with important implications for the proportion of class time used for instruction, the pace, and consequently the content, of the class. As a result, in terms of preparing children to navigate the hidden curricula of the most selective environments they may inhabit in the future, recreational gymnastics is more similar to mainstream math classroom than it is to the advanced track gymnastics class.

Because the two groups are physically separated during class time, differently apportioned, and never integrated, the social boundary of the class assignments sparks recognition of symbolic boundaries among the children. Though not the focus of my study, I observed incidents that suggested that students who’d been in Mrs. Chan’s class felt a sense of superiority over their third-grade peers in Mrs. Zielinski’s class. I inferred this primarily from their reactions to my miscategorizing them. I asked a friend’s daughter if she’d had Mrs. Chan, for instance, and she replied haughtily that she was in the gifted program, so she had Mrs. Zielinski. Another time, I asked a group of gymnasts that I’d coached (several of whom had attended Persimmon Creek) if anyone had had Mrs. Zielinski as a teacher. One person responded that she’d had Mrs. Chan, rolling her eyes heavenward, as she noted dismissively, “‘Cause I’m not, like, ‘gifted’ or whatever.”

The group commenced to tell me about some of the privileges bestowed on Mrs. Zielinski's class, like getting to do Lego Robotics instead of regular science. In gymnastics, the symbolic boundary maintenance seemed more overt. For instance, just before the Devo girls began their first competition season, they all purchased matching "Nordic" backpacks which the Shooting Stars (and the entire Compulsory team) coveted to no end. To prepare for their first meet, the Devo group coaches organized a practice, in-house intrasquad to which the girls wore their matching, long-sleeve, rhinestone-studded team leotards. During their routines, individuals in the Shooting Stars group stopped whatever they were doing to watch the "real" gymnasts "compete." Conversely, the Devo group regularly asserted their distinction by flaunting their permission to jump from the superior, white, in-ground trampolines into the pit, while the Shooting Stars pressed their noses to the lobby windows, waiting for Nick gather them for class.

In this way, two well-studied school practices—differentiated instruction and tracking—can be thought of as stages in the categorization process through which symbolic boundaries are translated into social boundaries. This process occurs in many formal educational settings, including extracurricular activities. Throughout childhood, young people participate¹⁹ in various adult-led instructional contexts like sports teams,

¹⁹ While there is ample evidence that ability sorting occurs in activities, there is a paucity of research regarding which groups of children are more likely to participate at the levels that are highly selective and competitive, and which groups of children are more likely to participate recreationally. Relative to studies of the outcomes of placement in different academic tracks, there have also been few studies of differential returns to participation in various levels of extracurricular activities. Yet there is reason to suspect that children with higher levels of social or cultural capital are more likely to excel in extracurricular activities than their less-advantaged peers. Further, there is reason to suspect that the benefits and drawbacks to participation in any given extracurricular activity may vary by level of involvement.

music lessons, and academic clubs, where they are likewise placed into ability-grouped levels or “tracks.” Sports in particular are notorious for employing significant filters to determine who gets to participate, when, and how. Notably, youth sports have been described as a conveyor belt in which many children begin, but few persist, and still fewer “go pro” (Rhoden 2010). Friedman (2013) and others have showed that youth dance and soccer have become increasingly competitive over the past generation (Adler and Adler 1994; Messner and Musto 2016). Finally, Clark (2012) found that ability discourses prompted by processes of team selection, emphases on performance outputs, and ongoing expectations of fixed athletic development affected girls’ ability to self-identify as “good at sport,” and that girls’ sporting identities were particularly important in predicting their continued participation in sport through secondary school. Given the ubiquity of this categorizing, instructing, and tracking process in formal youth educational contexts, it is important to understand how it happens at its earliest stages.

The Importance of Social Context

Still, these categorization and boundary formation processes don’t happen in a vacuum, and here the processual differences across sites are illustrative. We learn two important things from these differences about how the process is shaped by social contexts. First, how instructors decide to structure their classes and the criteria they use to assess child performance determines which children excel. Second, how the broader organization administering the preschool programs structure their course offerings largely prescribes which alternative learning environments “outlier” students can be moved to, and how much effort is required to readjust their initial placement. These contexts, in

turn, influence how students experience the learning environment and what they learn within it.

First, the social environment of each child's home determines how novel the formal preschool learning environment seems to the child. When there is a closer cultural match between a child's home and school or gymnastics, the child has an initial advantage in understanding and 'fitting in' to the classroom environment, compared to peers whose homes are more culturally different (Lareau and Weininger 2003). Because both gymnastics and preschool emphasize teaching children to navigate highly structured learning environments, the children who live in homes that incorporate structure and routine have an advantage over their peers who do not. In both the academic and athletic settings, the child who is used to following a schedule and engaging in the types of social interactions expected of them in preschool is more likely to be classified as highly skilled. Peers to whom such structure is novel are more likely to struggle. While the data I collected did not permit me to analyze this systematically, there were plenty of incidents I observed suggesting this to be the case. Further home-based ethnography would be necessary to investigate these hypotheses.

The children who struggle with the structure of the school or gymnastics class call attention to an important corollary observation: the kids themselves play an active role in learning to navigate the novel environment of the class. Far from being passive vessels awaiting the pouring in of knowledge by adults, the children I observed had their own thoughts and opinions about the activities their instructors wanted to engage them in. They were loathe to leave their parents or eager to run into the classroom to play with their friends; they were proud of selecting their own foam square and entering the gym

“like the big kids” or they threw temper tantrums at the door. They loved Story Time so much they refused to wash their hands lest they miss a word, or they regarded the story as mere background noise to tune out when playing wordlessly with the matchbox cars a friend secreted onto the ABC carpet in his pocket. They were so excited to jump in the pit that they got a running start from 40 feet away, or they were so terrified of falling into the blocks that they needed Nick to go in first and hold them. They even helped in socializing one another (August, under review). Many of these reactions, no doubt, were shaped by their feelings about similar situations at home, and the reactions other adults had had to the ways they expressed them.

Second, how and when the instructors make formal decisions about how to categorize each student depends on the categories available to place them in. That is, the organizations—Nordic Gymnastics Club or St. Cecilia School, in this study—structure what classes are available for children of different ages. They set policies for eligibility and rules for how a child is to move from one class to another. Parents must determine the appropriate classes for their children and enroll them. Once the course begins, it typically requires administrative permission to change a child’s placement with the term in medias res. The rigidity of the organization’s rules for moving students affects how difficult it is to move an outlier somewhere that’s not prescribed by the system. We see this when Mrs. Marshall moves Jimmy to the half-day preschool class that only meets two days a week, because the children in it are younger. In order to effect that change, Mrs. Marshall had to provide extensive documentation to the preschool director, Mrs. Harper.

Though moving a child into a younger class not happen in the class I observed Nick teach, it did happen in a preschool course I taught at Nordic. My student, Kobe, began the MightyTots preschool class the age of three, without having previously taken a Parent-Tot class. Kobe struggled to stay with the group on his foam square, and instead made repeated efforts to run across the busy Saturday morning gym where big kids were tumbling. After talking with his parents for two weeks in a row about how dangerous it was for him to leave the group, his parents agreed to accompany him to a session of Parent-Tot classes first, so he could learn the class routine with more help. They agreed to this switch because the two classes met simultaneously and cost the same amount. To do this required Nick's verbal permission, which I was able to obtain in the five-minute window before my next class, and the switching of Kobe to the other class in the computer system. In contrast, Nick rarely granted permission for exceptionally talented children to move up in the middle of a session, and, in fact, he encouraged coaches to wait until the end of the academic school year to move kids up. His logic was that there were six levels in the recreational program – one for each grade from kindergarten to fifth – and a “high school prep” class for middle schoolers. He worried that if the talented kids (disinclined or economically unable to participate on the team) moved up too fast, they'd run out of new levels to do before middle school, and they would quit.

These examples stress the importance of the broader social contexts – at the both the family and organizational level – in shaping which children are advantaged by institutions of learning, and in determining which types of placements would come to be considered “normative” or the “default.” The structure of the class and the instructors' expectations of the children navigating it seems to predispose certain groups to be

categorized as “high-ability” and others as “low-.” In addition, perceptions of certain pathways as the social “norm” likely influence how those who deviate from them are perceived and categorized. More research is needed to determine, for instance, which home and family characteristics are associated with the pace and success of children’s acclimation to the role of student or athlete. Moreover, more research is needed to identify how constraints on instructors’ ability to promote children to a higher grade-level before the appointed time affects the content-area progress of children in the mainstream groups.

Category Content: Social Skills or Content Area Skills?

In studies of both schools and sports, scholars have repeatedly regarded skills in the content area as the ultimate arbiter of academic and athletic success. While neither field has been inattentive to the importance of social skills as promoters of content area success, they are typically treated as a mediator of excellence in content area performance, or as a felicitous byproduct of participation. This is because studies of child sorting and tracking in both subfields have largely examined these processes in elementary school and higher grade levels. My findings based on fieldwork in institutions responsible for the education of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds suggest that the process works differently in preschool and preschool sports because this misrecognition does not occur.

Sociologists of education (going back to Anyon (1980) Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) Bowles and Gintis (2011) and Oakes (2005), at least, but also the many others who continue to examine the role of schools in the intergenerational reproduction of social class inequalities) have shown time and again that the way students “get ahead” in school is by out-performing classmates on tests and grades, as such indicators of content-

area performance are the criteria upon which students are sorted into academic tracks of varying abilities and chosen for admission to selective universities²⁰. Bourdieu, for instance, argues that while it would be unthinkable to sort children according to SES (or, by extension, race or gender) upon their entry to kindergarten, if it happens that children get sorted along roughly the same lines when they are in middle or high school, it is permissible because, in the interim, they should all have had the opportunity to deploy their best efforts to learn the same skills as their peers. For the observed outcome—unequal sorting of wealthier students into higher ability tracks—to result, something must occur during children’s earliest years of schooling that allows “natural” differences—those stemming from variation in natural ability, family resources, and parenting—to be “misrecognized” as differences in performance. “Misrecognition,” as Bourdieu terms it, explains the paradox, long acknowledged by sociologists of education, that though socioeconomic status influences high school track placement, it does so almost entirely through its effects on achievements, goals, and encouragement in earlier grades (Ozturk and Singh 2006).

In line with this theory, sociologists of education widely acknowledge that social skills play a role in this success, specifically by facilitating the learning and behaviors that are evaluated positively by teachers and standardized tests²¹. Excellence on these formal assessments, especially in the higher ability tracks or college-preparatory schools,

²⁰ There has been some push-back against this practice, with many teachers advocating for contract grading and self-assessment, and some colleges dropping test scores in favor of holistic assessments, etc.

²¹ Bourdieu contends that teachers often misrecognize the true basis for how they classify students. This happens because teachers acknowledge cultural capital as a legitimate indicator of student merit. It is, after all, what it is their job to instill through instruction. However, because the amount of cultural capital a given student possesses just happens to be a product of one’s social location of origin, academic assessment tends to favor advantaged students.

has been shown to depend on the mastery of a “hidden curriculum,” a set of unspoken rules of conduct that align with those demanded in white-collar and professional occupations. Given their interest in social class reproduction, they note that students’ social locations of origin furnish them with “cultural capital” or “soft skills” that are differentially effective for navigating the “hidden curriculum” of school. Because these skills are more likely to have been imparted to privileged children in the home from an early age, they have an advantage over their less-privileged peers who must struggle to learn them in the classroom²². In general, though mastering the expectations of the “hidden curriculum” is hugely influential over students’ grades and test scores, they are not overtly graded on their mastery of it.

Similarly, sociologists of sport have assumed that athletic ability constitutes the primary sorting criterion for selection into the most competitive levels. Unlike school, which is mandatory, sports participation is elective, and scholarship shows that the likelihood of persisting is higher among youth athletes who are or perceive themselves to be successful. As youth sports have grown increasingly professional—that is, with increases in the number of selective and elite travel teams catering to ever younger children, organized and paid-for by adults, with higher stakes (Cox 2011)—metaphors like the pyramid structure or the conveyor belt are often used to describe the patterns of participation among child and youth athletes. The average age for children to stop participating in sports is 10.5 years old, and the average amount of time spent playing any

²² Nevertheless, there is a difference between the cultural capital effortlessly acquired within the home and the cultural capital hard-won through the education system, and it manifests as a difference in manners. Such differences in manner “are predisposed to mark differences within the dominant class, just as differences in cultural capital mark the differences between the classes” (Bourdieu 1984:69).

given sport is 2.9 years (The Aspen Institute 2020). The persistence of the athletically talented occurs due to both push-out and drop-out. That is, in addition to the children who are cut from the team, others self-select out of sport on the basis of their own perceived ability (Clark 2012; Fox, Corbin, and Couldry 1985; Martin 1997). A sense of “being good at sport” is important to persistence, particularly among adolescent and pre-teen girls. According to Clark, “At this transition into adolescence, sport became more competitive and some girls felt that they were no longer ‘good at sports’ even if they had participated in a variety of physical activities during primary school. Although many girls had hoped to continue their sports involvement into secondary school, they either did not believe that they would be selected for a team or were not selected once they attended tryouts” (2012:1183).

In contrast to sociology of education’s focus on how social skills contribute to school success, sports researchers have focused more extensively on sport as site wherein social skills are cultivated. For instance, scholars focused on positive youth development through sport have identified five areas of growth enhanced by effective programming: competence, confidence, character, caring/compassion, and connection (Lerner 2005). Research on talent identification among athletes has been criticized for an overemphasis on physical or performance characteristics, with some studies suggesting that a broader conceptualization of talent, including psychological determinants, could yield more accurate predictions (Abbott et al. 2005). Moreover, these studies tend to focus on identifying the psychological predictors that distinguish among adult elite and sub-elite athletes, and devote little attention to the social skills that advantage child and youth

athletes in competitive sport (my assessment, based on reviews by (Abbott et al. 2005:22–24 and Johnston et al. 2018²³).

In this dissertation, I have demonstrated that the classification, instruction, and sorting of students in preschool inverts the importance of content area and social skills. I had expected, following Bourdieu, that instructors would commonly misrecognize the basis of their categorizations, emphasizing differences among students' content area skills while in practice sorting on the basis of social skills. Yet my research revealed that, in fact, at the preschool level, instructors of preschool-aged children are very mindful of the importance of social skills—including behaviors like listening while others are speaking, turn-taking, making eye contact, following directions, and sharing—and they are deliberate in incorporating social skills instruction into the curriculum. They assess and measure them continually, and when it comes to formally sorting children into classrooms for the following school year, social skills are the primary basis for their placements. In short, in preschool the curriculum is not hidden. In fact, teaching and credentialing social skills is preschool's entire *raison d'être*.

It is perhaps a bit hyperbolic to claim that the hidden curriculum is not hidden, for it is certainly true that there are degrees of hiddenness. Preschool instructors cannot make all their expectations explicit all the time, or they'd be providing instructions all day, and the kids in Mrs. Marshall's preschool class and Nick's gymnastics class did occasionally

²³ Of the 20 studies included in the systematic review, only two explored the influence of cognitive/psychological characteristics (one (Van Yperen 2009) included among these goal commitment, problem-focused coping, and seeking social support; the other (Vestberg et al. 2012) included creativity, response inhibition, cognitive flexibility, visual scanning, number and letter sequencing). The study by VanYeperen also took into account player profile (including number of siblings, ethnic origin, parental divorce) on sports performance.

get mistaken as misbehaving when in fact they did not understand the expectations. In general, though, the preschool instructors treated breaches of their expectations as teachable moments, and they sought to provide extra help to the children who struggled to master them. They reacted differently when kids failed to live up to their expectations than, for instance the fourth-grade teachers Calarco (2018) describes. Calarco shows some efforts made by teachers to provide explicit social skills instruction to disadvantaged students, such as encouraging them to ask questions or approaching them to provide help, but her emphasis is on the failure of teacher attempts to bridge disparities between the middle-class culture of the classroom and working-class students' interaction styles. She depicts with heart-breaking clarity the times when working-class and poor 4th graders refrain from seeking help and get reprimanded for failing to complete assignments, times when kids who haven't seen an ophthalmologist struggle to see the board but don't ask to change seats, and times when students become despondent because they don't receive as much attention from the teacher for their injuries or accomplishments. In this dissertation, I've shown how in preschool, Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill work daily to devise ways to help Vann develop the language skills to make friends, to engineer more cooperative social interactions among Dekari and John, and to encourage Faith to "find her bossiness." I've shown how Nick creates opportunities to reward struggling students for good listening, direction following, or patient waiting in line. Moreover, as opposed to fourth grade teachers who tend to socially promote children, preschool teachers and coaches retain kids in their classes (to the extent possible) until they master the social skills believed to be necessary in kindergarten and beyond.

Even Streib (2011), who focuses on preschool, shows that the differences in linguistic facility among working-class and middle-class children provide advantaged students more power and disproportionate opportunities to practice their language skills and silence less-advantaged peers. But because she doesn't investigate how teachers' assessments of student verbal acuity and their resulting strong social skills map on to teachers' placement decisions, her findings suggest that preschool operates in the same way as all the other grades. However, by examining Mrs. Marshall and Mrs. Jill's rationale for retaining students, we learn that their goal—and in fact—the most important goal of all their preschool instruction—is to prepare the students *socially* for kindergarten.

Theorizing the development of field-specific cultural capital

In this dissertation, I argue that social skills—and the embodied, culture-bound interpretations of how children exhibit them—function as important instantiations of cultural capital in the acquisition of institutional advantage via teacher categorization. By illustrating how instructors in two different content areas evaluate and interpret students' dimensions of difference, how they differentiate their instruction to meet students' perceived needs, and how they make placement recommendations, I have demonstrated that social skills form an important form of cultural capital the teacher recognition of which advantages some learners. The support for this argument comes from the evidence presented in the previous five substantive chapters, as well as from prior research on cultural capital and social skills.

Sociologists have long argued that social and cultural capital are primary sources of institutional advantages. Guided by similar cumulative-advantage theories of how

early learner differences translate into later great disparities, researchers in educational, developmental, and social psychology cite the importance of early social skills for children's long-term academic and economic outcomes. Yet social skills are not typically included among sociologists' measurements of social or cultural capital. That they are known to differ in patterned ways among children upon school entry and that they are associated with academic and other important life outcomes suggests they should be.

What is cultural capital?

Lamont and Lareau (1988) prefer to define cultural capital as consisting of institutionalized cultural signals such as attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials that are used for social and cultural exclusion from jobs, resources, and high-status groups. This definition, a simplified version of the many propounded by Bourdieu throughout his prolific career, focuses on the implicit power of cultural capital to accomplish cultural and social exclusion. Bourdieu himself described cultural capital and its functions in five different ways²⁴.

Owing to the theoretical ambiguities and gaps in Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) original model and in Bourdieu's subsequent works, the concept of cultural capital has also been utilized by later scholars in different and contradictory ways (Lamont and

²⁴ In *Inheritors* (1979[1964]), Bourdieu & Passeron defined cultural capital as the informal academic standards which are also class attributes of the dominant class, including informal knowledge about the school, traditional humanist culture, linguistic competence and specific attitudes, or personal style—ease, naturalness, aloofness, creativity, distinction and “brilliance.” In *Reproduction* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977[1970]), cultural capital is measured by academic standards, including only linguistic aptitude (grammar, accent, tone), previous academic culture, and diplomas. In *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984[1979]), cultural capital is both an indicator and the basis of class position, and in “Les strategies de reconversion” (Bourdieu, Boltanski, and St-Martin 1973, p. 93), it is a power resource (technical, scientific, economic or political expertise) facilitating access to organizational positions and simultaneously an indicator for class positions.

Lareau 1988). The term has been variously operationalized as knowledge of high culture (DiMaggio and Useem 1982), educational attainment (Robinson 1985), the curriculum of elite schools (Cookson and Persell 1985), the symbolic mastery of “practices” (Martin and Szelenyi 1987), the capacity to perform tasks in culturally acceptable ways (Gouldner 1979), participation in high culture events (DiMaggio 1985), symbols of specific class interests (Dubin 1986), and the supply of ideas and concepts acquired from previous encounters (Collins 1987).

Still other researchers, particularly those working in U.S. school contexts, accept the idea that some other quality is being misrecognized by teachers as “merit,” but have contested understandings of cultural capital as possession of taste for high culture. One popular argument is that, particularly in the United States where high cultural markers are less widely agreed-upon than in France, children who experience a culture in the home that “matches” the institutional culture of the school enjoy advantages denied to children who experience a mismatch between home and school cultures (Hansen 1986; Ladson-Billings 1995; Mehan 1992; Villegas 1988). For instance²⁵, parenting styles associated with the middle class confer upon children the advantages of better teacher assessments

²⁵ Not only is cultural matching important in elementary and high schools, but it matters on the job market as well. Rivera (2011) shows that hiring by elite professional service firms, more than mere skills sorting, is a process of cultural matching between candidates, evaluators, and firms. Employers looked for shared culture with their candidates: of particular importance were commonalities in lifestyle markers like leisure pursuits, experiences, and styles of self-presentation. In accord with Weber’s contention that lifestyle markers are the fundamental bases of status group reproduction and social closure, Rivera found that these factors often outweighed employer concerns about productivity. Based on her findings, Rivera concluded that “both cultural variety and depth serve as important bases of economic and social distinction in North American corporate life. Additionally, they suggest that concerted cultivation (Lareau 2011b) of children’s extracurricular lives—a hallmark of U.S. white, upper-middle-class families—is not only a prerequisite for admission to America’s most elite colleges (Stevens 2007), but also for entry to its highest paying entry-level jobs” (1018).

and grades, higher verbal skills, and greater ability to navigate institutional settings (Calarco 2018; Lareau 2011b).

Possession of cultural capital does not automatically yield differential institutional advantages, however. For those benefits to accrue, one must also know how to effectively deploy one's cultural capital. Studying parents' involvement in the classrooms of their third-grade children, (Lareau and Horvat 1999) distinguish between the possession and activation of capital and resources. People who have social and cultural capital may choose when to activate it, and they may vary in the skill with which they activate it. Moreover, they find that the value of capital depends heavily on the social setting (or field). When a strategy used by parents to gain advantages for their children is legitimated and accepted by school officials, the result is what Lareau and Horvat (1999) refer to as a moment of social inclusion. On the other hand, when parents' strategies are unsuccessful, moments of social exclusion or contestation occur, as for example, when a child is placed in a low reading group, retained, or placed in remedial courses; or when parents' feelings of alienation and anger are further compounded by interactions in the school. Taken together, these types of occurrences suggest that social reproduction is uneven and continually negotiated by social actors, as opposed to being an overly deterministic process.

Because the value of cultural capital depends on the field in which it is employed, some groups strategically use more than one form of cultural capital. Carter (2003) distinguishes between the forms of capital which coexist and are used selectively within the social and academic lives of poor ethnic minority students, designating them "dominant" and "non-dominant" cultural capital. She defines dominant cultural capital as

“powerful, high status cultural attributes, codes, and signals that provide individuals with an ability to “walk the walk” and “talk the talk” of the cultural power brokers in our society” (p. 138, paraphrasing Bourdieu). She defines non-dominant cultural capital as “a set of tastes, or schemes of appreciation and understandings, accorded to a lower status group, that include preferences for particular linguistic, musical, or interactional styles,” and are the “resources used by lower status individuals to gain “authentic” cultural status positions within their respective communities” (138). Carter insists that the interplay between these two forms of capital in the lives of low-income minority students must be considered in developing a more thorough and nuanced understanding of how culture affects the mobility of lower status social groups.

Social Skills as Cultural Capital

Taking into account this research on cultural capital, the findings of this dissertation refine our understanding in two ways. First, they suggest that young children’s “social skills” function as a sort of nascent cultural capital in the sense that children who have stronger skills are evaluated more positively by their teachers and coaches. Second, by teaching attention strategies appropriate for the micro-interactional contexts of the classroom or the gym, teachers and coaches foster the development of forms of cultural capital that are particularly conducive to school and athletics. That is, among preschoolers, social skills function as a nascent form of cultural capital which teachers and coaches shape into domain-specific cultural capital through differentiated instruction. In this way, beginning with children’s earliest experiences in institutional education, they are socialized by their teachers and coaches into students and athletes.

While conceptualizing social skills as a nascent form of cultural capital may be new, thinking about specific social skills as institutionally and personally advantageous is anything but novel²⁶. Dozens of studies in developmental, educational, and social psychology have explored the relationship between academic outcomes and the skills categorized variously as social and behavioral skills, cognitive self-regulation, self-discipline, effortful control, executive function, non-cognitive skills, emotional self-regulation, social-psychological factors, and cultural capital (DiPrete and Jennings 2012). However, collectively, they provide resounding evidence that social and behavioral skills are important predictors of later life success. In this section, I will briefly review the literatures on group differences in social and behavioral skills at school-entry, school and teacher effects on social and behavioral skills, and outcomes.

Children differ on levels of social skills at school entry (Foulks and Morrow 1989). Two important predictors of variation in school-entry social and behavioral skills are, unsurprisingly, gender and socioeconomic status (DiPrete and Jennings 2012;

²⁶ While many scholars of cultural capital specify its characteristics, mechanisms, and concrete forms, one important characteristic is notably omitted from their investigations: manners. For Bourdieu, manners are the nuance of cultural capital that permit its function: “The emphasis on manners, and through them on mode of acquisition, enables seniority within a class to be made the basis of the hierarchy within the class; it also gives the recognized possessors of the legitimate manner an absolute, arbitrary power to recognize or exclude” (95). Through ethnographic descriptions, Bourdieu manages to eloquently illustrate how differences in manners reinforce distinctions between social class fractions within both the dominant and dominated social classes (Bourdieu 1984). However, perhaps because manners are hard to quantify, and perhaps because of the invisibility of the taken-for-granted appropriateness of the manners of the dominant class (see fn. 4), most of the widely varying studies of cultural capital attuned to differences in manners are qualitative (for instance, Lareau's (2011) descriptions of ‘constraint’ and ‘entitlement’, and Khan's (2012) discussion of ‘ease’; Jack 2016). Though these works set up powerful illustrations of holistic differences among class fractions, they do not attempt to enumerate specific behaviors constituent of ‘ease’, ‘constraint’, or ‘entitlement.’ The one place manners are consistently rationalized and measured is in developmental psychology and early education research, where they are commonly referred to as social and behavioral skills, which I turn to next. Listening while others are speaking, turn-taking, making eye contact, following directions, and sharing commonly fall under the rubric of social skills.

Jennings and DiPrete 2010). Whereas girls develop social skills earlier and receive better teacher-based academic evaluations (DiPrete and Jennings 2012), boys have higher rates of developmental problems, disruptive behavior, attention disorders, reading disabilities, and mental retardation (Buchmann, DiPrete, and McDaniel 2008; Halpern 1997).

Other factors associated with learning-related social skills include IQ, behavior difficulties, hearing and language problems (McClelland, Morrison, and Holmes 2000). Moreover, according to Russell, et al. (2016), early caregiving environments predict certain social emotional competencies among first graders, including peer relationship satisfaction, oppositional behavior, social skills, and classroom competence. Their findings suggest that the caregiving qualities that matter the most for predicting primary school outcomes differ from the qualities of the infant-child relationship that matter most for predicting early childhood outcomes. Whereas supportive home characteristics and maternal sensitivity matter more for attention and language skills at 54 months, caregivers who “successfully shift their caregiving in the later preschool years to promote independent problem solving and exploration in a cognitively stimulating and supportive context are best equipping their children for 1st-grade social competence, while protecting them against inattention and oppositional behavior problems” (Russell et al. 2016:163).

Not only have children’s social skills been found to differ upon school entry, but they also develop differently as children progress through early elementary education. For instance, exploring the trajectories of self-regulation development across children from preschool through first grade, Montroy, et al. (2016) found that children follow three distinct developmental patterns of growth. The majority of children develop self-

regulation rapidly during early childhood. Children were classified as either early developers, preschool developers, or late developers, depending on the age at which they underwent rapid growth in self-regulation skills. Girls, children with greater expressive vocabulary, and children with higher maternal education levels were more likely to be early developers (Montroy et al. 2016). While most children are reasonably well behaved and exhibit a positive approach to classroom tasks upon beginning kindergarten, children with risk factors in the area of parental education, socioeconomic status, or family structure are less likely to be socially adept, more likely to be aggressive, and less likely to have a positive attitude toward learning activities (Zill and West 2000).

Many scholars believe that social skills can be improved by schools. For instance, Diamond, et al. (2007) found that cognitive control skills can be improved in at-risk preschoolers and suggested this as a low-cost alternative to other costly interventions. Additional evidence supporting this conclusion comes from Reynolds, et al. (2011) who determined that participation in the Child-Parent Center Education Program, a publicly funded early-elementary intervention in inner-city Chicago schools, was linked to higher educational attainment, income, socioeconomic status, and health insurance coverage, in addition to lower rates of substance abuse and justice-system involvement at age 28. Positive effects were strongest for males and children of high school dropouts. Other studies have bolstered the reliability of these findings. For instance, Jennings and DiPrete (2010) found that teacher effects on social and behavioral skill development are considerable and larger than teacher effects on academic development, and that early elementary teachers vary measurably in their ability to transmit these skills to students.

To narrow down precisely which factors in early childhood classrooms matter the most for positive outcomes throughout the life course, other scholars have explored associations between specific classroom and teacher characteristics, and shorter-term outcomes. For instance, Mashburn et al. (2008) found that in public prekindergarten programs, teachers' instructional interactions predicted academic and language skills and teachers' emotional interactions predicted teacher-reported social skills. Moreover, in a 2009 study, Rimm-Kaufman, et al. report that classroom quality—specifically, the quality of teachers' classroom management—was linked to children's greater behavioral and cognitive self-control, children's higher behavioral engagement, and less time spent off-task. However, they found that classroom quality did not moderate the relation between children's school-entry self-regulation and adaptive classroom behaviors, which included teacher reports of children's cognitive and behavioral self-control and work habits and observer-rated engagement and off-task behavior (Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2009).

Kids with stronger learning-related social skills experience better outcomes in several domains. Additionally, McClelland, et al. (2000) found that children's learning-related social skills, as measured by teachers two weeks after the beginning of kindergarten, were associated with their academic scores at school entry and at the end of second grade. Behavioral regulation is also a good predictor of literacy and math skills. McClelland, Acock, and Morrison (2006) found that children's learning-related skills including self-regulation and social competence affected children's reading and math scores between kindergarten and sixth grade and predicted growth in those areas between kindergarten and second grade. Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2009) found that children's self-regulation, measured upon entrance to kindergarten, related to teachers' report of

behavioral and cognitive self-control and work habits in the spring of the kindergarten year.

Early elementary school students' behavioral regulation skills have positive effects on their academic performance and growth. McClelland, et al. (2007), controlling for site, child gender, and several background variables, found that behavioral regulation (assessed using the Head-to-Toes Task) predicted fall and spring emergent literacy in preschoolers, vocabulary, and math skills, and that growth in behavioral regulation predicted growth in emergent literacy, vocabulary, and math skills over the year. Ponitz, et al. (2009), also assessing behavioral regulation using the Head-Toes-Knees-Shoulders task, demonstrated that kindergartners' performance correlated positively with parent ratings of attentional focusing and inhibitory control and teacher ratings of classroom behavioral regulation. They also found that higher levels of behavioral regulation as measured in the fall by the HTKS task predicted stronger levels of achievement in the spring and better teacher-rated classroom self-regulation, but not interpersonal skills. After controlling for site, child gender, and other background variables, gains in behavioral regulation predicted gains in mathematics, but not in language and literacy.

Strong behavior-related social skills also have positive effects throughout a child's life course. Children's social behavioral characteristics are known to contribute to their adjustment to school and subsequent academic performance (Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber 1993; Cooper and Farran 1988; DiPrete and Jennings 2012; Ladd, Price, and Hart 1990). Additionally, using a 20-year longitudinal data set, Magnuson, et al. (2016) determined that high average levels of math and reading achievement and low average levels of antisocial behavior problems are positively associated with later achievement,

after adjusting for family and individual background measures. They found small associations between attention problems and later attainment. Also, among kindergarteners of low-socioeconomic status, prosocial skills are key predictors of adolescent and adult outcomes. Teacher ratings of children's socio-emotional skills predicted outcomes 13 and 19 years later across multiple domains of education, employment, criminal activity, substance abuse, and mental health (Jones, Greenberg, and Crowley 2015).

In spite of the overwhelming evidence of the importance of social skills for later academic outcomes, some studies point to the contrary. Duncan, et al. (2007), controlling for school-entry cognitive, attention, and socioemotional skills, as well as family background factors, found the strongest predictors of later achievement to be early attention, reading, and particularly math skills. They found measures of socioemotional behaviors, including internalizing and externalizing problems and social skills, to be insignificant predictors of later academic performance. This study's null finding is likely due to differences in the conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement of social skills.

In this dissertation, I have shown that the observed benefits coming to students who excel at these skills are strikingly similar to those enjoyed by students with large amounts of cultural capital, as indicated by the sociological literature. Indeed, social and behavioral skills seem to function similarly to cultural capital in that they are the dominant class's institutionally legitimated versions of social interaction and cultural consumption, respectively. Though social interactions look different when practiced by groups differing in social class, race/ethnicity, or geographical region, what constitutes

their adequate performance is their similitude to those of the dominant class. What scholars mainly seem to agree on is that, however they may vary in execution, their use in the classroom is important.

Given the strong evidence of positive outcomes resulting from early social skills, it is not surprising that I found them to play an important role in how teachers and coaches alike classify, instruct, and sort children. Since many sociologists of education use the term cultural capital to understand the set of skills and abilities that confer institutional advantages, it may be useful to think of social skills as the form of cultural capital possessed and used by preschool-aged children. Though it remains an open, empirical question whether the strength of particular child social skills I identified in this study (those required to complete independent tasks, participate in group settings, and interact with individuals one-on-one) are associated with social class background, the research discussed above shows that children from higher-SES families tend to demonstrate greater strength in a number of other social skills. The research on cultural matching provides reason to suspect that this happens because middle-class parents' expectations for child behavior in the home may be more similar than those of working-class parents to teachers' and coaches' expectations in preschool or gymnastics class.

Attention Socialization – Shaping nascent social skills into cultural capital

Elsewhere²⁷, I explore how attention socialization happens in schools in more depth. But in this dissertation, I have shown how, by teaching children strategies for

²⁷ In another paper (currently under review), I demonstrate the behavioral expectations preschool children are socialized by their teachers and peers to adopt as markers of kindergarten readiness, each involving the use of a particular form of attention. In illustrating how children are socialized to participate in the novel environment of the school, I investigate a previously unexplored domain of socialization—the socialization of attention. I show how children actively negotiate attention expectations introduced by the teacher, and

paying and seeking attention that are considered appropriate in specific microinteractional contexts within the classroom and the gymnastics environment, teachers and coaches shape children's nascent social skills into field-specific forms of cultural capital.

Psychological definitions of attention (for an excellent review, see Chun, Golomb, and Turk-Browne 2011) capture important elements of attention processes, but they often disregard the relationships among different types of attention and their embeddedness in other social processes. To study how children are socialized to pay and seek attention in the preschool classroom, I understand and define attention sociologically. In this understanding, inherent in any social context is a set of norms governing the paying and seeking of attention among individuals who occupy particular social roles. Individuals' attention-paying and -seeking behaviors acquire social meaning with regard to these norms (e.g., whether they perceived as compliant, transgressive, or borderline). That is, as others in the environment provide feedback regarding the appropriateness of attention behaviors, they acquire social meaning and value.

The norms governing attention-paying and -seeking may differ, in a given social context, for those occupying different social roles. Those in more powerful social roles, for instance, may have more license to seek attention than those in less powerful social roles. The power relations among the social roles occupied by individuals in each social context also influence the value of the social rewards and penalties they provide in

how they are socialized into the role of student through the adoption of these practices. In so doing, I demonstrate the centrality of attention beliefs and practices to readying children for kindergarten and later schooling.

response to others' compliant and transgressive attention behaviors. In a school setting, teachers have more power than students, so their positive responses to compliant attention behaviors and their negative responses to transgressive attention behaviors have more influence on the norms which are socially constructed by the group. In a gymnastics setting, the same power is afforded to coaches.

When newcomers enter a social context, its attention norms and behaviors must be learned. When children enter the novel environment of the class setting upon beginning preschool or preschool gymnastics, they must learn not only how to sustain their attention, but when and on what. Because attention is limited in the sense that attending to one thing generally precludes attending to something else, children must learn which of the myriad stimuli they are expected to attend to at any given moment, and whom or what to ignore. Because attention seeking and providing are generally reciprocal processes, children must also learn the rules of exchange. Put concretely, when one seeks another's attention, the would-be provider must voluntarily acquiesce to the request for the exchange of attention to take place; he can just as readily withhold his attention. Through the process of attention socialization, children learn that certain strategies are regarded as more socially appropriate for students than others.

The ability to use attention in socially appropriate ways confers advantages on the children who can do so, and as such should be considered instrumental to developing the social behaviors and mannerisms recognized as cultural capital. As Chapter 6 makes clear, the primary differences between the highly selective learning environments and the inclusive, mainstream environments in both school and gymnastics have largely to do with instructors' expectations for how children use attention. In the higher ability tracks,

children are expected to remain on-task for longer periods of time while completing both independent tasks and cooperative activities and transitions from one activity to another are more efficient. As such, the children who are rewarded in their respective fields by inclusion in the selective ability tracks are provided with differential opportunities to further develop their attention skills.

Field-Specific Cultural Capital

While the differences in the forms of cultural capital developed and rewarded within the fields of school and gymnastics are minimal when compared to the differences across ability tracks, there are some notable differences. This is because the rules governing socially appropriate attention-paying and -seeking are very similar in preschool and preschool gymnastics, by-and-large. Nonetheless, there are important differences across sites that affect the specific forms of cultural capital developed through participation. As I described in Chapter 3, these are primarily differences in which social skills Mrs. Marshall and Nick emphasize and which attention skills they reinforce more frequently in teaching them. Based on their beliefs about what matters most for learning, Mrs. Marshall tends to more heavily emphasize developing and sustaining interpersonal relationships and friendships, whereas Nick tends to emphasize those he believes to be important for interacting with teachers and completing tasks. As a result, Mrs. Marshall spends more time teaching sharing, conflict resolution, and cooperation; whereas Nick spends more time teaching waiting one's turn, listening to and following directions, and processing verbal feedback. Performing each of these social skills in ways appropriate to the classroom or the gym setting requires mastery of a particular sequence of attention rules. This subtle difference in emphasis parallels the differences I observed between the

more prestigious, higher-tracked school and gymnastics settings. Indeed, in Mrs. Zielinski's math class, much higher emphasis was placed on cooperative learning and the ability to verbally explain new concepts and work processes to classmates than in Annalise's developmental gymnastics class. And, in the gymnastics setting, much higher emphasis was placed on precise compliance with instructor directives, productivity, improvement of skill performance.

The two instructors not only develop the skills that mature into and are widely recognized among older students as cultural capital, they also differ subtly in how they teach the same skills. These differences likewise contribute to variations in how the cultural capital children develop is displayed and recognized within specific fields, such as sports and schools. Consider the teaching of task persistence. While both Mrs. Zielinski and Annelise give children opportunities to practice attending to tasks by blocking out fatigue, frustration, and boredom, high-level math rarely (never?) requires children to also block out assignment-induced fear or pain. As such, Mrs. Zielinski does not devote instructional time to teaching children how this feat of attention can be accomplished. Annalise, Beth, and Alisa, however, spend hours with the developmental group providing direct instruction on how to redirect attention from one's internal physical or emotional state and toward the task itself. The children most capable of this ability (Mariah, the "Rockstar") are praised and promoted, whereas those who are incapable of controlling their attention and emotions, and therefore incapable of learning the more difficult skills, are retained or even demoted to a less-selective group. High-level math, on the other hand, requires a great deal of metacognition and awareness of one's problem-solving process. As such, Mrs. Zielinski often encourages children to turn

to their elbow partners to describe how they derived their answers on specific problems. Not only do the children practice exchanging attention by alternating between paying and receiving it, they also must do so while simultaneously attending to the task of explaining their problem-solving mentation. In addition, while listening to their elbow-partner, they must simultaneously take in the new information, hold in mind their own process, and use the remainder of their working-memory capacity to compare the two processes. In gymnastics, not only is such thinking and analysis de-emphasized, it is at times actively discouraged, as some coaches see “overthinking” one’s skills as contributing to fear of them.

To summarize, in both preschool and preschool gymnastics, instructors cultivate desirable child behaviors by providing feedback, shaping basic social skills into recognized and site-specific forms of cultural capital (Holt 1997). When children participate in multiple sites that cultivate specific forms of cultural capital (e.g., the home, the school, sports and extracurricular activities), the commonalities among specific forms are reinforced. This generalization is the source of what Holt calls abstract cultural capital, as “a set of generic transposable characteristics – dispositions, skills, sensibilities, embodied knowledges concerning the body, beauty, creativity, individuality, achievement – that together compose the habitus of cultural elites.” Abstract capital constitutes “a universal, fungible, and transposable resource” that is advantageous in many different sites (96)].

Why does the categorizing, instructing, and sorting of children matter?***Implications for social mobility/reproduction***

Schools and sports are both promoted as—and indeed widely believed to be—arenas in which success is determined fairly on the basis of individual hard work and performance. When we think of what happens in learning institutions, a process like this likely comes to mind: Teachers and activity leaders assess children's skills and design instruction to remediate their weaknesses and to challenge them in areas of strength. They categorize and group children both formally and informally on the basis of the skills they've mastered, such that the selection criteria vary depending on the nature of the activity. That is, school teachers categorize students according to academic ability, coaches according to athletic ability, music teachers according to musical ability, and so on, such that by high school, classes are tracked as honors, regular, or remedial; sports participation is classified as varsity or junior varsity; and exclusive audition-only choirs, bands, and orchestras are set apart from mainstream music groups. If teachers and coaches do in fact identify different strengths and weaknesses among the children they instruct, extracurricular activities may serve as alternative avenues for exposure to the skill sets encouraged among gifted groups by providing opportunities for children who are not the most academically successful to rise to the top.

Yet, if merit worked the way we think it did, we would expect to see a more even distribution of children from various social backgrounds peppered throughout advanced-placement classes and varsity sports teams. After all, we assume that athletic ability, like

intelligence, is distributed evenly throughout the population²⁸. However, studies consistently show that it is largely the same high-achieving students who participate in extracurricular activities like varsity sports (Fejgin 1994; Quiroz, Gonzalez, and Frank 1996). Moreover, the students taking advanced-track courses and the athletes on varsity are disproportionately white and socioeconomically privileged (Johnston, Delva, and O'Malley 2007; Oakes 2005). So, how do sports and schools transform children's family advantage into their own, personal academic and athletic success?

The fact that preschool children are in fact being sorted on the same criteria by teachers and coaches may play a role. This study shows that preschool teachers and coaches evaluate students *not* on the performance of content-area skills like writing or running – but instead on a common set of characteristics: social skills. The children with strong social skills, whether they are taking a preschool class or a preschool gymnastics class, are evaluated more highly and are promoted to kindergarten more quickly. Whether holding children back until they demonstrate sufficient content area skills has a negative impact on a child's long-term academic achievement largely depends on the effects of this grade retention. Sociologists of education generally view grade retention as negative, citing research on its links to dropout (Stearns et al. 2007), lower academic achievement²⁹ (Ferreira, Golsteyn, and Parra-Cely 2018; Gary-Bobo, Goussé, and Robin 2016) and adult criminal convictions (Eren, Lovenheim, and Mocan 2018). But evidence suggests

²⁸ Though recent research suggests it's not, due to the influence of early environmental factors on children's developing cognitive ability; low-SES children score 6 points lower than high-SES children on IQ tests at age 2 (von Stumm and Plomin 2015).

²⁹ The effects of grade retention on achievement is somewhat mixed. It has been found to improve language scores, but not math scores among retained students (Ferreira, Golsteyn, and Parra-Cely 2018). Another study found that while retention decreases achievement test scores on average, it improves them for the weakest students (Gary-Bobo, Goussé, and Robin 2016).

that timing matters, and retention prior to kindergarten is widely believed to be beneficial.

The evidence, however, is far from clear. Popular myths prompt many to wonder whether it's better to hold children back from kindergarten entry so that they are older, physically larger, and more socially and emotionally mature, and whether gifted children invited to skip a grade will struggle with social adjustment when grouped with older peers. Yet, there is no clear evidence that children who are among the oldest in their grade (e.g., those with summer birthdays, or those who have been academically "redshirted" (Graue and DiPerna 2000) do better in kindergarten and early elementary school than their peers (Lincove and Painter 2006), though there is evidence of "relative age effects" in some sports, mainly for boys (Baker et al. 2014; Gladwell 2008; Vincent and Glamser 2006). And, research shows that gifted kids are actually better off when placed in classes where they find content appropriately challenging, even if it entails their skipping grades (Kim 2016; Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, and Olszewski-Kubilius 2016). Because of their belief in the importance of social skills, it is plausible that teachers are influenced by these popular myths about the advantages of children being older than the other children in their class and about the disadvantages of being younger, or that gymnastics coaches overgeneralize information about boys and team sports to the children they coach in gymnastics. Yet, based on this evidence, decisions to retain children for another year in preschool may not have the beneficial social effects teachers and coaches seem to believe it does.

As a result, whether encouraging Bella or Brian's parents to wait a year before sending them to kindergarten will ultimately help their academic performance, or whether

Rory might have become a better gymnast had she spent an extra year in MightyTots is an open question. It Not only does sorting on social skills affects individuals' progress in schools and sports, it may also provide patterned advantages and disadvantages among children by race and social class. I believe that the emphasis on social skills in both preschool and preschool gymnastics, coupled with the instructors' practice of retaining kids until they have mastered them, means that it slows down the growth of achievement gaps in content area skills. To explain why, I offer the counterfactual example of the exceptionally early tracking (e.g., into the 3-year-old SuperTots class) that sometimes occurs in gymnastics.

Baker and his colleagues (2014) find that, unlike other sports, female gymnasts have an advantage if they're younger than their peers. This is because unlike most other sports, female gymnasts peak at a much younger age. Not only is "redshirting" more disadvantageous in gymnastics than in schools or other sports, but coaches concerned with developing talent are mindful of the brief window in which to develop it. This means that many gyms track children at the preschool level. When tracking occurs that early, the ability gap between the most- and the least-skilled children is widened because the high-track classes tend to focus on mastery of content-area skills. Because, as described, the mainstream classes focus on mastery of social skills, even the most well-behaved children are rarely challenged to try harder skills than the rudimentary ones included in their curriculum.

Therefore, the trend toward increasing participation and early tracking of very young children in extracurricular activities disadvantages children from homes that are not structured in culturally similar ways to those of schools and sports. That is, children

who become accustomed in the home to following predictably structured, adult-directed routines, taking turns and sharing with peers, and working on tasks to completion have an advantage in structured institutional learning environments. Children whose interactions with adults and peers and whose daily activities are less consistently and predictably structured are at a disadvantage in navigating institutionalized preschool settings.

Because such consistency relies upon ample resources, such as predictable parent work schedules, reliable child-care, access to health care, etc., children from families with more socioeconomic privilege are more likely to benefit from this cultural match. In extracurricular activities which most children begin at an older age, inequitable advantages enjoyed by privileged kids in content area skills—the result of several extra years of content-focused learning experiences—are reduced.

The different definitions of success for high-level athletes and high-achieving students held by instructors and educational institutions seems to be driving the difference in when tracking occurs. Thus, the goal of equity embraced by the preschool teachers and coaches observed seems to be at odds with the goals of later levels of sports (like girls' gymnastics) that have an extremely young time horizon (e.g., even the most talented women peak in their late teens or early 20s), and in which the objective is the maximization of sports performance. (Given the number of kids driven out at a young age by the intensity of the highest tracks, the efficacy of this strategy depends upon the presence of a number of other factors, including, most importantly, a sizeable talent pool and adequate resources to train it.)

This is less true of schools, wherein the highest-tracked groups are not geared toward producing the best students in the world at a subject area, as measured by

accuracy of performance of a hierarchically arranged set of increasingly complex and difficult skills. The SAT math test has a ceiling. Multiple people each year achieve scores of 1600. The goal of AP Calculus is not to prepare its best students to beat the others who have scored 1600 by performing even more difficult math problems more accurately. (If it were, such competition would effectively push the difficulty ceiling to asymptotic heights in the manner of an arms race, as does gymnastics—where new skills (and increasingly higher difficulty values) are created all the time). Instead, the goal of advanced track classes, even and especially for the children of wealthy parents oriented toward passing on socioeconomic success, is to develop students' proficiency at a number of different content areas – math, reading, writing, science, social studies, foreign language, a sport or a musical instrument, maybe an academic hobby like chess or debate, as well as a set of different soft skills and orientations that enable them to navigate future institutions with ease (the “hidden curriculum” in the original sense) and social connections with peers and adults with the ability to provide access to opportunities.

Implications of Differentiated Instruction on Equity

The ethnographic account presented in this dissertation also enriches our understanding of the consequences of differentiated instruction. While it may be necessary to maintain classroom order in a group filled with students of heterogeneous needs, abilities, interests, and readiness to learn, it should perhaps be met with a bit more scrutiny. The whole-hog, uncritical acceptance often afforded the practice is perhaps a bit misguided. I'm not arguing that teachers should not differentiate. They definitely should. But, they should do so mindful of the fact that by the “low-ability” kids receiving remedial instruction will require more of it to raise them to the level of their

“mainstream” peers. And the “high-ability” kids receiving enrichment and more challenging content area tasks will get ahead even further by virtue of this practice.

This reminder is consonant with what the literature tells us about differentiated instruction: its goals shape its practice. Though differentiating is widely regarded as the best practice for enacting educational equity, it can have pernicious effects depending on what it is used to accomplish. Consider one illustrative example from its history:

Differentiated instruction as a pedagogical practice became widespread in K-12 education in response to pressures on schools induced by the No Child Left Behind Act to meet adequate yearly progress benchmarks in order to receive funding. Prior to the 2002 passage of NCLB, there was already a consensus among teachers that differentiated instruction was an effective means of meeting the needs of all students as well as a great deal of scholarly evidence endorsing its efficacy. However, following the passage NCLB, states moved to comply with the act’s guidelines by revising their annual assessment programs, establishing proficiency standards, setting adequate yearly progress (AYP) benchmarks, and developing state curricula linking state content standards with state tests at each grade level. The result in many states was that differentiated instruction went from being a voluntary, self-directed practice to (one of many) mandated practices enforced directly through teacher evaluations and indirectly through expectations that districts meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) benchmarks.

This pressure on teachers to use differentiated instruction had a significant impact on its actual use in schools. Analyzing the effects of a policy directive to differentiate instruction among teachers in a large school district bordering a major metropolitan area in a mid-Atlantic state, Valli and Buese (2007) found that because state tests of student

achievement required significant increases in student scores between the tests' first administration and subsequent yearly tests in order to meet AYP benchmarks, the differentiated instruction which district personnel had already been using voluntarily became a primary means of getting to AYP targets. They explain that, practically, "in schools at risk of inadequate yearly progress, bringing sufficient numbers of students in each designated category to proficiency became differentiation's primary goal," requiring "teachers to engage in a number of other tasks such as assessment, curriculum implementation, student placement, individual and team planning, and data management and analysis" (2007:534, 533). They concluded that teachers' role expectations increased, intensified, and expanded in ways that had unanticipated, and often negative, consequences for teachers' relationships with students, pedagogy, and sense of professional well-being. Given Valli and Buese's (2007) findings, it is important to recognize the effectiveness of differentiated instruction depends upon the social context in which it is used.

In light of this example, it is crucial to remember that the social consequences of all practices based on teacher categorization are shaped by the environments in which they are implemented. When the stakes of grouping are high, that is, when the resources given or denied groups are vitally important—such as was the case when students regarded as "on the bubble" (almost meeting state standards) received extra interventions, but students whose performance was too far below standard were "left behind"—categorizations lead to more formal and hierarchical grouping, and more rigid boundaries between groups.

Part 4. Limitations & directions for future research

This study had several limitations. First, my research did not focus on the processes by which children were tracked into the gifted or mainstream third-grade classes I observed, but it is clear that how this happens is important for understanding social and symbolic boundary creation and warrants further research. There's a missing piece of the puzzle that occurs between Chapters 5 & 6. To write Chapter 5 ½, I would need to investigate what's going on between kindergarten & 3rd grade. In particular, I would like to follow a group of children from preschool into kindergarten to observe how the balance changes in instructors' emphasis on social and content area skills. In addition, I would like to sit in on several years of the gifted program selection meetings described briefly on pages 11-13. I would also like to observe interactions between kindergartners and preschoolers to determine whether (and if so, how) children enforce a symbolic boundary between the grades. For the same reason, I would like to spend more time observing interactions between the mainstream and gifted students at Persimmon Creek. For the gymnastics case, I have transcripts from four consecutive years of selection meetings in which a team of coaches determined the best placement for athletes trying out. I have not systematically analyzed them, however, because they concerned different groups of children than those featured in Chapters 3-6. I would like to do so in order to compare the process with that utilized at Persimmon Creek. Finally, I would like to conduct additional observations of children's strategies for maintaining boundaries not only between the developmental and recreational groups, but also among other ability-tracked groups in the gym as well (specifically including the Xcel and Junior Olympic Compulsory programs).

A second limitation to this study concerns my lack of descriptive, demographic data on the children I observed. In thinking about how institutionalized education advantages some children over others, I follow Bourdieu's theoretical and empirical elaboration of the processes by which socioeconomic advantage is reproduced in schools. Yet in this study, I focused specifically the process of categorization and boundary creation that happened within the school and the gym. As a result, I can only speculate about socioeconomic patterns among the children identified by both instructors as having strong and weak social skills. Future research should investigate these links as well as the mechanisms by which levels of economic privilege in the home translate into differences in social skills.

A third limitation to this study is in its focus on a Catholic preschool setting. To be sure, the attentional expectations I observed in this classroom likely differ in meaningful ways from those upheld by teachers in traditional public preschools, Head Start programs, and in programs aligned with more progressive philosophies, such as Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia schools. The attentional expectations upheld by parochial school teachers likely differ the most extremely from those of progressive teachers. Progressive teachers have different beliefs about the role of the student and the teacher and their relationship and about how to define and measure academic success. In particular, the high value they place on the development of sustained attention and independent, curiosity-driven learning likely results in teachers' praising students' concentration and deep engagement—their sustained task attention—over their ability to transition from one type of attention to another on command. These differences in turn,

likely privilege different learners. As such, attentional expectations in different types of preschools deserve very much to be investigated in future research.

Fourth, in focusing on gymnastics, this dissertation captured a sport commonly practiced by children in the United States, but one that differs from other sports in important ways. In 2019, a total of 4,770,000 kids in the US participated in gymnastics, with roughly half (49.1%) between the ages of 6-12 (Sports & Fitness Industry Association 2020). The average age at which children last regularly participate in gymnastics is 8.7 years; compared to 10.5 years for all sports (The Aspen Institute 2020). On average, gymnastics participants attend classes regularly for 3.0 years (The Aspen Institute 2020). These participation statistics reflect the relatively young age at which (especially female) gymnasts peak, as previously discussed. While participation at a young age and early tracking make gymnastics more similar to school, it makes the sport less similar to a number of other sports. As a result, the processes by which coaches classify, instruct, and sort children in other sports should be investigated in the future.

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