ABSTRACT

GOLDENTYER, BARBARA. Concerted Cultivation and Hegemonic Masculinity in Children’s Taekwondo. (Under the direction of Sinikka Elliott).

In this thesis, based on fieldwork and interviews, I argue that children’s taekwondo legitimizes the values of hegemonic masculinity—including both professional and warrior aspects—within the institutional logic of concerted cultivation. First, I analyze children’s classes at a taekwondo school as a site of concerted cultivation where children are taught both academic skills and strategies to navigate institutional hierarchy. Ling’s Taekwondo, where I conducted observations, provides instruction in a contact sport while attracting racially heterogeneous practitioners and maintaining a commitment to not differentiate on the basis of gender. I argue that the logic of concerted cultivation places an emphasis on individual responsibility for advancement which is in line with color-and gender-blind ideologies. In the second section of the thesis, I analyze a series of tensions that exist between two aspects of hegemonic masculinity: warrior myths and professionalism. Whereas concerted cultivation promotes an ideology of meritocracy and gender-blindness, taekwondo as a martial art is also steeped in the values and fantasies of warrior myths. The institution of children’s martial arts must strike a delicate balance to support both masculine warrior fantasies and an everyone-is-equal ideology of gender- and color-blind inclusion. By understanding how two aspects of hegemonic masculinity—warrior myths and professionalism—both contradict and co-exist, we gain a more nuanced view of hegemonic masculinity as a complex and multifaceted ideal. This thesis contributes to the literature on children’s socialization by demonstrating the institutional and interactional processes that convey messages to children about values, character, and avenues to success, messages that are embedded in larger racialized, gendered, and classed inequities.
Concerted Cultivation and Hegemonic Masculinity in Children’s Taekwondo

by
Barbara Goldentyer

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science

Sociology

Raleigh, North Carolina

2015

APPROVED BY:

__________________________________________  __________________________
Sinikka Elliott  Kim Ebert
Committee Chair

__________________________________________  __________________________
Michael Schwalbe
DEDICATION

Dedicated to my parents, who are incredibly patient. You taught me to be interested in the world. Thank you for never letting me get so frustrated I gave up on school, but also never letting me equate schooling with education. Thank you for teaching me to live with conviction. Thank you for all your support with grad. school. Most of all thank you for loving me so much. I could never have asked for anything more.
Barbara Goldentyer is the daughter of Elizabeth and Joel Goldentyer. She graduated from Warren Wilson College. She is still the frustrated child who did not understand why the world was so unfair. To that end, she studies power and inequality.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all my committee members for their time, their work, and their insight.

And my advisor, Sinikka Elliott, for the passion with which she teaches intersectionality and the careful attention she put into reading every one of my drafts.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................................................vi
INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................................................1
CONCERTED CULTIVATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF PROFESSIONALISM .................................................................................................................................3
BACKGROUND AND SETTING: LING’S TAEKWONDO SCHOOL .................................................................................................................................13
METHODS ...............................................................................................................................................18
PART 1: BUILDING CHARACTER AND EARNING RANK ........................................................................22
  Concerted Cultivation at Ling’s Taekwondo .........................................................................................23
  Meritocratic Advancement: “Everyone Starts Out as a White Belt” .............................................30
  The Contradiction of the Black Belt .................................................................................................36
  Color-Blind and Gender-Blind: “A Skill and Practice Thing” ..........................................................41
PART 2: CONTRADICTIONS IN HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY ..........................................................51
  Hegemonic Masculinity and Manhood Acts in Taekwondo ..........................................................52
  Professional Masculinity and Concerted Cultivation ....................................................................55
  Warrior Myths and the Body in Martial Arts ..................................................................................57
  Becoming an Ninja: Warrior Myths in Children’s Taekwondo .....................................................64
  Disruption and Contradiction in Children’s Taekwondo .................................................................74
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ...........................................78
REFERENCES ....................................................................................................................................81
APPENDICES .......................................................................................................................................86
  Appendix A: Belt Ranks, Tenets, Student Oath, and the TKD Organization ..................................87
  Appendix B: Introductory Email and Interview Guides .................................................................90
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Tensions within Hegemonic Masculinity .................................................................74
Table 2 Belt Ranks in Ascending Order ..............................................................................88
Introduction

“Punch in the face. Pow!” Kyle (age 7) demonstrates by pretending to uppercut his own jaw, tilting his head back to show the impact, but Mr. Ling interrupts “Kyle, concentrate. Concentrate ok?”

Kyle is a success story at Ling’s Taekwondo where he started classes as a five year old whose parents chose taekwondo on the recommendation of the psychiatrist who saw Kyle for ADHD. Kyle is now a regular student, a blue belt, and one of the more talented sparrers I observed. He is also fascinated by his own masculinity: he watches himself kick in the mirror, regularly deepens his voice to see his friends’ reactions, compares belt levels with everyone he meets, and volunteers to do fifteen pushups when asked for ten. Kyle walks into the taekwondo school, where I conducted fieldwork and in-depth interviews during the fall and spring of 2014-2015, with his mother trailing ten steps behind and his head held high brimming with confidence. This is a confidence, I argue, based in his sense of himself as someone who can compete physically, who can “fight,” as a successful martial artist. But it was not Kyle’s sparring record that his instructor Mr. Ling, recounted to me after class. Instead it was the fact that Kyle focused in class and learned the steps to his form. While Kyle strove to embody the warrior masculinity Donohue (1994) associates with the martial arts, Mr. Ling praised Kyle for skills that would benefit him in school, a practice more in line with professional masculinity and concerted cultivation (Donohue 1994, Lareau 2003). Other parents emphasized that while the warrior aspects of martial arts attracted children (and particularly boys), taekwondo also taught children to set goals, to practice for tests, to perform in front of an audience, and to show leadership all skills parents hoped would help children in school. Based on over 20 hours of observing children’s classes at a school I call
Ling’s Taekwondo\(^1\), along with 14 qualitative interviews with parents, children, and instructors, I argue that rather than see this as two competing versions of masculinity, we can understand the phenomenon of children’s martial arts through Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity in crisis.

In the first section of this paper I examine how taekwondo functions as a site of concerted cultivation and supports an ideology of meritocratic advancement. Critics have questioned the analysis of racial and gender inequalities in Lareau’s conception of concerted cultivation (Choo and Ferree 2010, Perrier 2013, Vincent et al. 2013). I attempt to address this debate by examining how the meritocratic ideology of concerted cultivation is linked to racial and gender inequalities within the taekwondo community. Gender, age, and racial differences are minimized as everyone starts out as a white belt and meets similar standards for advancement. At the same time responsibility for advancement is placed on the individual with the belief that everyone can become a black belt but only a few have the strength of character to actually do so. In the second section, I will analyze how the rituals and bodily reflexive practices of children’s taekwondo operate to resolve tensions within hegemonic masculinity, creating a structured “professional” path to warrior masculinity. I argue that taekwondo as an institution supports hegemonic ideals of masculinity despite institutional attempts at a color- and gender-blind meritocracy.

\(^1\) The placement of the apostrophe in the school’s pseudonym is based on the real name. Mr. Ling is the chief instructor at the school. During the period of research there were also three assistant instructors, Mr. Ling’s wife, Ms. Ling, Mr. Sam, a black belt student trained by Mr. Ling, and Mr. Ling’s son, Mr. Ling the younger. Though Ms. Ling now works at the school with her husband, Ms. Ling began studying taekwondo as a white belt only when Mr. Ling opened the school.
Concerted Cultivation and the Construction of Professionalism

Children’s taekwondo programs are part of a larger trend of increasing involvement in extracurricular activities and youth sports (Friedman 2014, Lareau 2003, Messner 2009). Lareau’s (2003) work on concerted cultivation demonstrated that structured extracurricular activities are a central part of middle-class childrearing and an important means of insuring the replication of middle-class status. The cultural logic of concerted cultivation holds that in order to reach their full potential children must be involved in structured adult-organized activities and actively encouraged to develop academic, cognitive, and linguistic skills. Parents engaged in concerted cultivation are not focused on the particular activities the children learn, so much as the broad cultural capital skills being taught: the goal is not to raise a ballerina, a chess grand master, or an Olympic martial artist, but to fulfill an aspect of normative middle-class development for a professional career (Friedman 2014, Lareau 2003). Through involvement with organized clubs, sports, and artistic pursuits, children develop skills for navigating adult organized institutions. Middle-class parents engaged in concerted cultivation also teach academic skills, introduce adult linguistic habits, and promote reasoning skills, which provide advantages in school (Lareau 2003, Redford, Johnson, and Honnold 2009). On the down side, Lareau suggests that concerted cultivation can also have the effect of stifling children’s independent creativity and causing stress from over-scheduling. Parents engaged in concerted cultivation believe that through this process of development children gain both character traits and skills which will be recognized in school and eventually a professional career. Lareau terms the alternative to concerted cultivation “natural growth,” because, according to the ideology of concerted cultivation children do not
naturally develop the skills necessary for adult life, instead children of concerted cultivation require extensive adult-organized development.

In the United States, taekwondo is in most cases a middle-class sport. Parents at the school work as an accountant, a computer engineer, a stay-at home mom, a stay-at home dad, a preschool teacher, a graduate student getting a PhD in environmental sciences, and a veterinarian in private practice. Classes are expensive and time-consuming, and especially once the child starts sparring, there is a significant amount of equipment, which must be purchased, maintained and periodically replaced. One parent described the equipment as equivalent to “hockey or band.” Testings, tournaments, and camps are additional expenses and commitments, such that organized martial arts is not only in line with concerted cultivation, but time intensive and financially restrictive for families in lower income brackets. More profoundly the logic and assumptions of concerted cultivation are built into martial arts as practiced at Ling’s Taekwondo.

Lareau (2003) suggests that concerted cultivation creates a form of cultural capital, which prepares children to navigate adult organizations and communicate their needs to adults. For example, Lareau describes a middle-class girl with learning disabilities learning to expect accommodations from her teacher and a middle-class boy who brings up concerns with his doctor. Lareau writes “middle class children learn to question adults and address them as relative equals” (2003: 2). Children in taekwondo receive focused adult attention and learn skills to navigate an organizational hierarchy. As children are coached through the progressive belt levels, they are taught to practice for testing performances, to keep track of their status and upcoming testing requirements, and to value their rank as a symbol of accomplishment. The belt system of taekwondo values accomplishments in terms of belt
advancements over age. This is visible both in the protocols for lining up by belt rank and in the terms of address. Throughout the south Mr./Ms. are generally used when children address adults, but in taekwondo only black belts (and black belts regardless of age) are addressed by their last names. Within the logic of martial arts, all rank has to be earned through belt testings not granted according to age or initial ability.

As Lareau (2003) points out, the practices of concerted cultivation place new and heavy burdens on parents. Parents are aware of the dangers of “helicopter parenting” and over scheduling, but feel responsible for planning and providing a full range of developmental activities (Hays 1996, Lareau 2003, Stearns 2003). Pressure on parents has increased dramatically as competition for schools and anxiety about college admissions continue to increase and parents take greater responsibility for children’s academic success (Stearns 2003). Concerns about safety have also decreased children’s freedom to play outside and move freely through their neighborhoods (Rutherford 2011, Stearns 2003). In response, involvement in organized youth sports has increased dramatically, with parents hoping to encourage physical activity in supervised settings (Messner 2009). Parents must strike a balance between encouraging children to take risks and experience bumps and bruises, while also protecting children from greater dangers. Stearns writes that after the 1960s “it was almost impossible to strike a successful balance for children who were physically vulnerable to safety hazards but also psychological vulnerable to excessive parental zeal” (2003: 38). This time line corresponds with the rise of children’s martial arts as structured extracurricular activities, which can expose children to controlled levels of risk.

One contradiction of concerted cultivation is that children who are encouraged to engage with adults as equals in some settings are regarded as vulnerable and fragile in other
contexts. Within taekwondo children are allowed to earn rank above adults but the school is extremely safety-conscious and instructors attempt to protect children emotionally by phrasing corrections in the most positive light. One of the effects of increasing anxiety about children’s protection has been the isolation of children from the world of work and productive adult activity. Rutherford (2011) refers to the process of moving children out of the world of work as the “privatization of childhood.” However this term can be deceptive: concerted cultivation is an institutional process encoded in schools, sports leagues, and camps. As I will show, families at the school learn to navigate the institutional structures of martial arts, including the complex system of belt rank advancement.

In this age of concerted cultivation and “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996), parents of children with “invisible disabilities” face particular challenges (Blum 2007, Francis 2012). Parents I interviewed emphasized the particular value of taekwondo for children with ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, and disabilities affecting coordination and balance. Paralleling parental expectations in concerted cultivation, parents of children with disabilities are expected to become advocates for their children and to arrange for a vast array of treatment and developmental activities (Blum 2007). Even as neurological research shifts the blame away from parents (and mothers specifically), the expectations on parents continue to increase (Blum 2007). For Ling’s Taekwondo, the successful incorporation of children with a wide range of ability levels has required adjustments, such as occasional private classes, additional assistant instructors, adjustments to teaching methods, and flexible sparring gear requirements.

Scholars have criticized Lareau for looking at the effects of intersectional identities only in the disempowered groups (e.g., only talking about race for black families and
comparing girls to the male norm) (Choo and Ferree 2010). Lareau notes that the middle-
class black families in her study talk to their children about racial inequality and racism. She
also argues that black parents face extra burdens protecting their children from racial
inequalities. One mother monitors each activity her son is involved in to make sure he’s not
the only black child. Another mother worries that teachers’ may have lower expectations for
her black son. However, as Lareau describes it, the middle-class black and white families
otherwise engage in similar practices of concerted cultivation. Choo and Ferree suggest that
these black families’ actions might constitute a distinct style of “race-aware” parenting and
critique Lareau for attempting to rank the significance of class as compared to gender and
race (Choo and Ferree 2010: 141). Dumias, Kessinger, and Ghosh (2012) add evidence of
how race affects concerted cultivation with a quantitative study showing that elementary
school teachers interpret parental involvement negatively for black parents, but positively for
white parents. Importantly, then, concerted cultivation is not just a “parenting style,” but a
cultural logic encoded in institutions, which may be classed, gendered and racialized (Gillies
2005, Perrier 2013, Vincent and Ball 2007). As we will see, the curriculum and institutional
structures of the school shape the conceptions of race and gender at the site. The institution
of taekwondo promotes a meritocratic ideology of concerted cultivation; any child who puts
in the effort can be developed into a black belt. Concerted cultivation is fundamentally
dependent on the idea that the self is not determined by identity at birth, but developed or
“cultivated” over a child’s life.

Lareau makes the contention that class is the salient determining factor in the logic of
conscerted cultivation. Choo and Ferree counter that class identity cannot be looked at in
isolation from race or gender. In actuality, race and gender are neither less salient, as Lareau
claims, nor part of a separate “race aware” logic of childrearing as Choo and Ferree suggest, but ideologically obscured by the precepts of concerted cultivation. Put differently, I argue that race and gender constitute a part of the institutional logic of concerted cultivation in their deliberate absence. My analysis suggests that the ideology of concerted cultivation promotes color- and gender-blindness, rhetorically papering over existing inequalities and allowing the institutional mechanisms of inequality to operate outside parental awareness.

Bonilla-Silva (2010) coined the term “color-blind racism” to describe the maintenance of white privilege without (or with reduced) explicit racism. Color-blind racism evolved out of the post-civil rights era attempt to maintain beliefs and structures of white privilege in the face of a growing awareness that outright racial discrimination was no longer morally defensible. One female respondent in Bonilla-Silva’s book opposes affirmative action in the following way, demonstrating the logic of color-blind racism:

Yes and no. I feel someone should be able to have something, education, job, whatever, because they’ve earned it, they deserve it, they have the ability to do it. You don’t want to put a six year old as a rocket scientist. They don’t have the ability. It doesn’t matter if the kid’s black or white. As far as letting one have the job over another one just because of their race or their gender, I don’t believe in that (2010: 62, italics in original).

Characteristic of color-blind racism, this woman erases the long history of racism and ignores the structures of inequality to support her opposition to affirmative action. She also invokes an absurd analogy of a six-year-old rocket scientist to suggest that affirmative action is not meritocratic. Although color-blind racism takes a slightly different form at Ling’s Taekwondo, as I will demonstrates in the findings, notions of meritocracy are equally
important. My research indicates that color-blindness in the taekwondo community originates not just from the modern decline of explicit racism, but the meritocratic ideology of concerted cultivation.

Bonilla-Silva identifies four frames of color-blind racism: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. Though aspects of all four frames can be found at my site, three frames, minimization, abstract liberalism and naturalization, take on a particular importance within the context of children’s taekwondo. Several of my interview respondents minimized the importance of race when asked about racial diversity at the site. I also never observed direct discussion of race during observations at the school. When I asked interview participants explicitly about the “racial diversity” of the classes, my respondents expressed strong support for the variety of “backgrounds,” “cultures,” and ability levels at the site, but avoided direct discussion of race. Similarly my participants deemphasized the importance of gender and physical differences like height for success in martial arts. While minimizing the significance of race, gender, and physical ability interview respondents focused on the importance of cultivatable abilities (skill and technique) and character traits (perseverance, effort, and confidence).

The belt rank system of taekwondo is premised on an ideology of equal opportunity and individual advancement which invokes the frame of abstract liberalism. Bonilla-Silva’s abstract liberalism frame involves the use of ideologies of equal opportunity, individual choice, and economic liberalism to explain racial inequalities and justify policies that have negative consequences for minorities. In direct contrast to team sports, taekwondo allows each child to advance individually. Much of the responsibility for advancement falls on individual children and their parents. In interviews parents explicitly connected this to the
hierarchy in schools and workplaces, for example suggesting that children in school should be similarly allowed to work at their own pace and that failing a testing in taekwondo would prepare children for difficulties at work. The frame of abstract liberalism is applied within children’s taekwondo to explain why some children advance faster and further than others, and to support the claim that anyone can become a black belt.

The third significant frame, naturalization allows whites to explain away racial phenomenon like segregation and inequality as natural outcomes, the result of people “gravitating towards likeness” (Bonilla-Silva 2010: 28). A parallel frame of naturalization occurs in the construction of gender-blindness within children’s taekwondo. When I asked interview participants why there were more boys than girls at Ling’s Taekwondo, several parents stated that boys choose taekwondo more frequently. Parents presented children’s choices as natural or impossible to explain. By framing the decision to become involved in taekwondo as children’s choice, parents suggested that children’s natural preferences were responsible for the gender division between martial arts (male dominated) and other extracurriculars like dance (female dominated). While some boys at the site did enjoy warrior fantasies and clearly relished sparring, this was not always the case. For example, Rafat (a green belt boy whom I discuss in section two) particularly disliked sparring. Naturalization occurs in tandem with the minimization of gender differences, when parents and instructors diminish the significance of sex-linked physical differences (height, weight, and upper body strength) in support of the idea that technique and skill are the chief determinants of success in martial arts. Gender naturalization is often thought of as a component of arguments based on explicit claims of biological sex-difference, but my participants were always careful to allow for exceptions (girls who appreciate the fighting aspects of martial arts) and suggest
that they saw no major differences between boys and girls in terms of overall ability. The naturalization frame as it occurs at my site is therefore part of a gender-blind ideology, which in many ways parallels Bonilla-Silva’s naturalization frame for color-blindness.

Although Lareau’s work focuses on the aspects of concerted cultivation that are similar for both girls and boys, later research has built on Lareau by looking how institutionalized ideologies of gender determine the form of concerted cultivation. Friedman (2014) undertook an ethnographic study of three extracurriculars: competitive dance, soccer, and chess. She finds that, although some skills are valued by parents with children in all the activities, for example the ability to compete (which is the focus of Friedman’s work), other skills such as the improved posture taught to girls in dance were specifically associated with one gender. The involvement of boys in sports as a way of ensuring proper masculinity has a long record of study in sociology (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Kimmel 2001, Messner 1992, Thorne 1993). For many men and boys, sports provide a female-free zone of male bonding and a way to indicate hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel 2008, Messner 1992). Kimmel describes sports as the “easiest way to choose ‘guy’ over ‘gay’” (2008: 128) or, to put this in theoretical terms to claim the status accorded hegemonic masculinity and avoid the stigma associated with gay masculinity. However in line with the importance of competition, parents also reported valuing that soccer taught their girls to play aggressively (Friedman 2014). Because the parents in Friedman’s study viewed the ability to compete as necessary for many professional careers, they wanted both sons and daughters involved in competitive extracurriculars. In all cases, Friedman found that parents engaged in concerted cultivation valued skills which they perceived as giving their children an advantage in school and professional advancement.
Children who participated in activities not stereotypically associated with their gender—girls who play chess or boys who dance—often engage in certain highly gendered performances of identity (Friedman 2014, Thorne 1993). For example, as girls who compete in chess are participating in a more masculine activity, they would compensate by overemphasizing their femininity, dressing in all pink, a phenomenon Friedman terms “pink girls.” Friedman does not use the term, but this might be an example of gender “compensation” (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). A study of a coed-judo school observed a similar pattern of “gender display” in a martial arts setting, with young female judokas maintaining long hair styles and sporting particularly tight fitting clothing in a self-expressed deliberate attempt to compensate for their “broad shoulders” and reputation as judokas (Guerandel and Mennesson 2007). Among adults, Ezzell (2009) finds that women in the stereotypically masculine sport of rugby engaged in practices of “defensive othering” and emphasized heterosexual aspects of their identity to compensate for stereotypes of “mannish lesbians” in athletics.

The study of taekwondo provides an opportunity to understand how the ideology of gender-blind meritocracy is combined with the values of dominant masculinity (e.g., strength, competition, physical ability, rationality, courage, and authority/control). Taekwondo is an unusual contact sport in that classes are co-ed and girls and boys spar together. The taekwondo community is committed to an ideology of “gender-blindness,” holding boys and girls to similar standards and not separating children by gender in classes or tournaments. Parents and children in interviews emphasized how little gender mattered in taekwondo. Taekwondo participants combine and balance ideologies of gender equality and dominant masculine values derived from both the warrior traditions of martial arts and the
professional world. The first half of this paper describes how the school and the logic of concerted cultivation encourage color-blind and gender-blind ideologies with a faith in meritocratic advancement. The second section addresses contradictory ideals of masculinity at the site and how taekwondo’s institutional policies and bodily practices resolve tensions between professional and warrior ideals of masculinity. The institutional logic of concerted cultivation at the school not only provides children with skills for professional advancement, but values, legitimates, and combines warrior and professional aspects of hegemonic masculinity.

**Background and Setting: Ling’s Taekwondo School**

The term ‘tae kwon do’ (alternately spelled as one word: taekwondo) is derived from Korean words meaning hand (tae), foot (kwon), and way or art (do) so that tae kwon do means literally the art of punching and kicking (Encyclopedia Britannica 2012). Taekwondo was first officially recognized as a sport in 1955 in South Korea, although it was quickly adopted by the US and taekwondo sparring was incorporated into the Olympics beginning with the 2000 Sydney Games. Taekwondo (abbrev: TKD) may seem like a recent creation, but practitioners of the sport trace the history of the art back to tae kyon, a Korean martial form believed to have developed as far back as 37 BC. Elements of karate and modernized techniques have also been incorporated (Encyclopedia Britannica 2012, Whang, Whang and Saltz 1999). Taekwondo is an unarmed martial art, known for its emphasis on standing and jump kicks, although punches and other hand strikes are incorporated (Kil 2006, International Taekwon-Do Federation 2015, Whang et al. 1999). As practiced in America, taekwondo usually involves forms (choreographed series of movements), sparring, and board
breaking, as well as some instruction in self-defense and martial arts ideology (Donohue 1994, USA Dojo 2014, Whang et al. 1999).

Ling’s Taekwondo reflects the historical pattern of Americanized martial arts. Asian martial arts became widely popular in America following the 2nd World War with the introduction of karate, jujitsu, and judo (Encyclopedia Britannica 2012). During this period martial arts first began to phase in the colored belt rank systems now common to judo, karate, jujitsu, taekwondo, and many variants of kung fu. Taekwondo, itself, is also a product of this modern martial arts resurgence. The 1960s-1980s were then characterized by a rash of Hollywood and Asian import films featuring martial arts, including the Bruce Lee movies and, as part of the “Kung Fu wave” of Hong Kong action cinema, the original “Karate Kid” series (Nitta 2010). Both the Bruce Lee movies and the “Karate Kid” films are still common references at Ling’s Taekwondo. During the process of Americanization, martial arts underwent dramatic shifts, reducing the mystical elements, decreasing the emphasis on the origins of arts, and almost completely dropping traditional Chinese medicines and acupuncture (Krug 2001). In addition to shifts in the martial arts techniques themselves, martial arts schools began to offer programs for younger groups of children, created more colored belt ranks, and reduced the time required to attain a black belt (Krug 2001). The TKD organization to which Ling’s Taekwondo belongs followed this trend with the gradual introduction of more colored belts and senior belts between the original belt levels. Most recently martial arts in America has been characterized by an increased focus on self-defense

---

2 Citations: International Taekwon-do Federation
http://www.itftkd.org/?n=information, World Taekwondo Federation.
http://www.worldtaekwondofederation.net/taekwondo-history

3 Citation: World Taekwondo Federation.
http://www.worldtaekwondofederation.net/taekwondo-history
and more “realistic” fighting styles reflecting the growing popularity of mixed martial arts and krav maga (Hebrew: close or contact combat) (Cohen 2010, Hirose and Pih 2010).

Although the organization does not require instruction in self-defense, Mr. Ling makes a point of including self-defense in the curriculum.

Ling’s Taekwondo is located in a strip mall in the suburbs of a southern state. The school is small, some classes attract only one or two students, but others pack in fifteen or twenty students. The school offers beginning and advanced classes for Juniors, ages 5-13, with separate classes for 4-5 year olds (Little Dragons), adults, and families. The average age in the Juniors’ classes I observed was around 7-8. The school website advertises a “safe and friendly atmosphere.” Mr. Ling is the chief instructor. During the period of study, the school also had three assistant instructors: Mr. Ling’s wife, Ms. Ling, their college age son, Mr. Ling the Younger, and one of Mr. Ling’s first students, Mr. Sam. The school building is basically one large room with a small bathroom and office/storage space in the back.

Children waiting for class to start have the run of the main area, a large mat on the practice floor and five kick bags, while adults sit in a few rows of metal chairs near the entrance and congregate around Mr. Ling’s desk. Students are required to wear a uniform, with a less formal taekwondo t-shirt and pants for class and full jacket for testing. The South Korean and American flags hang on the front wall alongside framed copies of the Tenets of Taekwondo (courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control, and indomitable spirit) and the Student Oath, which are both recited at the beginning of class. A regular class is between 30-45 minutes and includes a bowing-in ceremony, a stretching period, the main class which varies by week, and a bowing-out ceremony at the end. Each week of classes has a theme—sparring, board breaking, forms, basics, and so on—and there is a large testing held at an off-site
location approximately every two months where students can earn advancing belt ranks (yellow through 3\textsuperscript{rd} degree black) by demonstrating proficiency in forms, board breaking, and sparring. For reference, Appendix A contains a list of the belt ranks in ascending order along with the Student Oath, Tenets of Taekwondo, and information regarding the larger TKD organization to which Ling’s Taekwondo belongs.

The average income in the area where Ling’s Taekwondo is located is well above the state average and most students are middle class. Classes at Ling’s Taekwondo cost about $100 a month (per child) with an additional $50 testing fee as often as every two months. There is also a one-time fee of between $150-200 (depending on exactly what is purchased) for sparring gear. Besides classes, the school hosts a number of special events including leadership classes, self-defense seminars, awards ceremonies, and parents’ night out drop-off programs. Awards ceremonies and leadership classes are free, but drop-off programs are $10, which covers the cost of food. The TKD organization to which Ling’s Taekwondo belongs hosts two regional and one national tournament annually. Tournaments are optional and there is a $70-100 fee to compete.

There are about twice as many boys as girls in the Juniors’ classes at the school. Martial arts are largely associated with masculinity and many of the values promoted by taekwondo are also stereotypically masculine characteristics, including athletic ability, emotional control, courage, and toughness (Connell 2005, Kimmel 2011, Schwalbe 2014). Nonetheless taekwondo practitioners pride themselves on holding every student to the same standards and not separating students according to gender or initial ability level. In taekwondo, girls and boys spar together train together, and meet nearly identical testing standards. I say nearly, because the difficulty level of the board that is used for board
breaking is determined by a combination of belt rank, age, and gender. Despite the stated effort to avoid differentiation by gender there are still differences in how men and women are viewed and treated at the site. In the adult classes, I experience a greater focus on the importance of self-defense for women like myself, presumably as a defense against male violence (e.g., “if you’re at a party” or “if you’re out at night”). About once a year specific women’s self-defense seminars, open to the public, are offered for ages 13 and up. Also tournaments have separate men’s/women’s divisions at the adult level (typically 13 and up, but sometimes teens get a separate division). Within the classroom, I observed Mr. Ling refer on occasion to several girls’ kicks as “beautiful” a term I never heard used for boys’ kicks. Also some of the younger girls had purple class t-shirts reading “taekwondo princess,” suggesting an emphasis on beauty and appearance for girls that is not to the same degree evident for boys at the site. This female beauty ideal reflects a larger pattern of women in sports being held to higher standards of appearance and compensating for negative stereotypes of athletic women with displays of heterosexuality and femininity (Ezzell 2009, Krane 2012). I also observed some boys and men engaging in occasional attempts at chivalry such as letting girls go first, holding doors, and reducing contact (not kicking/hitting as hard) when sparring women. Research strongly suggests that codes of chivalry and other forms of benevolent sexism serve to entrench notions of women as subordinate and in need of protection (Glick and Fisk 2001, Schwalbe 2014). Glick and Fisk (2001) also demonstrate that, at the national level, ideologies of benevolent sexism (such as chivalry/paternalism) and hostile sexism (antipathy toward women and feminism) are heavily correlated suggesting that benevolent and hostile forms of sexism operate as complementary justifications for inequality.
Racially, Ling’s Taekwondo is heterogeneous with South Asian Americans making up the largest proportion (approximately 40-50%) followed by white and East Asian American students and a smaller number of black, Latino, and mixed race students. Because of the small size of the school, racial dynamics shift rapidly. For example, when I first started observations there were no Latino students, but during the period of observations a Latino family joined with five children, a large enough group to make up them the racial majority at classes they attended. The locality has a higher than average percentage of Asian residents and there is an Indian grocery store on the end of the block, both of which help to explain the large number of South Asian students. Most of the South Asian parents are first generation immigrants. Research has not explored the significance of martial arts practice within Asian American communities, but studies of martial arts in American media have critiqued the portrayal of Asian men as alternately hyper-masculine and asexual (the martial arts icon Bruce Lee is the classic example) or feminized and nerdy (Chan 2000, Hiramoto 2015, Hirose and Pih 2009, Nitta 2010). Nitta (2010) analyzes martial arts films as a niche in which an Asian ethnicity is idealized but simultaneously exoticized and “Othered.”

**Methods**

During the fall of 2014, I conducted 22 hours of ethnographic observations at Ling’s Taekwondo. This included observations of 21 Juniors’ classes and 7 Little Dragons’ classes as well as a testing event and awards ceremony. Then during the spring semester I observed a regional tournament (an additional 5 hours of observations) and conducted fourteen in-depth interviews. Of these 14 interviews, I interviewed four instructors (including Mr. and Ms. Ling). All the instructors were also parents with children in taekwondo. I interviewed four other parents whose children were involved in taekwondo. In addition, I
interviewed six children all of whom were taekwondo participants. The children ranged in age from six to fourteen years old, and in rank from yellow belt to second degree black belt. I have trained as an adult student at Ling’s Taekwondo for over two years. Prior to taking taekwondo classes at Ling’s TKD I had very little experience with martial arts, but through taking classes I have gained a greater knowledge of the techniques involved and a more accurate understanding of both the allure and frustrations of martial arts. I have developed a friendly acquaintance with the Lings and a number of the adult students.

After the Lings approved my request to study the children’s classes, Mr. Ling sent an email explaining the purpose of my study to all of the families on the school mailing list (see Appendix B). Prior to observing the children’s classes, I obtained written consent individually from the parents. I participated in some of the classes by taking on an informal assistant role, but many of the classes were too small to need an assistant and so I simply observed from the side. This position gave me an opportunity to talk with parents waiting for their children to finish class. I took jottings during the classes and recorded full field notes within 48 hours. I spent considerable time recording children’s body language and actions which were often animated and expressive, sometimes much more so than a child’s actual speech. I also recorded the pattern and rituals of the classes, the instructors’ directions, the setting of the school, and classroom conversations. During classes when I was not assisting, I observed from the chairs where parents sit, conducting informal interviews with a large group of parents. Most of the children seemed more interested in each other and ignored the presence of another adult, unless I was acting as an assistant. As an assistant I held target pads and boards for students to break, called out kicks, started/stopped the timer, assisted with practice tests, pointed out spots to stand at actual testing, and occasionally helped the
children get into and out of their sparring gear. I also gave advice and praise for particular kicks, but I was generally hesitant to give too much advice as some of the students had studied taekwondo longer than I had and I was not fully confident in my level of knowledge.

I also obtained written consent for my interviews, with parents consenting on behalf of their children (children aged 10 and over signed consent forms along with their parents). Most interviews were either at the school or nearby at the Subway or the picnic tables outside. At the regional tournament, I interviewed one family, an instructor/parent and her daughter, who belonged to another taekwondo school in the same organization. I have ensured confidentiality throughout this work and as such all the names included are pseudonyms. I have also left deliberately unnamed the taekwondo organization to which Ling’s Taekwondo belongs and the municipality in which the school is located. My interviews with adults lasted on average 40 minutes. Children’s interviews varied more broadly, one lasting only fifteen minutes and others as long as the adults’. I asked all interview participants how they (or their child) became involved in TKD, what (if anything) they felt they learned, and what they liked or disliked about the classes. I asked adults specifically about the belt system, about their role as parents/instructors, and about their own background with martial arts. I asked all my participants (adults and children) a set of questions specifically about gender. I varied the exact questions based on what had already been established earlier in the interview, but I generally asked if participants thought there were differences between boys and girls in TKD, if TKD was equally beneficial for boys and girls, and why they thought more boys attended classes. I asked children about their experiences with forms, sparring, board breaking, and testing and what they thought made
someone a good martial artist (see Appendix B for interview guides). I transcribed the interviews myself.

Particularly in the beginning of my observations, the white parents approached me (as another white person) more often and held longer conversations with me when I was explaining the consent required for the project, but the gap reduced over time. One Indian participant, Madura, was particularly helpful in introducing me to several other Indian families. Madura and her son, Aary, also did in-depth interviews. I regret not being able to schedule in-depth interviews with more Indian families (possibly an area for future research), however I believe this was largely the result of the limited number of in-depth interviews I conducted. Of my in-depth interviews, one family was African American, one Chinese American, one mixed race (white father and Chinese/white daughter), one Indian American, and two white. I have tried to match the original names by assigning ethnically and gender similar pseudonyms. Also, note that I refer (regardless of age) to colored belts with first names and black belts as Mr./Ms. and last names, which is the accepted address within the taekwondo community. Finally, I have edited interview comments for ease of understanding, removing various um’s, uh’s, and you knows. The Lings, who immigrated to the US from The People’s Republic of China, have a tendency to drop prepositions and some pronouns, so for ease of understanding I sometimes put “connector terms” in brackets.

Using a grounded theory approach, I coded both field notes and interviews as research progressed. I also did field notes of the interviews, including details of the location, my participants’ body language, and sometimes conversations that preceded or followed the interview. I wrote a series of analytical memos, recording my impressions and initial questions, patterns that developed across interviews, and thoughts for questions that might be
important to bring up in later interviews. I have several analytical memos specifically on meritocratic ideology at the site, color-blindness, and the nature of diversity at the site, issues whose complexity only gradually emerged as my research proceeded. In the section that follows, I report the analysis that stemmed from those memos to argue that children’s taekwondo as a site of concerted cultivation encourages complementary ideologies of meritocracy, color-, and gender-blindness. At an early stage in the analysis, I noticed a variety of contradictions at the site (e.g., a commitment to safety alongside an allure of risk, glorification of combat alongside ideologies of restraint and non-violence) which evolved into a series of memos on masculinity. In the second section, of the paper I analyze these contradictions as a series of tensions between two aspects of hegemonic masculinity.

**Part 1: Building Character and Earning Rank**

In this section I analyze Ling’s Taekwondo as a site of concerted cultivation, designed to develop children’s character and skills for professional and middle-class life. Previous research on concerted cultivation has documented a middle-class parenting style that exists across racial groups and incorporates both girls and boys (Friedman 2014, Lareau 2003). However, despite parents’ hopes that both sons and daughters advance to college and equivalent professional careers, differences continue to exist, with certain extracurricular activities common for boys and other for girls. Scholars have also questioned whether Lareau’s research appropriately analyzed the role of racial inequalities in parents’ practices of concerted cultivation as well as the institutional settings in which they and their children are embedded (Choo and Ferree 2010, Perrier 2013, Vincent et al. 2013). I attempt to address this gap by examining how the meritocratic ideology of concerted cultivation is linked to racial and gender inequalities within the TKD community. Parents have high hopes that their
children’s involvement in TKD will lead to the development of important character traits like integrity, self-confidence, and work ethic, while at the same time providing regular physical activity and developing useful academic skills. TKD practitioners strongly believe that any child can become a black belt with hard work and consistent effort. I will argue that this ideology of meritocratic advancement develops from the institutional logic of concerted cultivation as it exists at the site. With the belief that everyone can advance through effort follows the connected idea that effort and character are more significant determinants of advancement than ascribed characteristics like age, race, gender, or ability level. The school as a site of concerted cultivation is also a locus of color-blind and gender-blind rhetoric. While community members make clear efforts to support the participation of a mix of racial groups, a wide age range, various ability levels, and a combination of boys and girls, they, at the same time, support an ideology which refuses to acknowledge existing inequalities.

**Concerted Cultivation at Ling’s Taekwondo**

For the families I observed and interviewed, martial arts was just one portion of a more comprehensive developmental plan for their children, typically including at least two or three other extracurricular activities. Although some of the children at the site are involved in multiple sports, several parents I interviewed saw TKD as providing an athletic activity whereas other extracurriculars such as school clubs, music lessons, tutoring, and religious education rounded out the children’s development in other areas. The selection of extracurricular activities is a carefully planned balancing act, as demonstrated by one parent, Mr. Sam, who explained his seven-year-old son Marc’s extracurricular activities as follows:

Really it’s his muscular development for me that’s the biggest thing. That’s why we have piano so we can shape his hands. The yoga was for muscle developments also,
but that just got to be too much. Taekwondo is also for muscle development.

Basketball, he really loves to play basketball; so that’s so he’ll have something that he really enjoys. And of course tutoring for school.

This father—whose son has a mild neurological condition, which slows his muscle development and reduces muscle coordination—is more focused on physical development than most parents, but even so the goal is normative physical development, not athletic ability. James, the father of Emma an eleven-year-old soon to be black-belt, seems almost apologetic when he tells me Emma is only involved in four extracurriculars.

She’s been playing piano for five years. She’s been in some competitions in piano. She [won at] the district. She won at the state level. She’s now taking guitar at the same time and she’s decided she wants to do two instruments…Yeah she’s really… those activities right now, that she’s working on: guitar, piano, she takes Chinese after school and she comes here for taekwondo.

It is later revealed that Emma has also started competing in a series of children’s triathlons sponsored through her school. According to James, Emma directs her involvement in these activities, taking the initiative to start taekwondo, guitar, and triathlons. Such busy schedules are characteristic of concerted cultivation as parents hope to keep children involved in a large number of structured adult-organized activities (Lareau 2003). Parents also work to promote a mix of breadth and depth, balancing extensive involvement in a few activities with trying out a range of options, each developing different skills and capacities (Friedman 2014, Lareau 2003).

Parents I spoke with were most concerned with character building, hoping TKD would develop abstract traits like discipline and confidence along with more specific skills.
The website for Ling’s Taekwondo includes a list of skills which the classes can help children develop. In this list, discipline and focus are included alongside the physical components of fitness and coordination/balance. The website also describes “Little Dragon” classes as intended to help four and five year olds learn to “follow directions” and “work with others.” The six to twelve year olds work on developing “self-esteem,” “leadership skills,” and the determination to “do their best at whatever they decide to do.” The reader may be justifiably dubious that a couple of classes a week will be able to help children develop such a variety of physical, mental, and life skills not to mention profound character traits like the taekwondo tenets of self-control, perseverance, and integrity. Without prompting five of the eight parents I interviewed expressed similar skepticism and awareness that such claims can easily be exaggerated. Parents emphasized the importance of practical matters like cost and travel distance when choosing a martial arts school. Often parents had shopped around for a martial arts school and many started their child out at another school and transferred when it didn’t meet their needs. Nonetheless, the parents I spoke with are generally confident that martial arts can provide a variety of important benefits and promote good character.

I asked parents if they had seen changes in their child since starting TKD, and while some parents described major developments, others had seen few changes. But both groups were confident that given time and effort martial arts was valuable for children’s development. Yet as I probed, I came to see that among the interviewed parents there was little agreement on what character traits and skills martial arts teaches. James emphasized the confidence his daughter, Emma, gained from martial arts: “She’s able to get up now in front of a class, do a presentation. Not intimidated at all anymore. And I think it’s from here…[In
the last tournament] she took on all those older boys and bigger boys you know, physically bigger, and she had no problem with that.” This father draws a clear connection between his daughter’s conception of herself physically (as capable of taking on larger boys) and her confidence in academic situations like classroom presentations. Carl, the father of a seven-year-old orange belt had not seen character changes, but felt that his son, Max, benefited from experiences, such as practicing his forms at home for testing. Carl is hopeful that given time TKD will help his son learn to “step up” and gain more confidence in social situations. In contrast, when I asked Ms. Ling what children learn from TKD, she emphasized the way children learn to respect adults: “They should listen, respect others, because now they are [getting] face to face interaction. Now[a]days kids are on the computer and they play games, don’t talk to each other…don’t respect the teacher, adult, they talk back like the way they talk to the computer, screaming at the computer.” It might seem contradictory to think that TKD teaches children both discipline and leadership, following orders and giving orders, but I never saw discipline or leadership thought of in a contradictory sense by parents or instructors within the TKD community. In classes, both terms tended to be used interchangeably alongside others like respect and integrity, to encourage a range of positive behaviors everything from listening to directions to speaking loudly during the bowing in ritual or being honest when counting off push-ups or crunches. One judge at testing encouraged a child to sit still saying: “What’s integrity? I’m not looking, you still sit crisscross applesauce. That’s integrity. That’s one of the tenets too.” In this way appropriate and obedient behavior became a symbolic representation of internal character. In general, leadership and discipline are understood to support each other because following directions
and respecting teachers is assumed to lead to success and in turn to advancement, both in TKD and eventually as part of a career.

Though the children I interviewed talked first about how “fun” taekwondo was, they were aware that the activity was meant to teach a variety of skills. When I asked what they learned from TKD several of the children immediately supplied the same “buzzwords” as the adults: “discipline,” “confidence,” and “leadership.” A few of the younger children also described more TKD specific skills like their one-steps (i.e., combinations of techniques memorized and performed at testing) and board breaking techniques (e.g., “hit the board like this”), but even young kids seem aware that TKD is meant to teach character traits which extend beyond the immediate activity. Consider the following exchange with Aary, an eight-year-old boy with a yellow belt.

B: What are your classes like?
A: It’s really fun you get to learn taekwondo and punching and kicking. Yay. It’s really cool.

B: Ok. So what do you think you learn from your classes?
A: Discipline. Self-defense so like if a bully tries to hit you, you can defend yourself…

B: So how do you learn discipline? What do you learn discipline from doing?
A: First you say it in the tenets, in the tenets of taekwondo, and then it teaches you discipline when you’re kicking and to do it [TKD].

As previously mentioned, the children I interviewed described TKD first in terms of its value as a “fun” activity. Several of the children, both boys and girls, mentioned “punching and kicking” and enjoying the warrior fantasy aspect. In their interviews, several parents
speculated that the enjoyment boys often take in punching and kicking is one of the reasons the classes have more boys than girls. However, Aray said he had no interest in TKD until his mother enrolled him, and another boy, Marc, described his primary motivation as wanting to “take classes with daddy.” When asked, Aary is able to list some of the skills he is learning (discipline and self defense) and phrases them in much the same terms as the adults (not incidentally, discipline and self-defense feature prominently in his mother’s interview as well). Aary also has a developing sense of how he learns abstract character traits like discipline through first reciting the important traits in the tenets and then further internalizing the tenets through practice during class.

As parents and children hope, the classes I observed emphasize skills applicable to academics, including focus, memorization, and attentiveness to adult directions. Sometimes Mr. Ling specifically included academic skills in class. For example, he worked a subtraction problem into a lesson on round kicks with a seven year old.

Mr. Ling: [If you] have to do 10 [kicks], 6 yesterday. How many more?

Max: (quietly) Four

Mr. Ling: (smiling) You didn’t know when we take taekwondo we have to do math too.

There is a heavy emphasis on learning forms, which involves memorizing a series of techniques performed in order. Even if the class is crowded, Mr. Ling may still watch each child do her form individually, while the other children do kicks on the bags independently. Left to work on the bags without direct supervision, some children work diligently, but others put in minimal effort or stop altogether after just a few techniques. The class focus is firmly on the forms. Sometimes children are taught mnemonics to remember particular techniques
in order. Families look up the steps online and practice at home. Forms are full of formulaic details such as “right hand facing down to set for a knife-hand strike” and “left hand in front on the x-block.” Once the basic steps are mastered, there are countless details to improve such as widening the front stance or putting more snap in the back fist. Children, hoping to advance in belt rank, have to pay attention to forms, follow directions, and apply their mind to remember detailed lessons.

As the school’s website I described earlier suggests, focus and concentration are important. My field notes are full of instructors reminding children to “focus” and “concentrate.” In line with the typical practice of concerted cultivation, Mr. Ling tries to reason with kids who act out explaining why they need to follow directions. Mr. Ling appeals to the structure of the class (“we have to stretch in the beginning”), the requirements of testing (“you need to learn this for your next belt”), reminders to focus (“focus, you can do this”), and the tenets (“courtesy means not being mean”) to encourage children to behave. The appeals to focus are particularly interesting, because Mr. Ling assumes (or pretends to assume) that children are trying to behave but simply lack focus. Mr. Ling prides himself on rarely having to resort to having a child “sit out.” The result of this style of behavior management is that Mr. Ling and the other instructors do not invoke their own authority to encourage children’s behavior, but instead encourage children’s compliance with reasoning and positive reinforcement. Lareau (2003) observes similar practices among middle-class parents who rely on reasoning and negotiation to develop children’s comfort and confidence interacting with adult authority figures.

The best way to make visible the countless ways in which the school is directed towards academic development and professional ideals is to imagine for a minute that the
classes were instead designed to focus on developing children as talented practitioners of the sport. If the focus of taekwondo at the school was to be on producing talented sparrers, more attention would have to be paid to children’s sparring ability and more time would need to be spent sparring (roughly one week a month is designated for sparring, so some children spar only once or twice a month). If the classes focused on producing talented sparrers, students would have to work harder on improving flexibility and strength. Encouraging children to do pushups or crunches often meets with resistance, and instructors regularly pretend not to notice when children are not doing the exercises. Classes focused on producing talented sparrers could not compromise on improving flexibility and strength. Sparring itself would be different, with more emphasis on competitive techniques which depend on using hard contact to back off opponents or forcing opponents off the mat (perhaps backing them into a wall during practice when there is no mat). Children sometimes end up taking classes for as much as eight months before actually sparring. Instead of focusing on the combat-like sparring competition, the children’s classes develop skills more applicable to academics and thus in line with the broader goals of concerted cultivation. However parents hope that children not only develop skills helpful for school, but more abstract character traits as well. As parents are aware, it is not enough to simply recite the tenets, children have to gradually internalize them and this is in part what the belt system intends.

**Meritocratic Advancement: “Everyone Starts Out as a White Belt”**

Children’s success in taekwondo is measured by meeting progressively increasing curricular standards and earning rank (belt level). Parents strongly praised the belt rank system for providing “motivation” and teaching “goal-setting.” The belt system includes 14
color-coded levels. It takes around three years (no less than two and a half) of consistent attendance and dedication to complete the colored belts and earn the first (of many) black belt ranks. For each belt level children also earn colored stripes added to the ends of their belts with tape, to indicate readiness for testing. For white to blue belt, children must earn four stripes, but brown belts earn only two and red belts in preparation for the black belt test no longer earn the intermediary stripes. Once children advance in rank to brown and red belt they are to know the requirements for testing and have learned to request help when needed. The intermediary stripes are then phased out, as children are expected to take more responsibility for their own advancement.

Children at the school are almost constantly preoccupied with belts. The children I observed compared belts, asked about requirements for belts, counted the time until they would earn future belts, and talked to each other all the time about belts and stripes. The belts are a constant tax on the class as parents and instructors are repeatedly forced to retie and adjust children’s belts. Many of the younger children have not mastered the somewhat complex technique for tying one’s own belt. It is through the testing event and awards ceremony, at which children receive new belts, that the professional advancement pattern is most clearly visible and simultaneously most clearly in contrast with the warrior masculinity one might find in sports such as mixed martial arts, boxing, or wrestling. Throughout the testing event, children are judged not by their ability to best others in sport but by their ability to meet set standards for advancement along a pre-planned path. At the same time, testing is associated with higher standards for behavior, instilling in children the idea that self-control and focus are aspects of their martial arts identity and the accompanying status.
Testing is held early on a Saturday morning in a packed school gym about a thirty-minute drive from the school. Children are called up by belt rank to demonstrate their forms before a table of judges. The bleachers are crammed with parents and siblings, numerous video cameras in evidence. One little boy struggles with his form. He is maybe just five years old and a yellow belt. The second time he repeats the form one of the judges counts off the steps for him in an effort to help him slow down and remember the steps. The other judges prompt him “watch which direction you’re going” and “go back to your knife hand step.” The child ends up doing the form three times and finishes the third time only with extensive prompting. Although this little boy gets the most help, almost every child who struggles gets some advice from the judges. Failures are framed in the best possible light: “one more time,” “ready to show off?” (meaning: do the form alone since it was wrong the first time), “You want to do it one more time?” Meanwhile the judges police the children sitting on the sidelines waiting their turn, repeatedly reminding them “it’s testing,” a phrase which is basically an order not to talk and to sit still. The judges work to ensure that children meet the requirements set for a technical pass at their belt level. The emphasis of the event is on composure and self-control, demonstrating ability and knowledge in a formal environment rather than showing off physical talent. Although there is performance pressure, this is not a competitive environment. Success is not determined by besting another individual, but by advancing up the hierarchy based on individual effort.

Testing takes a toll on families. It is stressful for the participants. Parents described their children getting “stomach butterflies” and even throwing up beforehand. The entire family, including the parents and siblings who do not participate, have to make an additional time commitment to testing. The whole event usually takes at least three hours and families
are busy with a packed schedule of extracurriculars. I saw younger siblings still in their cleats from a crack-of-dawn soccer game and others still in pajamas and sleeping on the hard gym floor. A number of families brought fast food, using the benches at the back of the gym as makeshift tables. Despite the stress and the time commitment, every one of my interview participants agreed that testing is (at least for children) an important and necessary part of taekwondo.

Parents and instructors support the testing and belt system as part of how taekwondo teaches values. As Ms. Williams (an instructor and mother of six children all involved in TKD) described the importance of the belt system, she emphasized the way the belts taught children to respect the work of higher-ranking students:

Your belt shows progression. So it shows that you gain knowledge but it also helps the younger kids in class or the lower ranking kids in class [and] the lower ranking adults respect those who have worked so hard to get to brown belt, black belt.

Ms. Williams believes that the belt rank system teaches the lower ranking students to respect “those who have worked so hard.” Hard work and respect come up repeatedly in Ms. Williams interview. She feels strongly that children should learn to work through difficulties and never be “passed through” (i.e., granted a new belt rank without fully earning it). Belts provide social recognition of the “hard work” Ms. Williams values.

Mr. Sam (father of a child in taekwondo and an assistant instructor) acknowledges the stress and pressure of testing, but also feels that the ordeal instills values. Mr. Sam focuses not just on the work ethic required for belt advancement, but the perseverance to continue through failure.

B: Alright, so what do you think about testing? Is it ever stressful or?
S: Oh yeah, oh heck yeah! Like I said, I’m coming up on five years and I still get butterflies every time I’m going through testing. And I think a lot of it is just personal because you want to do something like that. It’s not, I don’t think especially Mr. Ling. I don’t think he puts any pressure on us to pass or anything. He always tells stories about how when he goes to tournaments and stuff (past the rank of third degree black belt testing is held at national tournaments), he throws up before he goes to testing so you know it’s not pressure from him or the school or the other judges. It’s just, I’ve worked so hard for this and I really want to do well. But yeah, it’s stressful. It’s not as bad as tournaments, though; tournaments are worse. Tournaments are crazy!

B: Laughing

S: But again it’s that whole character building and, again, even if you don’t pass, it builds that resolve of ok, you look at other people and I really like testing, because you see people who have, I think there’s one kid who he’s no-changed on his first degree black belt like four times and then finally on the fifth time he passed and you could just see the celebration and the weight come off his shoulders. So that was cool to see him persevere through that. Really it’s all a lot of fun. The whole experience to me is a lot of fun.

Parents, like Ms. Williams and Mr. Sam, saw the pressure and stress created by testing as a necessary learning experience. By the logic of concerted cultivation, testing and belt ranks are extremely important because they teach children skills like performing in front of an audience, following directions, and goal setting. But parents I interviewed value the belt system not only for the skills taught, but the values being communicated, like respect, hard
work, and perseverance, values in line with academic and professional ambition. Ideally, as Mr. Sam suggests, the pressure to advance in belt rank is not experienced as an external requirement, but primarily as an internal drive to succeed. However if the drive to success were purely internal, a large spectator event and the performance pressure of testing would be unnecessary. Nonetheless, the many belt levels and the graduated stripe system encourage children to gradually assume greater individual responsibility for advancement.

Children who advance at testing receive their new belts at an awards ceremony held at the school later that week. Like testing, the awards ceremony is a formal event with children dressed in full uniforms. Parents pack into the small space, cameras in hand, while children (and a few adult practitioners) line up by belt-rank. Students are then called up one-by-one to receive their new belts and certificates. I am strongly reminded of a school graduation ceremony, shaking hands with my instructors and carrying my diploma (in this case a certificate) off the stage. Perhaps the most striking thing about the awards ceremony is how happy the children are. The lower level belt advancements may seem like guaranteed “giveaways” to the adults, but for the children every belt is, as one parent puts it, “a big accomplishment.” Parents take photos of their children standing between Mr. and Ms. Ling or posed against the kick bags holding up their certificates. Mr. Ling generally works to keep the ceremony short, but the parents (or other family members) of new black belts have a chance to speak. They say how proud they are and how hard the children worked. Mr. Ling wants the lower belts to see the black belts getting this award, because this is the lesson:
gradual advancement until you become a black belt. The lower belts are just stepping stones, like a middle school graduation.\textsuperscript{4}

\textit{The Contradiction of the Black Belt}

Despite the hope that everyone can advance with effort, meaningful rank must be difficult to achieve. Even while my interview participants were reluctant to blame children and parents, responsibility for children who failed to advance in rank ended up being placed with individual families. The transferring of the responsibility for advancement onto the individual sets the stage for color- and gender-blind ideologies which similarly obscure inequalities. All the instructors I interviewed were quick to provide examples of students who struggled, but with great effort eventually advanced and became black belts. Mr. Ling told me repeatedly of a black belt student who could not kick above his belt when he started. During our interview he described the particular efforts he makes to encourage students who work hard even if they are not the most athletic. “A lot of times the kid that will get the best effort award is not the athletic [one]. The one that struggle with the kicks but you see the effort in there, see the improvement in there, those are the ones I recognize.” Mr. Ling carries this attitude into his teaching and anytime he hears a student doubt his or her own success provides an anecdote of someone who beat greater odds, started at an older age, was even shorter (specifically directed at me), failed more testings, got stuck on a particular belt for even longer and still succeeded. Such against-all-odds success stories are a point of pride throughout the TKD community. Other interview participants described the success of students with disabilities, students who never thought they would be capable of TKD, and

\textsuperscript{4}The school participates in tournaments as well. There are three tournaments a year, and I observed one regional tournament. Tournaments are optional (unrelated to belt rank advancement).
adults who started the sport long after their prime. Ms. Williams (an instructor from another school in the same organization and the mother of six children all involved in TKD) explained it like this:

You know there are physical disabilities, but I’ve seen people overcome physical disabilities and do amazing things in martial arts. And we have black belts with Down’s syndrome, we have black belts with autism, we have black belts with one eye. We’ve got black belts that are just incredible people that have overcome incredible things to get there. So I think it’s not easy to get a black belt, but I think everyone is capable of getting there eventually.

In the beginning I saw such stories as simply an attempt at motivation, but they also discourage complaints. As a brown belt, I jokingly complained that sparring would be much easier if we could just attract a few other students around my size (4’11”) to the classes. Frustrated with my own poor performance, we had just sparred five rounds and I had been at a disadvantage against the all-male black belts, some of whom were more than a foot taller than me. Mr. Ling and Mr. Sam nonetheless insisted that height was not an obstacle and offered stories of black belts my height or shorter. Mr. Sam, who is well over 6’, told me that he also has to spar people taller than him. The emphasis on success through effort is the flip side of concerted cultivation’s faith in development over identity. Mr. Ling and Mr. Sam are firm in their belief that success and advancement should correspond to effort (as much as if not more than) athletic ability and that everyone who puts in the effort and the time should eventually be able to succeed. Even when inequalities exist, the only acceptable solution is to work harder.
I started asking my interview participants if they thought anyone could become a black belt. Although all my interview participants unequivocally and enthusiastically thought that yes, anyone could indeed become a black belt, they also took pride in the fact that very few people actually become black belts. There is a saying, sometimes quoted on online martial arts forums: “Question: How long does it take the average person to become a black belt? Answer: The average person does not become a black belt.” So taekwondo is faced with a dilemma: how to explain all the people who don’t become black belts. Twice in my interviews participants struggled to explain why only some students become black belts. During my interview with Ms. Williams I asked:

B: But it does happen, and I guess I can ask you this since you’re also an instructor, that sometimes kids do fail and they stop coming. Or they have maybe a couple difficult testings and you don’t see them around anymore. So in those cases where taekwondo doesn’t get that message across that failing isn’t the end of the world, what do you think, what goes wrong or…?

W: Sometimes it’s the parents. A lot of the times it’s the parents. I don’t want to say that they allow their kids to give up but they do. They get angry that we’ve not passed them along, that we’ve not just pushed them through, and I think that some of that may be related to the school system, some of that may be related to just the way people parent. We don’t push people through in taekwondo and I think that’s important for kids. If a kid fails and doesn’t come back, sorry. I mean we encourage you to come back and we want you to get your black belt, but it may take some time and it may take a longer time than you were expecting and that’s ok - you’re not left behind you’re just progressing at your own rate.
Ms. Williams doesn’t want to blame parents but she does so anyway in the end. My experience with parents does not support her argument though. During fieldwork and my own two-year involvement in TKD, I spoke with parents who have considered taking their child out of TKD and usually parents do so because the child is unhappy and no longer wants to attend classes or because other priorities interfere, such as school or other extracurriculars. By shifting the blame to parents, Ms. Williams avoids putting blame on children or the sport itself. Then Ms. Williams’s comment at the end of the above quote “you’re not left behind, you’re just progressing at your own rate,” seems to avoid acknowledging a problem. Earlier in the same interview Ms. Williams describes how the system of TKD is predicated on gradual advancement that teaches new skills at each belt level. A student who is not advancing does not receive this gradually structured progression of instruction, which was crucial to Ms. Williams herself coming to believe she was capable of participating in TKD as more than just a form of exercise, learning to spar and testing for belt ranks.

Similarly when I asked Ms. Ling “Do you think anyone can become a black belt in martial arts?” she replied:

Yes! Look at me (laughing). Yes, I do. I mean even with the ones [who are] learning slower you don’t get passed every time the first time. You just have to work harder, getting [there] slower. But for the kids [they need] a lot of dedication from the parents. They [parents] really have to be involved. They have to bring the kid to school to learn. They have to be involved to push the kid to practice. Some of them don’t come here half an hour and only once a week. That’s not going to be passing and then the kid will get discouraged seeing other friends getting new belts and
passing and they’re not. It’s because they don’t bring them here often enough to make them progress nice and easy.

Ms. Ling had none of the same reservation about blaming parents as did Ms. Williams. Ms. Ling’s account, however, suggests a number of factors working together. The parent does not bring the child enough, the child fails a testing, other children are advancing, the child gets frustrated and the problem gradually gets worse. But Ms. Ling still does not really have an explanation for why some parents do not bring their children consistently and the rest of her interview suggests a frustrated inability to understand what she perceives as some parents who simply cannot control their children. Both Ms. Williams and Ms. Ling want to avoid holding children responsible for their own advancement. Research has documented a pattern of holding parents responsible for children’s advancement, with parents and experts viewing children as innocent and vulnerable to bad parenting intensifying social pressure to parent “right” (Hays 1996, Rutherford 2011). Concerns about children’s innocence and vulnerability put a great deal of emphasis on parents safeguarding their children (Elliott 2012).

Ms. Ling also had no explanation for the student who comes to class regularly but fails a testing anyway. Much like Ms. Williams, she attempted to phrase not advancing in belt rank in the best possible light of “learning slower” and “not getting passed.” The organization’s official term is a “no-change,” and the terminology of failure is deliberately eschewed. (In his interview Mr. Ling corrects my use of the term “failure” in place of no-change.) But whatever term is used, the only solution to a “no-change” is to “work harder.” This seems a somewhat frustrating ideology for a struggling student, but could also be seen as a positive ideology for a martial arts instructor. Perseverance is one of the tenets of taekwondo, and practice does count for a lot in the martial arts. However, taekwondo is about
preparing children for life, not just belt testings. The idea that advancement is the result of hard work and good character can suggest that those who do not advance are somehow lacking in character, lazy, or uncommitted.

As a site of concerted cultivation, taekwondo is about developing traits that support professional careers. As evidenced by Ms. Williams and Mr. Sam’s earlier quotes, institutional emphasis on individual responsibility is meant to develop a work ethic and perseverance. As one child put it “You can’t just cry if you’re not a black belt. You have to have patience to wait and get to the higher levels.” Ms. Ling and Ms. Williams communicate a philosophy for how individuals (not government programs or societies at large) should work for advancement and handle injustices: a focus which obscures some of the realities of inequality. The ideology of meritocracy in taekwondo produces certain blind spots in how participants think about inequality, particularly in regards to race and gender.

*Color-Blind and Gender-Blind: “A Skill and Practice Thing”*

The ideology of individual responsibility extends to racial and gender inequalities. While the organization and school owners make efforts to accommodate individuals in many cases (e.g., welcoming various ethnic backgrounds and accommodating dietary restrictions, disabilities, various athletic skill levels), TKD participants also place a high emphasis on individual accomplishment. In interviews, participants used a combination of color- and gender-blind rhetorics to express a philosophy of meritocratic advancement. As I will show, my interview participants emphasized the ways in which TKD did not differentiate by “where people are from” (race is a nearly taboo word), gender, age or ability. Though these four axes of inequality (race, gender, age, and ability) cannot be treated as parallel, and my participants made differentiations between these axes of inequality, they also clearly
subordinated these ascribed identities to meritocratic accomplishments which resulted from “hard work,” values, and character.

Although around two-thirds of American youth are involved with organized sports, sports teams are segregated spaces with most youth sports leagues separating by gender, ability, and relatively narrow age-brackets (white and upper-middle-class children are also over-represented) (Messner 2009). Martial arts is an interesting case-study because many families choose martial arts to get away from this team-sport environment where their child does not “fit in.” Ling’s Taekwondo is racially heterogeneous with a mix of South and East Asian, white, black, Latino, and mixed race students. Students range in age from the four-year-old Little Dragons to adults in their 60s. As previously stated, boys and girls train together. The school also hosts a wide ability range including children with ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, and various physical disabilities including hearing aids, limited vision, and one student with cerebral palsy.

My interview participants, as a group, were uncomfortable with the topics of race and gender, but proud of the mix of students. When I asked if TKD encourages “diversity in terms of race,” Mr. Ling answered more generally that “Our goal is to make everybody feel welcome regardless of your ability. That’s one of things we work really hard - to make our school a true family.” Consistent with color-blind ideology, Mr. Ling took a question specifically about race and redirected it to talk about ability level. This is consistent with the “slippery” style of color-blindness Bonilla-Silva observes, where interview participants attempt to redirect questions about race towards other issues. Mr. Ling also talked about making sure that the children were accepting and did not “make fun of each other.” Mr. Ling lived up to these statement in the classes I observed by making an effort to learn children’s
names regardless of ethnicity, making accommodations for a variety of dietary needs at school events (e.g., Muslim, Hindu, vegetarian/vegan, and allergies), offering private lessons, at no extra charge, for children needing one-on-one support, and praising children’s efforts regardless of athletic ability. The Lings’ efforts are however part of a larger institutional practice within the TKD organization.

Although Ling’s TKD is, both because of the location and perhaps the Lings’ efforts, a particularly diverse site, it is also true that taekwondo itself seems to encourage a racially heterogeneous population and a wide range of ages and abilities. At the tournament, I was able to observe students from TKD schools across the southeast region and I recorded the following comments in my field notes.

My overall impressions are that the tournament is crowded and diverse. Up through teenagers the competition groups aren’t gender separated and I see Asian, white, black, Latino and Middle Eastern kids. I think white and Asian are the most common with black in a distant third. Although far more children than adults compete there is quite an age range from “VIPS” in their 50s/60s to 4 and 5-year-old Little Dragons. The uniform seems to facilitate a wide range of body types as well and diminishes differences between girls and boys, so that watching from the bleachers, it’s often hard to guess participants’ genders.

The policies of the taekwondo organization support a wide age range and spectrum of abilities. A girl with Down syndrome competes and is awarded a medal at the tournament after sparring a black belt who has clearly been asked to let her win. At testings, sparring gear requirements are adjusted for ability, including, in my observations, the addition of a facemask for one student, a chest pad for an adult, and several alternate styles of shin/arm
guards. Judging, support, and degree of refereeing are also flexible, and children ages 10-15 are often given a choice of testing with the juniors or adults, as desired. These types of policies are typical of the sport and the website of the largest taekwondo organization, the World Taekwondo Federation, concludes a history of the sport with an explicit statement on diversity: “And the WTF has also made ceaseless effort to make taekwondo a sport for all, irrespective of gender, race, age, religion, culture and with or without physical or mental disabilities in cooperation with various international sports organizations.” Note the inclusion of color-blind rhetoric, which embraces diversity “irrespective” of identity, diminishing the importance of ascribed identities for people’s experiences and life chances. Regardless of the accuracy of this official statement, the statement itself demonstrates that color- and gender-blindness are a source of organizational pride.

It is perhaps surprising that TKD should support such heterogeneity within an unapologetically hierarchical and ritualistic sport. As an aspect of concerted cultivation, the explicit hierarchy of martial arts prepares children to navigate more complicated social and professional hierarchies as adults. Parents often choose TKD because of a focus on the individual. The social dynamics of team sports can be particularly difficult for children who do not “fit in” sometimes because of ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, or minority ethnic backgrounds. Compared to other children’s extracurriculars, like Little League Baseball or scout groups, taekwondo is not steeped in the same American-specific mythology (Mechling 2001, Messner 2009). Asian men in particular are presented positively in martial arts media. Hirose and Pih (2010) discuss the inclusion of East Asian elements within mixed martial arts as a process whereby white masculinity “selectively authorizes” specific East Asian masculinities as “useful” if still feminized and exotified. Taekwondo has a large number of
specific rituals and customs, but participants do not need a history of family involvement with martial arts, because classes include instruction in etiquette. The rituals and hierarchies of TKD are explicit and new students are given instruction in the belt levels, the proper forms of address, the bowing ceremonies, and the etiquette for numerous situations, such as when they lose a match, if a judge acts unfairly, or if they feel like a sparring match has become too heated. Explicit hierarchy can reduce the strain of identifying and navigating unspoken social hierarchies. Taekwondo provides students with clearly marked hierarchical statuses (belt ranks and titles) and explicit instructions in etiquette to appropriately enact rank (e.g., when to say yes sir/yes ma’am). Compare this explicit hierarchy to the unspoken hierarchies in a school cafeteria or the jockeying for position that occurs on children’s sports team (Eder 1995, Messner 2009). The appeal of an explicit hierarchy is at least in part in the meritocratic openness of participation. In taekwondo there are no cliques, no one fails to make the team, and yet hierarchical divisions, are if anything, stricter.

Bonilla-Silva describes white color-blind ideology as the result of a “universe of whiteness” with extreme racial segregation still characterizing many whites’ everyday lives (2010: 125). In contrast, color- and gender-blindness in TKD are less dependent on segregation and instead stem from the ideology of concerted cultivation. Interview participants not only diminished the significance of ascribed identities, but emphasized children’s individual capacity for development and accomplishment. Dean is a white father who, along with his male partner, has two daughters both enrolled in TKD. Dean is concerned their daughters might face bullying or violence as children of a same-sex couple. He monitors the situation at their school carefully to be on the lookout for any bullying and is thankful that TKD will teach the girls self-defense “just in case.” He was also particularly
positive about the racial heterogeneity at the school. Yet, as the following passage from his interview reveals, Dean supports a color-blind ideology that looks at everyone as “just human” and believes race should not “matter,” diminishing inequalities and refusing to hold anyone accountable for their privilege.

I grew up and it was you were either Irish or Italian and right, that’s the neighborhood. And that’s fine, but as the world is changing I want them [my daughters] to be so it doesn’t matter. That’s the type of how we want them to live their lives. Male, female, black, white, whatever it is that you are, you’re just humans right? We’re all just trying to get along and do what’s best for everyone. Let’s not make it about a thing about a person or the way they look; it’s about what we’re trying to accomplish.

Dean believes “everyone is just trying to…do what’s best for everyone,” which ignores the benefits of whiteness. In line with the meritocratic ideology of TKD, Dean focuses on what people can “accomplish.” Even as he worries about his daughters potentially facing discrimination as children of a gay couple, he does not appear to extend this awareness to concern about violence or discrimination that non-white Americans may encounter. In this example, Dean invokes color-blind frames of minimization (diminishing the significance of racial inequalities) and abstract liberalism (focusing on individual capacity for achievement).

In another interview, Madura, Aary’s mother and a first generation immigrant from India, assures me that she has no qualms about her son’s involvement in TKD (despite no family background in martial arts). Madura waits until after I have asked if there is anything else and then finally turned off the recorder to ask if “I think the Indian families are different.” I tell her she talked about a lot of the same themes as my other interview
participants, but I was surprised to see so many Indian families at the school. She nods and visibly relaxes. We talk about the number of Indians in the area and how “popular” martial arts is now. She tells me she wishes she knew TKD, because it would be useful when she visits India where “that kind” of violence (violence against women I believe) is so common. More than my other participants, Madura seems to want to talk about cultural differences, but she also seems worried that I (a white outsider) might misunderstand. She mentions that the Indians in this area are “educated” and “professional” and implies this might contribute to the number of Indian children in TKD. She emphasizes that for her son, TKD serves much the same purpose as for the other children, preparing him for school, work, and a professional career, teaching him “discipline” and to “stay focused and always try to do your best and maybe then you can succeed.” When I asked why she thought TKD classes had more boys, she diminished the difference as largely the children’s choice (her son tells another version in which he did not choose TKD but enjoys it now that he is involved). Madura clearly echoed the precepts of concerted cultivation and gender-blindness, along with concern for how Indian families are perceived, suggesting that she sees the relevance of race and ethnicity even as she downplays it.

I asked every interview participant, children and adults, a series of questions specifically about gender and TKD. The answers have a lot in common with participants’ beliefs about racial diversity. Almost without exception, my interview participants believe that there are few if any differences between boys and girls in TKD. The children report no preference for sparring a girl or a boy, and parents would enroll either a son or a daughter in taekwondo classes. When I asked the children if there were any differences between the boys and the girls in taekwondo, the kids said “Noooooo” (drawn out for emphasis) and “We’re all
human.” Several gave me a look as if I had said something ridiculous or borderline offensive. The adults (after assuring me that the differences were minimal and that they saw no reason to differentiate) sometimes brought up gendered reasons TKD might be especially good for a girl (teaches self-defense) or a boy (teaches non-violence/self control). The following responses show how committed my participants were to the idea of that gender not be considered overly significant in taekwondo.

Carl is an adult TKD participant and father of Max, a seven-year-old orange belt. I ask:

B: There are definitely a lot more boys in the class than girls. Do you have any theories on why that happens?

C: I don’t know. Unless just more of a potentially violent thing, or maybe boys tend to be more attracted to that, I guess, and just for whatever reason just tend to look at more contact things as more boy stuff. But I’ve never really seen any good reason why there would be from the class. I mean from the training…There’s no advantage of one over the other. A guy might be bigger and stronger but even that is kind of, that’s up for grabs. It really is a skill and practice thing.

Mr. Sam is a second degree black belt, assistant instructor, and father of Marc, a seven-year-old with a green belt. Mr. Sam also teaches a no-contact white and yellow belt curriculum to the 1st and 2nd grade classes at his son’s school. I ask:

B: So if you had a daughter instead of a son, would you still want to look at TKD as an option?

S: Oh absolutely! No question about it, no question about it. Especially because one of the things I like about Mr. Ling’s school is that he also
incorporates self-defense. Which is, I’ve actually taken that to his [Marc’s] school when I teach classes. Maybe one or two classes a month we’ll just do self-defense techniques, so they can help take care of themselves. So absolutely, if I had a daughter, she - no question. No question.

B: Do you think it’s any different trying to enroll a girl in TKD?

S: No, no. (shaking his head)

B: Pretty much the same?

S: I mean again at our school, our style does not differentiate. You all have to do the same thing. You know the warm-up might be different (this is probably a reference to some women putting their knees down for the push-ups) but once class starts, we’re all doing the same thing.

Carl and Mr. Sam are aware of gender norms that code contact sports and combat as male and acknowledge the realities of difference to some extent (men tend to be bigger and reach is important in TKD and the emphasis on self-defense skills for girls suggests an attempt to protect against male violence). At the same time, both Carl and Mr. Sam appreciate the fact that TKD does not differentiate on the basis of gender and want to minimize the differences that exist. Both Carl and Mr. Sam diminish the significance of physical and social differences. Carl, in particular, suggests that the gender demographics result from children’s inexplicable preferences rather than adult pressures. By suggesting that the greater involvement of boys in taekwondo is largely the result of children’s choices which do not require explanation (“for whatever reason”) Carl naturalizes the gender division while at the same time trying to minimize the importance of the gender. This parallels the color-blind frame of naturalization and minimization, within the context of gender-blindness. The less
important social and physical differences are, the more TKD can claim to be meritocratic, as Carl terms it, “a skill and practice thing.”

Ms. Ling provided a slightly different perspective from the other parents and her husband, by acknowledging gender differences more frankly. Although this may in part be a result of the fact that Ms. Ling knows me better than most of my other participants and is discussing the adult rather than the children’s classes.

B: How do you think it compares being one of the only women in the (adult) classes? Differences or?

L: Well, I think it’s a cultural thing. You know in Asia a woman does not bring up to do taekwondo. That’s why at the very beginning I didn’t join to do [TKD] is because I was raised in China. You know, it’s different. Until, like I say, I promised my son [that I would become an instructor so the school could remain open after he graduates and moves away]. And then you find out there’s a lot of benefits from the work out (laughing) and then yeah. I think it’s a cultural thing and also for women, they have different things. They could do more gentle [activities]: yoga or Pilates, different types instead of taekwondo is sparring. They [women] feel like, oh getting kicks and punches if so many men do it, it’s got to hurt.

Ms. Ling is more upfront about the different norms that exist for men and women and how they influenced her own decision to postpone involvement in TKD until after her husband started his own school when her ability to help as an assistant instructor became crucial for the family. Unlike Carl and Mr. Sam, who thought that women met mostly the same standards as men, Ms. Ling noted that men tended to “take it down a level” when sparring
her and other women, and felt that this was a good thing. It made her comfortable sparring and prevented injuries sparring taller and younger opponents. But it’s not just the physical challenges of sparring; “kicks and punches” and the warrior aspects of martial arts are culturally coded male as part of the warrior myths which I will discuss in more detail in Part 2. As an institution of concerted cultivation, Ling’s Taekwondo attempts to encourage the development of academic skills and professional character traits, like perseverance and work ethic. Participants are heavily invested in an ideology of meritocracy that suggests any student can become a black belt with effort and strength of character. Taekwondo as an organization places a high value on inclusivity and differentiates itself from team sports, which separate leagues by gender, age, and ability and are typically less racially mixed. Interview participants used parallel color- and gender-blind discourses to diminish the significance of ascribed identities and emphasize the importance of character and work ethic. However, an uneasy balance is struck between the meritocratic ideology of TKD, which attempts to be both color- and gender-blind, and the warrior fantasies of martial arts which are steeped in patriarchal assumptions.

**Part 2: Contradictions in Hegemonic Masculinity**

Although my interview participants claim to be “gender-blind,” considering gender irrelevant to children’s participation in taekwondo, they also value traits historically associated with masculinity and men (e.g., self-control, toughness, strength, leadership). In this section I explore two contradictory aspects of the masculine ideal—professionalism and warrior myths—within the context of children’s taekwondo (see pg. 74 for a chart outlining this division). First, I define hegemonic masculinity and summarize Connell’s concept of crisis tendencies. Next, having described the ideals of professionalism and concerted
cultivation in the first section of the thesis, I return to the theory of concerted cultivation to illustrate how the patriarchal values of professionalism become encoded in concerted cultivation as practiced in TKD. Then, I review previous literature on warrior myths and the significance of the body in the construction of masculinity. Using my observation of classes at Ling’s Taekwondo, I describe the manifestation of warrior myths in children’s free play and sparring behavior. Finally, I analyze a moment of disruption as two children first learn to spar and the contradictions between the assumptions of warrior myths and professionalism become visible. I argue that the resolution of contradictions between warrior myths and professionalism is a significant function of martial arts as an institution of concerted cultivation.

*Hegemonic Masculinity in Taekwondo*

Using Connell’s (2005) definition, I understand hegemonic masculinity to be a cultural ideal which is broadly seen as deserving of a position of authority and power. This ideal circulates widely and powerful men are in positions to spread and cement the idea that it is good and even necessary for society (e.g., we need heroic men to defend us). The ideal of hegemonic masculinity valorizes characteristics that men are thought to naturally possess. Although these traits may vary culturally and historically, in Western cultures they typically involve strength, rationality, power, control, and authority. Although both women and men and individuals across race, class, and sexual categories may value and seek to display and achieve the characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity, others are more likely to view middle-class, heterosexual, white men’s enactments of hegemonic masculinity as desirable and as markers of authority. Men who approach (or, perhaps more significantly, are socially perceived to approach) the hegemonic ideal gain power in a patriarchal society.
People who are not hegemonically masculine occupy other roles in relation to the power structure including marginalized, subordinate, or complicit masculinities and femininity.

Hegemonic ideals are historically specific, but in a relatively cohesive society (with a clear power structure), there is one dominant version of masculinity. This should not be taken to mean that there is not cultural debate and variation in relation to what constitutes hegemonic masculinity (this is the mechanism of historical change and occurs continuously). Even men who have hegemonic status may not think of themselves in these terms. As Connell writes "'Masculinity,’ to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture” (2005: 71). A man’s sense of himself as masculine, then, is formed in relation to the social ideals of gender, how he feels he compares to the hegemonic ideal and how he differentiates himself from devalued others. This sense of self is fluid and often partially unconscious but visible in the ways in which the men Connell interviews describe themselves. Connell writes, “Masculine gender is (among other things) a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving, certain possibilities in sex. Bodily experience is often central in memories of our own lives, and thus in our understanding of how and what we are” (2005: 52-53). Research has also connected use of space and physical confidence to the performance of gender within children sports and physical play (Guérandel and Mennesson 2007, Hasbrook and Harris 1999, Young 1980). It is these same physical practices in TKD, how children exaggerate a block, how they show confidence sparring, how they run about the floor demonstrating ownership of the space, which demonstrate masculine status.
Connell approaches the complexities within hegemony by introducing the concept of crisis. Crisis tendencies are the tensions, internal inconsistencies, and instabilities, which threaten the legitimacy of the patriarchal gender order. For example, the rise of paramilitary groups and gun cults alongside the rise of women’s growing public presence and rights suggests attempts to regain the legitimacy of patriarchal power structures (Connell 2005, Kimmel 2011). Though the dramatic language of crisis is often connected to efforts by the conservative “men’s movement” to highlight a “crisis of masculinity,” Connell conceives of crisis tendencies as permanent features of patriarchy. Similarly in Kimmel’s (1996) analysis of crisis tendencies in American history, the term “crisis” is used in quotation marks to indicate the shift from the popular meaning. That is, both Connell and Kimmel take great pains to distinguish crisis tendencies from the right-wing notion of “crisis” to mean the feminization of men.

Connell describes the current crisis in patriarchal power relations as the result of contradictions between the “universalizing” logic of modern states and capitalist markets and the persistence of patriarchal inequalities. She writes, “Power relations show the most visible evidence of crisis tendencies: a historic collapse of the legitimacy of patriarchal power and a global movement for the emancipation of women. This is fueled by an underlying contradiction between the inequality of women and men, on the one hand, and the universalizing logics of modern state structures and market relations on the other” (Connell 1995: 85, emphasis in original). This crisis within the gendered accumulation process, between the universalizing market and patriarchal power, is resolved by connecting the development of the ideal professional with the development of the ideal man. However the “ideal man” has long gained legitimacy by claiming physical superiority and other traits
unassociated with professional positions. For example, the Boy Scouts of America was founded in 1910 amid fears that processes of urbanization and modernization were stripping boys and men of strength and leadership skills. Though the Boy Scouts have since attempted to modernize, for example adopting merit badges like robotics, fingerprinting, and game design, the original intent of the program was to protect boys from the “moral degradation” of urban life (Kimmel 2011). In contrast to the original purpose of the Boy Scouts, which supported an idealized notion of masculinity defined in direct contrast to women through their exclusion, children’s taekwondo supports an ideology of equal opportunity and meritocracy teaching boys and girls to cultivate professional and warrior traits.

Professional Masculinity and Concerted Cultivation

To the extent that concerted cultivation prepares children for a professional career, it also embraces masculine standards of professionalism. Previous research has documented how the idealized components of masculinity (e.g., rationality, emotional control, and heterosexuality) are encoded in professional norms (Acker 1990, Dellinger 2004). Most workplaces reflect a hegemonic value on hierarchical advancement and particularly reward stereotypically male abilities involving technical expertise, money management, and leadership over jobs involving social skills and emotion work (Acker 1990, Hochschild 2012). As Acker (1990) points out, the concept of the “job” itself implies a separation of work and family life, which is based in a gendered division of labor. The ideal worker is implicitly a heterosexual male supported by a stay-at-home wife and therefore free of familial responsibilities (Stone 2008). Dellinger describes the “ideal” worker as “rational, objective, heterosexual, and male. He is able to separate his work life from his personal life so the non-work distractions are kept to a minimum. He is not ideologically invested in his
work and can therefore keep his personal beliefs out of the workplace and his mind on the bottom line” (2004: 546). Concerted cultivation embraces the same values. Children whose parents practice concerted cultivation learn that rationality and logic (not emotional appeals) are the appropriate interaction with adults (Lareau 2003). Heavy emphasis is placed on children’s ability to advance and/or compete (Freidman 2014, Lareau 2003). Parents (specifically mothers) carry much of the responsibility for supporting children’s extra activities (just as employers assume wives support husbands at work).

In the first section of this thesis, I described the “gender-blind” ideology of TKD. Girls and boys in taekwondo are held to roughly the same standards of advancement but the values of the institution are associated with masculinity. In classes children are held to the professional standards of focus and concentration, encouraged to leave aside concerns from outside the school (or by analogy the workplace). At tournaments and testings children’s behavior is expected to be composed and controlled even under pressure (e.g., sitting still, no emotional outbursts). Finally, if belt rank provides social recognition of hard work, only hard work that leads to advancement is recognized (much like professional work is valued over house work). The ideology of meritocratic advancement, central to both professionalism and concerted cultivation, is predicated on the idea of an equal starting point, which ignores existing inequalities. The professional ideology of meritocratic advancement is what Connell refers to as the “universalizing logic of the market place,” a logic which presents the masculine ideal as universally desirable and even equitable (i.e., available to both men and women). Martial arts combine this universalizing logic of meritocratic advancement with prevalent warrior myths and masculine ideals of physical strength, aggression, and independence.
Warrior Myths and the Body in Martial Arts

In addition to the values of professionalism and concerted cultivation, taekwondo cultivates children’s appreciation for warrior aspects of martial arts, which sometimes conflict with the values of professionalism. Donohue (1994) analyzes the idealized notions of martial arts heroes that appear within American popular culture and martial arts institutions. American movies and television are replete with images of warrior heroes: cowboys, frontiersmen, private eyes, Special Forces, superheroes, police investigators, and martial artists. Asian martial arts traditions such as Samurai and Shaolin Kung Fu are often adapted for use in Western warrior narratives where light skinned heroes eschew traditional values like obedience (Samurai and Kung Fu) and Buddhism (Shaolin Kung Fu) (Donohue 1994).

There is, of course, a great deal of variety within these narratives, but Donohue identifies three key commonalities which he terms the “warrior myth.” The archetypal warrior is first an expert fighter. Second, the warrior is a marginal figure in society operating individually (or with an independent team) and often in conflict with superiors. Third, the warrior is a moral, righteous character. Warrior myths feature heroic men who triumph based on physical prowess and moral strength, but the warrior myth also serves an important social function by perpetuating “the notion that the sometimes violent impulses of individualism (and I would add male dominance) are, in a way, an integral part of social life” (Donohue 1994: 66).

Jordan and Cowen (1995) working without reference to Donohue, developed a similar concept termed “warrior narratives,” but incorporated a range of narratives outside of American culture, as part of a globalized West. Warrior myths take a variety of forms but are nonetheless a historical phenomenon that supports Western ideas of masculinity including values of self-reliance, physical strength, and restricted emotional expression. Martial arts, as
an aspect of the warrior myth, also reinforce the subordination of women and marginalized men by justifying certain characteristics associated with male dominance as necessary for the greater good.

Through studies of adults in American ninjutsu and karate schools, Donohue illustrates how the martial arts embrace the lone warrior myth, but also manage the excesses of warrior independence with carefully structured ritual controls. While Donohue’s findings were mostly corroborated by my observations at Ling’s Taekwondo, there were two differences at my site. First, Donohue describes higher levels of physical discomfort, which are not present in children’s classes at Ling’s Taekwondo. For example, Donohue writes “Even in a dojo where fighting is not encouraged, sparring of one type or another is an integral element in training, and bruises, contusions, and sprains are inevitable” (Donohue 1994: 81). Of course Ling’s TKD has the occasional bumps and bruises but it’s not the defining feature of the classes, and children in the Little Dragons’ and beginning Juniors’ classes do not (yet) spar at all. Martial arts, in general, range in scale of physical danger from boxing, mixed martial arts, and krav maga to young children’s programs (such as the Little Dragons’ class) which avoid physical contact altogether. Safety concerns are definitely elevated when children are involved in the training, but the process of creating less violent martial arts should be seen as more than just the watering down of more intense martial arts.

The ideology of safety-conscious, child-friendly taekwondo is part of a larger social phenomenon of concerted cultivation. As we saw in the introductory quote (from pg.1), Mr. Ling doesn’t just rein in Kyle’s exuberant discussion of fighting; he encourages “concentration,” redirecting Kyle towards mental efforts in line with concerted cultivation. Instruction in mental skills of concentration, memorization, and attention to detail is an
important motivation for enrolling an ADHD-diagnosed child (like Kyle) in taekwondo, and more significantly, an attempt to cultivate a particular mental quality.

Secondly, while previous research has noted that martial arts often cultivate a mental state sometimes related to “enlightenment” or “mysticism,” Ling’s Taekwondo is singularly secular, practices no meditation or chanting, and rarely even discusses martial arts philosophy (Donohue 1994, Nitta 2010, Skidmore 1991). The tenets and student oath recited at the beginning of classes are the chief method of teaching martial arts philosophy, yet the parents I interviewed were not aware of the tenets before they began classes. Several of the children had trouble remembering the tenets when I asked about them. The one parent I interviewed who had come to particularly appreciate the tenets felt that children needed more instruction to understand the tenets. Other parents valued the tenets in a general sense, but did not differentiate between the ethical codes of different martial arts like Karate, suggesting that the specific tenets were unimportant. The mental focus taught at the school is not a spiritual or ethical instruction but an aspect of professional masculinity, a skill parents engaging in concerted cultivation hope to encourage in their children.

Yet TKD is also a physical sport which involves structured “combat” (i.e., sparring) and tests of physical prowess such as board breaking, kicking drills, push-ups. Physical fighting ability—the ability to use the body as a weapon—is perhaps the central requirement of warrior myths. In the effort to understand how men maintain dominance despite internal contradictions in hegemonic masculinity (i.e., professionalism and warrior myths), we can draw on Connell’s analysis of the body, and in turn on the broader literature surrounding the gendered meanings of the body within martial arts. Connell understands the body as socially constructed, but also socially constructing, meaning the body is both an agent and an object
of gendered practice. In 2005, Crossley introduced the concept of reflexive body techniques, or bodily techniques whose primary function is to operate to modify the body, and since then the concept has been repeatedly applied to the martial arts. Crossley’s reflexive body techniques bear comparison to Connell’s analysis, but where Connell focuses on a body/self-identity dialectic Crossley’s dialectic involves bodily actions modifying the body. For example, Connell’s term “reflexive body techniques” includes a man engaging in sexual encounters and in the process developing a new understanding of what his body responds to sexually and what bearing that has on his identity. But Crossley focuses on bodily techniques whose primary purpose is to modify the body such as exercise. Both concepts help explain why rituals which involve the body play such a powerful role in the formation of gender identity. Spencer describes body callusing in MMA (mixed martial arts) as a form of reflexive body technique. He writes, “it is not the aesthetic composition of the body, but what a body can do” that signifies (masculine) status within MMA (2009: 138).

Although these forms of martial arts (MMA and krav maga) are much more intense and physically taxing than children’s taekwondo, as martial arts they share certain commonalities.

The physicality of martial arts practices creates a particularly salient site to observe the construction of gender identities. Often without changing conscious beliefs or opinions, sports like martial arts can change how individuals feel physically: how they move, how they react instinctively and so on. Where an individual might reject a particular ideology of gender if made explicit, physical habits become engrained in behavior without conscious awareness (Cohen 2010, Connell 2005, Crossley 2005, Samimian-Darash 2012, Spencer 2009). For example, in an ethnographic study of an Israeli counter-terrorism unit, Samimian-
Darash (2012) found that, after repeated exposure to violence, trainees developed a sense of themselves as capable of committing violence. The training program focused not on convincing soldiers of the value of extreme force, but on developing a sense of the body as capable of withstanding attack, capable of getting punched and not fainting, and continuing to fight when exhausted. Once the instinctive violent response was engrained, soldiers worried about its effect on their behavior in non-combat situations and with their families.

Within taekwondo, children develop a conception of their body as capable of board breaking and sparring. Sometimes children require an adjustment period while learning to spar. They may initially resist striking their sparring partners, or, on rare occasion, refuse to finish a match by running away or crouching down in a defensive position. A similar process of adjustment occurs with board breaking. Dean talked about how excited his daughters, Sammy and Elle were when they first watched board breaking at a TKD birthday party. As he described it, Sammy and Elle were surprised “just that people could do that with their bodies. They’re used to, if you’re going to break something, you have to use a tool and then to see that you could use your body as that tool, I think that they were kind of surprised by that.” Learning forms also requires learning to follow a series of techniques from procedural memory (e.g., relying on muscle memory, instead of thinking through each step). In these ways children who are long-term students of taekwondo learn new physical responses and adopt new understandings of their abilities, with implications for their enactment of gender. As Crossley (2005) argues, reflexive bodily practices serve to reshape the body and change individuals’ perceptions of themselves and their capabilities. Connell’s and Crossley’s theories suggest that the practices of taekwondo alter children’s bodies as agents in gender formation. As children develop a new sense of their bodies as capable of combat, board
breaking and martial arts, children also adopt a new sense of their body more in line with the ideal of hegemonic masculinity.

Where Connell and Crossley focus on the body as simultaneously an agent and an object of gender performance, an alternative theoretical tradition focuses on the body as an expressive signifier (e.g., Bourdieu 1990; Schwalbe 2014; Schwalbe and Shay 2014), raising questions of how children’s martial arts classes affect the most immediately visible aspects of gender performance such as physical appearance, presence, and bodily comportment. I argue that children’s taekwondo as an institution of concerted cultivation encourages a form of “expressive habitus” (Schwalbe and Shay 2004) that enables children (boys and girls) to signify valuable characteristics associated with masculinity.

The concept of expressive habitus derives from Bourdieu’s theory of habitus. Habitus is a learned system of thoughts, tastes, beliefs, and interests that collectively make up an individual’s general disposition and allow individuals to indicate class position. For example concerted cultivation encourages aspects of professional habitus including academic skills and an ability to navigate institutional hierarchies. Schwalbe and Shay (2004) define “expressive habitus” as the embodied and expressive elements of individual style. They write: “Bodies…signify by virtue of their size, shape, and color. Here we have pointed to the socially patterned conditioning of bodies at the levels of neural pathways and muscle memory, a conditioning that engenders an expressive habitus” (2014: 171). An individual’s expressive habitus signifies information about identity, for example speaking with a certain accent or using certain words may indicate a position in the working-class. Expressive habitus includes relatively stable physical conditions (e.g., height or skin color), adjustable physical conditions (e.g., muscle memory and conditioning), and a variety of other aspects of
style and self-presentation (e.g., speech, dress, behavioral habits). The effects of expressive habitus are not limited to class, which was Bourdieu’s original focus, but have implications for the construction of gendered selves. Because habitus is often unconscious and gradually learned, most men signify manhood without conscious awareness of any deliberate construction of self (Schwalbe 2014).

Within children’s taekwondo we see the institutional cultivation of a particular habitus which parents hope will support children’s professional advancement. For example, Emma’s father, James appreciated how TKD taught her to confidently perform in front of an audience, a skill which might be considered a part of the expressive habitus of the professional middle-class. At the same time, Emma is learning aspects of a masculine expressive habitus, especially through sparring and board breaking. Emma’s father connected these new physical abilities with the sense of confidence he felt his daughter had developed as a result of taekwondo. It is important to note that the adoption of expressive habitus, like bodily reflexive practices, is not typically a conscious process and is only partially under the individual’s control. An emphasis on the power of the unconscious is common to both the theories of expressive habitus and bodily reflexive practices. For example, Samimian-Darash’s (2012) study on the bodily reflexive practices which led soldiers trained in krav maga to more instinctively violent responses could also be considered an example of training in a masculine expressive habitus. However, my interview participants emphasized those aspects of physical expression which individuals could control and took great efforts to deemphasize the importance of the categorical and relatively stable aspects of expressive habitus like skin color, height, and sex.
The meritocratic ideology described in the first half of the thesis exemplifies parents’ discomfort with the importance of the body and ascribed characteristics (particularly race and gender) in attributions of professional competence. Instructors at Ling’s Taekwondo school take special efforts to teach aspects of expressive habitus ranging from normative etiquette (e.g., how to address authorities) to self-confidence (e.g., ways to imagine oneself hitting through the board) to direct demonstrations of power in martial arts techniques (e.g., ways to add power to one’s techniques). By focusing on these cultivatable aspects of expressive habitus, parents and instructors shift the attention from categorical aspects of identity including gender and race to support a meritocratic achievement ideology. However, meritocratic optimism, which denies the significance of categorical aspects of identity (i.e., race, class, gender), does nothing to make habitus conscious or make visible the processes of gender accountability (e.g., how others hold an individual accountable for a particular performance of gender). More than simply not encouraging a consciousness about gender accountability, children’s taekwondo as an institution of concerted cultivation takes accountability out of the hands of individuals by encoding gender norms in the institutional curriculum and criteria for advancement. Whereas Lareau understood concerted cultivation as the transmission of class status through parents’ styles of childrearing, this perspective highlights the institutional cultivation of a professional habitus that involves class and gender aspects.

Becoming a Ninja: Warrior Myths in Children’s Taekwondo

I took this title from the father of one student who when describing his son said “all he wants to do right now is become a ninja.” Although warrior myths are rarely directly discussed during classes, warrior fantasies are evident in the way children and adults
understood the physical requirements of taekwondo as cultivation of a desired self.

Taekwondo classes center around a series of individual physical challenges, such as one-on-one sparring, board breaking, and forms. Board breaking and sparring in particular introduce controlled levels of physical risk, allowing children to prove themselves. Forms and testing introduce risk less directly by requiring public performance. Warrior myths rest on an assumption that physical ability (usually fighting ability) indicates strength of character; the hero wins the fight because of his desire, conviction, and bravery. In taekwondo the assumption is that as children advance in belt rank and succeed at various physical challenges (e.g., sparring and board breaking), they have proven their character in a similar way.

As the term “myths” implies, warrior masculinity is heavily incorporated into fantasy, particularly in comparison with the practical and success oriented professional masculinity. This is not to diminish in any way the significance or power of warrior myths in constructing masculinity. In fact, particularly with young children, fantasy can be a critically important aspect of identity creation (Thorne 1993). Children’s fantasies about their participation in taekwondo were often visible in their martial arts techniques. As they exaggerate blocks and strikes (sometimes to the determinant of their technique), they appear to be engaged in combat with some imaginary foe. Children often add sound effects to their techniques (e.g., pow, hyah, cha). Children also use the period before class starts for games of physical experimentation, such as jumping on the kick bags, trying to knock over the bags, or playing creative tag games with the target pads. One child in the Little Dragon’s class sticks in my memory. He was meant to be practicing his stances walking in a line, but the exaggerated gestures he performed looked like a Hulk interpretation, stomping the ground and flexing his arms in front of him. Were he asked, I doubt he would articulate this action as
anything other than the requested stances, but I observed a similar pattern in many children’s actions. Boys and girls exaggerated techniques to appear stronger, more powerful, or in combat with an imaginary foe.

Children’s exposure to martial arts is not limited to their taekwondo classes. The families I interviewed consumed martial arts warrior fantasies in the form of movies and TV shows. Some of the kids’ favorites were the “Kung Fu Panda” movies, “Ninja Turtles,” and the “Karate Kid” series. Parents also mentioned their children playing with martial arts themed toys like Ninjago Legos and Ninja Turtle action figures. Some parents monitor their children’s media consumption to prevent them watching more realistic or gory violence, but animated warrior fantasies seem unquestioned. Children themselves provided excited replays of the action scenes. Parents told me they knew the films and TV shows presented unrealistic images of martial arts, but believed media representations of martial arts could also be “motivating.” Several parents talked about encouraging their children to notice particular TKD techniques like knife-hand strikes and side kicks as they occurred within media.

Warrior fantasies may be a cornerstone of American movies and TVs, but they can also be disruptive. I observed boys in taekwondo classes and once during an interview attempting to play fight with their fathers. Meanwhile, the fathers tried to fend off the boys without engaging in a physical contest. During the course of a 45-minute interview, Mr. Sam ordered/asked his son Marc to stop hitting him five separate times. Marc was not aggressivelmente attacking his dad, he was attempting to involve his dad in play and interspersed the light “hits” with hugging, smiling, and nuzzling (rubbing his face and nose against his dad’s side). Under other circumstances, I’ve seen Marc and his dad play fight; Mr. Sam holds Marc upside down, plays at a flurry of jabs and encourages Marc to use bits and pieces of his
TKD training, but here Marc’s behavior was clearly irritating his father. In another case, Sammy’s father, Dean, expressed concern that she enjoyed sparring too much. He described her face when sparring: “grinning of the teeth, the eyes are like focused ready to pounce and I’m a little nervous.” He worries that Sammy might be “a little bit of a bully,” but hopes that taekwondo will serve as an outlet for Sammy’s aggression, preventing her from getting into trouble at home or at school. Finally, although Carl, who described his son, Max, as wanting to be a ninja, was not concerned himself about Max’s warrior fantasies, he told me that Max’s mother worried sometimes. “They’ll [my son and other children] play with their toy swords or whatever and she is aghast.” However Carl believes the sport context makes the violence in TKD more acceptable to his wife. Whereas Carl’s wife might disapprove of violence in other circumstances, she accepts the same acts when situated in a controlled and socially-sanctioned environment. Parents might encourage warrior fantasies in certain circumstances, but in others they struggle to rein in their children’s behavior.

Children’s warrior fantasies have a borderline existence within the school. Children play at warrior fantasies during their free minutes between classes, while standing in line, or putting on sparring gear. Sometimes children push the boundaries of dull class activities adding excitement with sound effects and dramatic actions until instructors reign in their behavior. All the adults I interviewed took it for granted that the fighting aspects of martial arts were an attraction for children (and especially boys). At the same time adults (even those involved in martial arts themselves) hoped to encourage a shift toward adult appreciation of the technical aspects of martial arts. For example, consider Mr. Sam and his son Marc. Marc told me animatedly about “Bird,” a character from Kung Fu Panda: “He (Bird) has a hat like cho (pretending to throw a hat). He throws it and like voom. Zoom. Boom.” Mr. Sam reports
that he encourages Marc to notice martial arts techniques in the animated movies. At the same time, Mr. Sam does not let Marc watch MMA, which he views as too violent. He watches MMA himself, but from “a technical standpoint.” Mr. Sam encourages Marc’s warrior fantasies by endorsing martial arts classes and movies, but also hopes to shift Marc toward an adult appreciation of the martial arts, which is based on valuing “technique” rather than violence. Similarly Mr. and Ms. Ling allow children, waiting for class to start, free range to jump on the kick bags, engage in physical contests (e.g., “bet you can’t make me move my feet”), and tag each other with target pads, but once class starts, the Lings expect children to put aside their play and stick to routinized sequences of techniques (e.g., ten side-kicks on each leg). In this way adults endorse children’s warrior fantasies, but encourage a shift toward a more controlled use of warrior behaviors.

Though every adult I interviewed believed that the fighting aspects of martial arts provided part of the attraction for children, not all the children I observed seemed equally enticed by warrior myths. We can also see children’s enactment of warrior behavior enforced institutionally, particularly surrounding the rituals of sparring. Consider the following example of a discussion after a sparring class:

Mr. Ling has all the boys in the class sitting on the ground in front of him as he gives a speech about the importance of remembering to wear their cups. Emma (the one girl in the class) stands awkwardly off to the side talking with Ms. Ling. Rafat (a talkative little green belt who struggled with sparring today) speaks up telling Mr. Ling that he does not like to kick. Mr. Ling replies that is what they are in taekwondo to learn. He tells Rafat that he must spar to learn to kick and block, but Rafat replies he just likes “to block or to kick but not others to kick.” Rafat asks why someone else can’t block
for him. Mr. Ling shakes his head. “How can someone else block for him when he
is the one sparring?” Finally, flustered, Mr. Ling says that if they don’t want to learn
to spar and kick they should not take taekwondo, they should take dancing, ballet
instead. Mr. Ling repeats this for emphasis and another child snickers, tilts his head in
Rafat’s direction and says “Is he a girl?” Mr. Ling interjects that “many boys take
dancing, many boys are very good [dancers].”

Rafat’s unusual reluctance to spar forces Mr. Ling to articulate expectations which usually
remain implicit. Struggling to explain what are generally accepted standards of behavior
within martial arts, Mr. Ling uses the stigma of ballet to suggest the importance of warrior
behaviors like sparring. One child in the class reinforces the stigma of feminization, teasing
Rafat with the interjection “Is he a girl?” But perhaps most interesting is Mr. Ling’s final
alarmed about-face that “many boys are very good” at dancing. In alignment with the
explicit ideology of gender-blindness at the school and in TKD, Mr. Ling tries to emphasize
that boys and girls can practice either martial arts or ballet, but he clearly lends status to
martial arts and introduces ballet, a particularly feminized activity, to make sparring seem
more appealing. It is not merely Rafat’s status as a male which is in question, but his status as
a particular kind of male, the kind who fights and can take hits, a warrior.

Often parents told me that the classes were an outlet for their children’s
(usually boys’) excessive energy, and that the classes developed their children’s self-
confidence. A mother of two sons told me: “They need to run around. They sit all day in
school.” Another mother told me angrily that their schools cut physical education to one day
a week. Sometimes when boys were “hyperactive” and not following directions, parents,
self-conscious that I was taking notes, apologized for or excused their sons’ behavior. In
some examples, I was told: “Eight-year-old boys right?” “Short attention spans.” “It’s the candy. They had Halloween candy.” “Snow day, they’ve been cooped up the whole day.” Only one of these invokes gender specifically, but all four treat the boys’ inability to follow directions as a result of normative excess energy. To the extent that parents viewed their sons as already possessing a nearly infinite energy sometimes associated with ADHD as with Kyle, the parents already viewed the boys as possessing a particular masculine self. The idea of the rowdy, wild boy who needs sports as an outlet for energy is connected to an understanding of boys as fundamentally different from girls. Parents often commiserated with me about the lack of recess and physical education classes in school, a discussion which, although not explicit, was frequently reminiscent of media debates about how schools underserve boys (Jordan and Cowan 1995, Kimmel 2013, Morris 2012).

The discussion of energy however should not be viewed as separate from the discourse surrounding self-confidence. In fact, it is precisely a harnessing of the physical energy boys already possess which parents assumed would cultivate self-confidence. Parents of sons I interviewed viewed their sons as basically already possessing the physical ability to spar and break boards, but as needing to focus that energy into an ability to succeed. Emma’s dad, in contrast, was quite surprised by her physical ability and Sammy’s father was uncomfortable with her aggression. All three mothers I interviewed debated with themselves about whether, should they become involved in TKD, they would be capable of sparring and board breaking. Ms. Williams and Ms. Ling overcame this initial doubt, but Aary’s mother, Madura, had not yet decided to make the attempt. Of the five fathers I interviewed, three were already involved in TKD and the other two expressed no interest. Mr. Sam (one of the
father’s already involved in TKD) joked about his own folly starting TKD in his forties, but none of the fathers expressed serious concern with their ability to participate in TKD. Board breaking seems a task designed to direct children’s preexisting strength and energy into source of self-confidence. The individual must not hesitate or pull back from the board or the board will not break. If the child pulls back at the last moment, a failed break will hurt, but successful breaks are relatively pain free. The broken board gives children a visual representation of their physical strength. But it is not breaking the board alone that has the potential to build self-confidence, but the association of the physical ability with the hierarchal rank represented by the belt levels. Taekwondo creates an association between physical ability in the face of risk (breaking the board), internal character (self-confidence), and social rank (belt level), which combine to create a desired self as a capable individual warrior deserving of social rank not just because of physical ability, but because of internal (and characteristically masculine) character.

However taekwondo as a form of concerted cultivation also deviates from the warrior myth in significant ways. TKD is generally safe and family friendly. Children rarely compete directly against each other and are encouraged to think of their sparring not as “fighting” but as “sport” or “self-defense.” Taekwondo is highly ritualized and sparring in particular is constrained by very specific rules, not only about legal and illegal strikes, but also about various aspects of decorum. For example, before the round, sparrers bow and tap gloves. The higher belt rank executes the first technique. Also, if an opponent falls, participants stop, back up and do not continue until the opponent bows back in. Contact is expected to be light and some children, especially with unfamiliar sparring partners, will actually take this to an extreme, aiming kicks several inches from their opponent to avoid making any actual contact.
Behavior that violates the formal rules of sparring is denigrated as “street fighting,” a term associated with crime and poverty. Warrior behavior is only sanctioned in specific carefully regulated forms. The concerted cultivation elements of TKD serve as social legitimations for warrior behavior that in other circumstances would be unprofessional.

Parents are confident that martial arts prepares children for professional careers in part because children are learning to combine and balance professional and warrior behaviors. In the beginning of this thesis I discussed the case of Kyle, a seven-year-old taekwondo student who embodied a physical confidence that was visible even as he walked into the school. As Kyle seeks to prove himself capable of physical feats and takes pride in his sparring and board-breaking abilities, he comes to see himself as a capable martial artist and thus of good masculine character. This would be an example of warrior masculinity except for the institutional structure on which Kyle’s sense of himself depends. The judges will declare Kyle a martial artist worthy of higher rank only if he meets a mix of physical and mental standards, which require him to control his own behavior and devote his mind to “focus” on his lessons. Kyle’s sense of himself and his body are dependent on the external structure for praise and reinforcement of the warrior identity. Kyle’s sense of himself in relation to the masculine ideal develops through a series of institutional bodily-reflexive practices (e.g., training in kicks and punches, forms, sparring, and board breaking). The martial artist is a particular kind of warrior myth, in which the individual strength of the fighter is dedicated to a system of highly structured rules and extensive training. As students like Kyle strive for black belts and affirmation of themselves and their bodies as martial artists, they engage with an institution of structured meritocratic advancement. Boys are
encouraged to indulge themselves in warrior fantasies and hyperactive behavior, but at the same time channeled towards professional avenues.

Before I move on from this section, I have included a chart showing the theoretical division I have made between warrior myths and professional masculinity. Hopefully this will make evident the contradictions and tensions (or, to use Connell’s terminology, crisis tendencies) that exist between these two paradigms. I have also laid out the primary ways in which these two aspects of hegemonic masculinity are visible in children’s taekwondo. However I do not mean to present these two aspects of hegemonic masculinity as oppositions or separated binary categories. Instead I view the two (warrior myths and professionalism) as aspects of hegemonic masculinity that exist together, both contradicting and reinforcing each other. The lines between the two aspects are blurred and unclear, as the distinction is an academic imposition, but an imposition which nonetheless brings to light significant tensions within the site.
Table 1: Tensions within Hegemonic Masculinity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Division</th>
<th>Warrior Myths</th>
<th>Professionalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Values physical ability</td>
<td>Values mental abilities and technical training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent/Marginal position</td>
<td>Valued social position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Success is evidence of strong moral character</td>
<td>Success is evidence of training and professional worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proven in combat</td>
<td>Proven by advancing in status, graduating/earning promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heroes are exceptional</td>
<td>Everyone can become a professional with time and effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victory requires risk</td>
<td>Physical safety is paramount</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empirical Examples</th>
<th>Warrior Myths</th>
<th>Professionalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sparring and board breaking</td>
<td>Forms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on physical ability</td>
<td>Emphasis on focus and concentration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only a few become black belts</td>
<td>Everyone can become a black belt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s physical experimentation and play</td>
<td>Belt rank advancement as opposed to competition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Disruption and Contradiction in Children’s Taekwondo**

I have argued thus far that professional masculinity and warrior masculinity are coexisting aspects of hegemonic masculinity within the site of children’s taekwondo, but that they do not exist together without tension. Taekwondo is not without its moments of disruption and conflict, moments when the ideology of taekwondo is caught in contradiction and it is often within these disruptions that the tenuous balance between professional and warrior ideals of masculinity is most present. In this section, I explore an instance of what I
term disruption with the intent to make visible the contradictions between warrior and professional masculinity. The disruption arises as two students learn to spar; this example is a more extreme version of a challenge that is endemic to taekwondo. Students in martial arts must learn new skills, which are quite foreign to their everyday existence. When children try a new technique they tend to judge themselves “good” or “bad” at the moves long before they have had any chance to develop expertise. Given that students are supposed to be simultaneously learning new techniques and building up a sense of the capable self, the possibility of failure is a common threat.

It takes Darben and Sammy (approx. ages 5-7) at least ten minutes to strap on all their unfamiliar pads. Darben and Sammy get along well in class. They are close in age and attend the classes at the same times. Sammy (a girl whose real name is similarly gender neutral) likes having another child near her age to talk with and Darben is almost always smiling and willing to follow Sammy’s lead. Both children have put on their gear before, at least once, but they are new orange belts and are still hesitantly practicing the combos (i.e., set moves done without actual contact). Today will be their first free sparring round. At the command, they bow to each other and tap gloves to start. Ms. Ling hovers near the pair ready to intervene at any moment. It is immediately clear that Darben does not understand what is expected. At first, Darben just stands there letting Sammy land a few kicks. After a pause Darben puts his hands up. After another agonizingly long thirty seconds he starts to add single kicks, pausing between each move and dropping his hands as if returning to a natural standing position. Ms. Ling tries to intervene. “Darben, attack, attack, kick, either punch or kick, defend yourself, kick, punch, punch, move around. Did you see the other high ranking [students] sparring, moving around?” Darben moves very little and ineffectually tries to
block Sammy’s kicks by tapping the footpads rather than sweeping aside her leg. Sammy starts with a few strong moves from her combos, but then as Darben fails to defend himself, Sammy starts to pause between her kicks. “Keep going, keep going you don’t need to wait,” Ms. Ling says, but Sammy’s attacks slack off as she waits for Darben to catch on. Mr. Ling and Ani (another student) have stopped their own activities to watch and shout advice from the side.

Darben’s hesitance to engage in the blocking and attacking behavior, most would consider “natural” was clearly disconcerting for Ms. Ling. Unsure how to handle the situation, she resorts to repeating herself for emphasis. Darben has failed to demonstrate the basic instincts expected by warrior masculinity, a fact that is starkly evident as the girl he is sparring immediately “catches on.” Further, Sammy cannot continue sparring if Darben fails to defend himself, as the purpose of the contest requires both parties’ engagement. Ms. Ling, in keeping with the typical routine, tries to encourage Sammy to continue with the match until the timer goes off after two minutes, but Sammy (consistent with warrior myths) does not want to spar a partner who fails to defend himself. The structure of taekwondo does not provide any particular guidance for handling Darben’s actions. His seeming inability to spar is not a failure to meet requirements (at least not until testing), and is clearly not an active disobedience and therefore merits no particular reprimand, except that the behavior is obviously outside the range of expectations. If we take the assertion of taekwondo and warrior masculinity that physical performance relates to character, Darben it would seem does not have the appropriate mentality for a martial artist. In warrior myths Darben’s behavior is a failure, indicative of lacking courage or strength. Darben has not demonstrated the character of a warrior. Concerted cultivation, in contrast, promises to be able to take any
child and train him or her to a level of competence. Taekwondo’s belt rank system is premised on the idea that skill as a martial artist develops progressively through practice. The logic of concerted cultivation suggests that Darben should, with practice and consistent effort, learn to spar, but warrior myths suggest that his sparring ability is related to internal character. As Darben fails to pick up on sparring, it is apparent that the taekwondo curriculum is premised on baseline assumptions about what abilities a boy should have even before he has any training. Whereas other parents assumed their sons already possessed an excess of energy and aggression, which needed to be channeled, Darben’s behavior disrupted these assumptions by demonstrating that these qualities are not always natural in boys. At the same time Sammy, a girl of approximately the same age, appeared to take quite quickly to sparring, although her efforts were stymied by Darben’s lack of participation.

Despite the potential for such disruptions to emerge, incidents like the scene with Darben happened rarely in my observations. The majority of the time the contradictions between warrior myths and concerted cultivation are obscured. In part this synthesis is possible because warrior myths and concerted cultivation have certain similarities, such as promoting a desire to improve the self, the valuing of tough, emotionally-controlled masculinity, and the positioning of a male ideal self as superior to the other (e.g., those who cannot fight, those who do not hold professional occupations, those of lower rank in the martial arts world). Nonetheless, contradictions and tensions exist. Taekwondo incorporates the independent warrior within an institutional, hierarchical structure, which is more socially controlled and more akin to professional masculinity.
Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

In this thesis, based on fieldwork and interviews, I argue that children’s taekwondo legitimizes the values of hegemonic masculinity—including professional and warrior aspects—within the institutional logic of concerted cultivation. Taekwondo creates an institutional structure through which children can live out warrior fantasies still firmly incorporated in the middle-class social structure and on-track for professional adult life. Children’s taekwondo is a site of concerted cultivation where parents hope children develop academic skills and professional character. Children are taught skills to navigate hierarchy and are taught that responsibility for advancement lies with the individual. The logic of concerted cultivation assumes that with intensive parental effort and appropriate developmental activities, any child can advance. Parents and instructors are insistent that effort and commitment are more significant than ascribed characteristics like race, gender, ability, or age. Parents and instructors invoked color-blind rhetoric, including the frames of abstract liberalism, minimization, and naturalization to explain both racial and gender inequalities. The ideology of meritocracy encourages color- and gender-blindness and an emphasis on individual achievement. By suggesting that institutions of concerted cultivation can support color- and gender-blind ideologies, this thesis adds to the scholarly debate over the role of race and gender in concerted cultivation.

The institution of children’s martial arts balances masculine warrior fantasies and an everyone-is-equal ideology of gender- and color-blind inclusion. Resolving the contradiction between warrior masculinity and professionalism is part of the concerted cultivation parents hope taekwondo will provide, channeling some children’s aggression (more often boys) while encouraging other children (more often girls) to be more assertive. Despite a
commitment to gender-blindness, parents and children draw assumptions about normative masculinity from martial arts media and a gendered discourse of hyperactivity. Though children’s warrior fantasies frustrate adults in some circumstances, warrior fantasies are endorsed and channeled through participation in martial arts. By understanding how two aspects of hegemonic masculinity (warrior myths and professionalism) both contradict and co-exist, we gain a more nuanced view of hegemonic masculinity as a complex and multifaceted ideal. Finally, we see a cultural example of how macro-level social shifts, such as the crisis Connell describes between professional or “universalizing market logics” and patriarchal gender divisions, play out in the micro-level worlds of children’s day-to-day activities.

This research drew specifically from observations of a small martial arts school in a particularly racially heterogeneous locale. Future research could explore the balance of warrior and professional masculinity within other martial arts. For example, the involvement of children in mixed martial arts remains controversial, suggesting that the conflict between warrior myths and concerted cultivation may be more intense in mixed martial arts. The Brazilian martial art, capeoria evolved out of mixing of West African slaves and native Brazilians in the 16th century. The history of capeoria as a martial art of resistance among oppressed groups makes it a potentially interesting comparison to taekwondo as a site of color-blind ideology. Though the more widespread martial arts, taekwondo and karate, are primarily middle-class, research within programs specifically targeted towards the working class could provide insight into how the logic of concerted cultivation operates to reduce or reinforce class divisions. Physical violence has a different role in working class masculinities
suggesting that martial arts may also have a different significance within those communities (Hasbrook and Harris 1999, Ongiri 2002).

This research analyses children’s taekwondo as an institution of concerted cultivation and supports Lareau’s contention that extracurricular activities teach middle-class cultural capital skills. However I add three important additions to Lareau’s theory. First, I contend that concerted cultivation is an importantly institutional process. Second, I explore how the assumptions of concerted cultivation encourage parents’ and children’s belief in meritocratic opportunity. This ideology of meritocracy in turn supports ideologies of color- and gender-blindness. Finally, institutions of concerted cultivation simultaneously socialize children in professionalism and practices of male dominance. Children’s taekwondo in particular cultivates aspects of professional masculinity and warrior masculinity, encouraging a balance between the potentially disruptive excesses of warrior behavior and the potentially demasculinizing or universalizing aspects professionalism. This work contributes to the sociological effort to understand the connections of class, race, and gender inequality.
REFERENCES


Academic Achievement.” *Race, Gender, and Class.* 16(1/2): 25-44.


APPENDICES
Appendix A: Belt Ranks, Tenets, Student Oath, and the TKD Organization

Belt Ranks

Below are the belt ranks in the taekwondo organization which the Lings belong to. Senior belts have a black stripe through the middle and function much the same as the full color ranks (they were added by the organization to allow frequent graduated testings/advancements without rushing the overall time required to earn a black belt). Green belt is the first rank to begin sparring at testing, prior to that white and yellow belt students learn stationary one-steps and orange belts purchase sparring gear and perform moving but pre-set combinations. Brown belt is the first rank required to break boards at testing. A 6th degree black belt or above is considered a master rank. After 6th degree black belt further rank isn’t earned by testing but awarded according to contributions to the organization, generally only school owners advance to this point.
Table 2: Belt Ranks in Ascending Order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colored Belts</th>
<th>Black Belts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Probationary Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Recommended Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Decided Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange Sr.</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Senior Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Sr.</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Decided Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Senior Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple Sr.</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Decided Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Sr.</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Senior Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Sr.</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Decided Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Senior Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Sr.</td>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Decided Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Senior Black Belt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Degree Black Belt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tenets and Student Oath

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenets of Taekwondo</th>
<th>Student Oath</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Courtesy</td>
<td>I will observe the tenets of Taekwondo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>I will respect Instructors and senior students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td>I shall never misuse taekwondo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Control</td>
<td>I will be a champion of freedom and justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indomitable Spirit</td>
<td>I will build a more peaceful world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Taekwondo Organization and the Ownership of Ling’s Taekwondo

Ling’s Taekwondo belongs to a national taekwondo organization which sets standards for testing, certifies instructors, and organizes regional and national tournaments and conferences. Although there are schools in nine states, the majority of the schools are located in Texas and North Carolina. The organizational style approximates ITF taekwondo with hand and foot pads instead of chest protectors, but with some variation in sparring rules and forms. Each school in the organization is owned privately. Mr. Ling started TKD at a larger school and his old instructor helped him open his own school. The two schools still hold
testing events together and a few students attend classes at both schools. Mr. Ling is the chief instructor at the school. His son, Mr. Ling the younger, one of his students, Mr. Sam, and his wife, Ms. Ling work as assistant instructors at the school but defer to his directions during the class. Mr. Ling is a fifth degree black belt and started studying TKD with his son, because he wanted an activity the two of them could do together. Ling’s Taekwondo is now eight years old.
Appendix B: Introductory Email and Interview Guides

Introductory Email Explaining the Study

Dear Taekwondo Families,

My name is Barbara Goldentyer and some of you may have seen me around the Ling’s school where I have been studying for just over a year now. I’m also a graduate student at NC State and this month I’m going to be starting my thesis project. I plan to study children’s taekwondo classes and I will be asking some families for permission to observe their child in class. At a later point I may also approach some families about an interview. All observations and interviews will be kept completely confidential. I’m very appreciative to the Lings for allowing me to conduct my study at our school. I am hopeful that my research will improve our knowledge of children’s taekwondo classes, which I have come to believe can be an important influence on children.

Please feel free to email me at bgolden@ncsu.edu with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Barbara Goldentyer

Interview Guides

For a child, student of taekwondo:

1. General Questions
   a. How long have you been doing TKD?
   b. What do you think about your TKD classes?
   c. Can you tell me about your favorite part of the classes? Least favorite part?
   d. What have you learned from TKD classes?

2. About the class and gender
   a. How do you feel about sparring? Do you ever have trouble remembering the forms? How about board breaking?
   b. What happens when class starts? (Changed to why do you line up in the beginning of classes?)
c. Are you good at TKD? What makes you so good? (Or what makes other kids so good?)

d. Are there girls and boys in classes? Do you think there’s any difference between the boys and girls in how they do TKD? (Added: Do you have any preference sparring a boy or a girl?)

3. About getting/staying involved in TKD?
   a. How did you start TKD?
   b. Have you ever wanted to stop taking TKD classes? Can you tell me about that?
   c. How do you feel about belt testings? Is testing hard? Have you ever failed a testing?

4. Beliefs about martial arts:
   a. Can you pretend I’m someone who doesn’t know anything about TKD, who has never heard of it? Then explain to me what it is?
   b. Do you like martial arts movies? Like Kung Fu Panda? What do you like/not like about them? (Added: Who’s your favorite character?)

For a parent of a taekwondo student:

1. How did you get involved with taekwondo? Who takes classes (you or your child or both)?
   a. How did you pick this school?
   b. Do you have experience with other martial arts?
   c. What were you looking for in a martial arts school?
   d. How long have you/your child been doing TKD?

2. How have the classes been?
a. Do you like them? How does it compare to other sports/extracurriculars?
b. What’s the best part? Worst or hardest?
c. Have you seen any change in (child’s name)?
d. Do you remember why you started (child’s name) in TKD?
e. The belt system seems to be an important part of the experience. What do you think its influence has been?
f. Does (child’s name) spar yet? Was it an adjustment to start sparring?
g. Do you have other children? Would you ever consider enrolling them in TKD?
h. Does (child’s name) have friends that do martial arts?
i. Did you ever experience another martial arts school and if so how does this one compare?

3. What about testing?
   a. Do you think the testing experience adds anything?
   b. Is it stressful?
   c. Has (child’s name) failed a testing and if so what was that like?
   d. Have you been to the awards ceremony? Is it important to have that ceremony?

   Added: Do you think anyone can become a black belt?

4. Some of the issues that sometimes come up about martial arts.
   a. Have you ever had any safety concerns? What were they, why?
b. A lot of parents are concerned about making sure their kids get enough exercise and activity in the day. Was that part of the motivation in taking TKD? Does your child like to be physically active?

c. Some people choose extracurriculars that they think will help their child do well in school. Do you think TKD has influenced (child’s name’s) school progress?

d. Do you think involvement in a martial art will help (child’s name) get a job someday or learn skills for working as an adult?

e. Some people choose martial arts to address discipline. Was that a factor?

f. Some people choose martial arts to address bullying. Was that a factor?

5. About boys/girls. Is it different enrolling a boy or girl in TKD?

   a. If you had a son/daughter instead would you still want him/her in TKD?

   b. Do you think boys/girls have a harder time in class/why?

      (Added question: Why do you think there are more boys than girls in the classes?)

6. Parent’s role. As a parent of a child in TKD, what role do you have? (E.g. getting uniform ready, helping practice, providing encouragement, transporting to practice.)

   a. Is there ever conflict over getting ready or getting to class on time?

   b. Who usually brings (child) to TKD classes? How do you decide?

   c. Does (child) have responsibilities for his/her gear/uniform? Does he/she practice outside of classes?
7. Movies, TV, and books. There are a lot of martial arts movies and TV shows nowadays. Does (child) ever watch them?

a. Did any particular movies change your perception of the martial arts?

b. Do you think movies are realistic now that you’ve been involved in martial arts?

c. If child enjoys martial arts TV/movies, do you ever have to restrict access to things you think might be too violent?

Questions added specifically for instructors:

1. Has teaching TKD changed the way you think about TKD? Has your teaching style evolved over the years?

2. What is the hardest thing about teaching kids TKD? What is the best part of teaching kids TKD?