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Wall to Wall: Examining the Ecology of Racial and Educational Inequality with Research

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Executive Summary

Ours is a world of massive inequality, in terms of both opportunity and the outcomes that shape well-being. We focus in this White Paper on the kinds of inequalities of opportunity (and in some instances, outcomes) that matter within the educational domain. As we proceed, we focus primarily on synthesizing research concerning inequalities of race, ethnicity, class, and to a lesser extent gender and ability, in education and schools.

The body of research on educational inequality is vast; and scholars and researchers approach it from numerous perspectives, disciplines, methodologies, and levels of analysis. A point of convergence is this unavoidable fact: educational inequality endures, and it is highly correlated with specific race, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender backgrounds --or some combination of these—across societies.

Key findings and implications from our synthesis include:

- We do not believe that the greatest possibility of the reduction of educational inequality will occur without society's paying off their "debts" (Ladson-Billings 2006) and attending to the needs of their historically marginalized, minoritized, and economically disadvantaged groups.
- Growth and improvement within social groups, schools and communities are possible. We have attempted to synthesize and highlight how an attainment of ample resources and inputs--materially, culturally, institutionally, and organizationally-- in disadvantaged communities can and will produce greater equity, and even further, enhance democratic society.
- Further, because test scores are largely explained by SES conditions in families and schools, we suggest that the educational research community could broaden the scope and meanings of "success". How might students' educational trajectories be shifted if researchers discontinued the use of tests as the main signifiers of their success, and instead focused more deeply on the resources – material and non-material – that matter most for sustainedacademic engagement and overall well-being?
- Finally, successful schools with a majority of minoritized youth exist across societies. We must inquire more deeply about and seek to emulate--to the extent possible-- societies, states, districts, and schools where the highest performances among minoritized youth occur. What lessons might the United States learn from other countries, not only where best practices are concerned, but also as it concerns the institutional design of other state school systems?

In sum, inequality itself is multi-faceted and complex, yet so too are the approaches and strategies needed to tackle it. We must be open to a variety of pragmatic strategies if the status quo is to be altered. At the same time our conclusions are sobering. Indeed, significant reductions in educational inequality will be difficult to achieve given a number of principled and practical challenges, not least of which the difficulty of recruiting quality teachers to the profession, and the constitutional freedom parents enjoy to choose an education they think best for their own child.

Keywords: Inequality, equity, race, ethnicity, class, Black education, educational policy

Wall to Wall: Examining the Ecology of Racial and Educational Inequality with Research

Inequality in Society and Education

Ours is a world of massive inequality, in terms of both opportunity and the outcomes that shape well-being. Its scope spans hemispheres, nation-states, regions, provinces, neighborhoods, and families. The relevant mechanisms driving inequality are formidably complex, its origins and consequences distressingly comprehensive and enduring, and the solutions stubbornly elusive. War and genocide, conquest and enslavement, past and contemporary manifestations of xenophobia and exclusion, and contested rights of citizenship characterize collectively modern capitalist societies. Prior deep, historical seeds of White supremacy, patriarchy, religious intolerance, poverty, and other forms of exclusion either laid the foundation or germinated and spread. In short, inequality and its attendant consequences of educational and academic disparities have a deep and wide reach across time and place. Taken together, these phenomena have motivated researchers to focus on the multiple strands of inequality—each strand is inherently complex, with intersectional features that continue to frustrate efforts towards its mitigation.

Inequality of opportunity[1] corresponds with myriad social categorizations—class, disability, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, to name a few—that subsequently correspond to structural barriers that unfairly disadvantage persons (Barry, 2005; Scanlon, 2018; Sen, 1992; Sher, 2014). Studies of social and political conditions across cultural contexts reveal how unequal (and unjust) the outcomes can be for those with darker skin; who have an ethnic surname; who express their sexual identities as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGBT); who belong to a minority religion; who come from working–class parents; or who speak a second "low status" language at home. Yet, the fact is that the value attached to any one of these can, and often does, have a profound impact on the lives of these minoritized "others" as they navigate educational and other environments. Inequalities of opportunity, therefore, become morally relevant when society constructs certain differences as "superior" versus "inferior," "desirable" versus "undesirable," or "better" versus "worse," such that certain attributes or social identities more favorably align with the opportunity structures of society.

[1] In this paper, we focus primarily on "inequality of opportunity," which is distinguishable from "inequality of outcomes," or the unequal spread of resources and results attributable in part to the span of individual characteristics and traits that are valorized by society. For instance, some individuals are born taller, faster, or have a natural proclivity for certain talents that yield certain economic advantages in certain contexts such as professional sports and arts.

In this White Paper, we focus on the kinds of inequalities of opportunity (and in some instances, outcomes) that matter within the educational domain. This is a daunting undertaking, in part because it remains virtually impossible to disentangle the features of educational inequality from the broader social, cultural, and economic forces that create and sustain it. There is no dearth of research addressing educational inequality. Indeed, we now know a great deal about both its causal and correlational features (Carter & Reardon, 2014; Carter & Welner, 2013; Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Jencks, 1988; Neckerman & Torche, 2007); and the analyses for educational inequality studies include macro, meso, and micro levels (Carter, 2018), and further encompass structural, community and family, and individual-level factors, akin to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) seminal theory about the "ecology of human development." Multiple domains of society determine the reproduction of both inequality and the distribution of resources, as well as the overall well-being of individuals.

Some large-scale (or big data) studies incorporate predictors or determinants of inequality from each of these levels, although our depth of understanding concerning their actual nature and causal functions is more limited. For example, a recent national study examined tax and census records of over 20 million individuals born between 1978 and 1983 in the United States to document intergenerational mobility between parents and their offspring. Based on this age cohort, economists Raj Chetty et al. (2018) have found that living in "opportunity-rich neighborhoods"—with less residential segregation, less income inequality, better primary schools, greater social capital, and greater family stability—increases people's chances for greater intergenerational mobility. Further, the levels of economic opportunity in metropolitan areas where children are raised shape mobility patterns. They find that children born into the bottom quintile of household incomes in San Jose, California, for instance, have a higher chance of moving up multiple rungs of the mobility ladder than their peers born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in large part due to the variation in the constellation of employment, poverty, and other material conditions in these cities.

At the same time, however, Chetty and colleagues (2018) also found that living in opportunity-rich neighborhoods, though impactful, is insufficient to close fully intergenerational mobility gaps by race—especially between Black and White males. Across the United States, even Black males raised in affluent families and communities fare relatively worse than their White counterparts (see also Brooks, 2009; Lacy, 2007; Ogbu, 2003; Pattillo, 2015). This suggests that other systemic forces such as racism and incarceration neutralize (see more below) the power of exposure to better economic resources in families and neighborhoods (cf. Alexander, 2011; Moore, 2017). Theirs is an example of how structural-level forces, such as historically entrenched racial hierarchies and the cross-generational socioeconomic features of communities and families, profoundly influence both the opportunities and long-term economic impact of children and youth.

Meanwhile, at both the meso and micro levels, we know that school features often compound the problems historically disadvantaged ethno-racial and poor or low-income communities already face. Cumulatively, sorting and selection procedures via ability grouping and tracking (Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Hallinan & Williams, 1989; Ireson et al., 2005; Lucas, 1999; Tyson, 2011), restricted access to informational networks and social capital (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995), a culture of deficit thinking (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Gilborn, 2010), low teacher expectations (Castro Atwater, 2008; Harry & Klingner, 2014; McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Verkuyten et al., 2019), curricular erasure (Banks & Banks, 2003; Cornbleth & Waugh, 2012; Loewen, 1995; St. Denis, 2011), and zero-tolerance behavioral policies (Browne-Dianis, 2011; Martinez, 2009) serve to further penalize those whose prospects were already dim, the outcome of which is all too often a familiar tale of educational failure (Downey & Condron, 2016; Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Liu, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2015).

Finally, at the micro-level we attend to the attitudinal and relational features of inequality. Over the last two decades, three concepts to gain the strongest currency in social psychology and education are "stereotype threat," a concept popularized by social psychologist Claude Steele (1997); "growth mindset" and its flip side, "fixed mindset," are concepts ushered into common researcher and practitioner vocabulary by Steele's Stanford University colleague, Carol Dweck (2008); and "grit," a concept popularized by MacArthur Fellowship award winner and psychologist Angela Duckworth (2016). Though Steele's stereotype threat encapsulates the impact of harder-to-measure contextual or structural forces related to group-based inequality, Dweck's mindset and Duckworth's grit concepts tend to focus more on the intra-individual, or how students, parents, and teachers can change their perceptions and how they engage in academic settings.

Next, we offer an assessment of other types of micro- and individual-level arguments that other researchers and theorists argue shape educational inequality. Arguably, one of the most vexing challenges of educational inequality is the limited political will to construct equitable practices in schools and communities, especially if it demands that local resources are shared or allocated disproportionately with economically marginalized students and their families. One of us has argued elsewhere (Carter, 2012, 2017, 2018) that although we are fully aware of the drivers of much (educational) inequality in society, "opportunity hoarding"—and limited consciousness about sharing resources with other people's children for equity's sake (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Rury & Rife, 2018; Tilly, 1998; Wells & Serna, 1996)—combine with the continual reproduction of deficit narratives and stereotypes about the unworthiness and cultural deprivation of select ethno-racial, poor, and working-class individuals (Katz, 1989). Altogether, these forces undermine the realization of any full implementation of social, economic, and educational interventions.

As we proceed, we focus primarily on research concerning inequalities of race, ethnicity, class, and to a lesser extent gender and ability, in education and schools. We realize that other inequalities threaten, and sometimes even thwart, the well-being of individuals in schools, and communities daily around the globe; we do not disclaim either their power or salience. Moreover, from our analyses we conclude that the policy and practice solutions for equitable educational spaces need not fall victim to an either-or mentality. Rather, we argue, scholars, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers need to step back and take the time to understand that multidimensional educational problems of inequality require multidisciplinary and multidimensional solutions (Carter, 2018). This multifocal approach further entails that some of the most effective solutions available to us require that we are also amenable to pursuing pragmatic alternatives, when our preferred strategies either cannot be attained or implemented (Merry, 2020).

Educational Inequality: Demographics, Test Scores, and Big Data

Researchers have documented the kinds and degrees of inequality within the educational domain for a long time in both the United States and elsewhere (e.g., Attewell & Newman, 2010). Over the past 60 years, a virtual avalanche of studies has documented institutionalized inequalities that track closely with socioeconomic, racial and ethnic status, first-language advantage, gendered differences, and (dis) ability. The features of educational inequality include, but are not limited to, school financing; chronic teacher shortages; discrepancies in instructional quality; early selection for high school tracks; biased teacher expectations and recommendations; high teacher and administrator attrition rates; disproportionate learning disability labelling and low track assignment for stigmatized minority groups (males in particular); inequitable rates of discipline and suspension; and more.

Many prior studies of educational inequality have based their findings on relatively small probabilistic samples or case studies. Recent years have ushered in an era of big data studies that examine full or near-full populations of districts, schools, communities, and families, in addition to new methodological techniques. In what arguably has become the largest educational research data set since the release of the 1966 Coleman Report, Stanford sociologist Sean Reardon and his colleagues at the Educational Opportunity Project have put together a dataset of all public-school districts in the United States (more than 11,000), comprising over 200 million test scores and records. Their key findings are that Black–White and Hispanic–White achievement disparities persist across the United States.

They also found that the family, school district, and metropolitan area socioeconomic contexts are the most significant predictors of achievement disparities (i.e., test-score differences) among social groups by race and ethnicity; and finally, that metropolitan areas comprising school districts with large racial-socioeconomic disparities and segregation have the widest achievement disparities.

As in many other countries, the racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. public school population is changing rapidly. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, public elementary and secondary school enrollment increased from 47.2 million to 50.4 million between Fall 2000 and Fall 2015 and is projected to continue increasing to 52.1 million in fall 2027 (the last year for which projected data are available). In 1972, 22% of public-school students in the United States were students of color. Today, they constitute 51% of the public-school student enrollment. White student enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools decreased from 61 to 49% between 2000 and 2015; and so did the percentage of Black students, from 17 to 15%. In contrast, the proportion of Hispanic/Latinx students has increased from 16 to 26%, and Asian/Pacific Islander from 4 to 5% during this time period. The percentage of students enrolled in public schools who were American Indian/Alaska Native remained around 1% from 2000 to 2015. National projections reveal that by Fall 2027, White student enrollment in public schools will continue to drop to 45%; the Hispanic/Latinx student percentage will increase to 29%, and Asian/Pacific Islander to 6%. Black and American Indian/Alaska Native student percentages in 2027 are projected to remain at 15 and 1%, respectively.

The birth and immigration of children of foreign-born parents from Mexico and Central America will account for the significant rise in the U.S. Hispanic/Latinx population. In 2017, more than half (54%) of all immigrant children were of Hispanic origin, compared with 14% of non-immigrant children. Immigration from China and India—the two sending countries of the student populations with the fastest rates of immigration to the United States—account for the increased rates of Asian youth in the public-school systems. Non-Hispanic Asian children made up 17% of all first- and second-generation immigrant children in 2017. In the same year, 16% of all immigrant children were non-Hispanic White, and 9% were non-Hispanic Black. To date, one in four children in the U.S. today is the child of immigrants, with at least one immigrant parent. Notably, nearly 90% of these “immigrant” children are second-generation. Many, though not all, immigrant youth will likely live in either poverty or low-income households.

Poverty and Schooling

Schools serving high concentrations of students with limited socioeconomic means, low overall parent education, and limited proficiency in the dominant language of schools and society face challenges that frequently make academic success and mobility extremely difficult (Berliner, 2013). To counter these patterns, schools with high concentrations of students from low-SES backgrounds across the nation receive additional federal funding from Title I, the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and other state categorical grants. Further, over the past several decades a variety of other programs and services have been added to the local school's list of provisions: free breakfast and lunch programs, school nurses, physical education equipment, computers, translators, security, enrichment and after-school programs, and a wide variety of special education staff.

Outside of these schools, too, several means-tested programs have been in place for decades, including Head Start for preschool children, food assistance programs for low-income families, and Section 8 housing vouchers in some regions. The institutional supports for schools do not stop there. Many school districts across the United States have launched pilot projects to reduce class size by constructing additional classrooms and hiring additional staff. Other districts have introduced incentives to attract more qualified and experienced teachers to struggling districts. Behind each of these efforts is the idea that stronger fiscal investments in education, both inside and outside of school, will go some distance in leveling the playing field (Baker et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Jackson, 2016, 2018).

While many wealthy districts far outspend poorer ones, in other cases the opposite occurs. Several states across the United States, not to mention in many other countries, allocate funding based on need (Ladd, 2008). The result is that a great number of high-poverty school districts in fact receive more funding, and schools are at liberty to spend the money as they think best. Yet even when per pupil spending is comparatively greater—as it is in several cities with high-poverty rates including Washington, D.C.; Camden and Newark, New Jersey; and Buffalo, New York—new buildings, libraries, computer labs, not to mention athletic equipment, extra staff, and security do not typically translate into equalized performance rates (as measured by test scores and graduation rates). At the same time, however, some have documented trends of significant growth in learning rates for those districts that have attended to their students' specific resource needs, for example, districts such as Union City and Newark, New Jersey and Chicago, Illinois (Kirp, 2015).[2] These districts that serve some of the most disadvantaged student populations have shown noticeable progress of student growth in performance, elevating themselves from some of the worst-performing to among the better-performing districts in terms of annual growth. Although they have not escaped the red zones of significant achievement disparities, compared to their more affluent peer districts, many schools and districts exhibit what it is possible to do when key investments in high-quality preschool education are combined with strong teacher preparation and support for English language learners (ELLs), bilingual instruction, as well as a strong culture of learning, caring, and support for both students and staff. In other words, we note that as crucially important as institutional supports are, financial resources on their own remain insufficient to reduce educational disparities dramatically.

The Enduring Significance of Race in Academic & Test-Score Achievement

Critics of the equal and compensatory funding "solution" for the reduction of educational inequality rest their arguments on enduring "achievement gaps"—mainly defined as significant racial test score differences (e.g., Hanushek, 2020). We do not deny that many studies (e.g., Reardon et al., 2019) still uncover persistent racial test-score differences across the nation's school districts, after controlling for a host of socioeconomic factors at both the district and family levels. Still, we argue that quantitative researchers with large study designs have yet to expand the calculus in their assessment of educational inequality to include independent variables such as bias, racism, stigma, and cultural erasure. Indeed, because these phenomena are not observable using instruments like test scores, too often, such researchers have treated these either as insignificant or non-generalizable, or else simply not relevant to how we talk about educational inequality. Large-scale studies, which many rely on for generalizability, do not (or likely, cannot), capture the full social, cultural, political, and psychological realities of historically oppressed ethno-racial groups. Meanwhile, ethnographers and other types of qualitative researchers (e.g., Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Tyson, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999), and social scientists from a range of fields, including experimental social psychology (Eberhardt, 2020; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Steele, 1997), have long observed the significance of racial bias and stereotypes on achievement.

Furthermore, many of the "representative" studies use composite indicators for the socioeconomic status of families and communities. Yet, they have not been able to account for wealth disparities between groups—a phenomenon that has garnered more attention in the past few years. For instance, Oliver and Shapiro (2006), and more recently Darity and Hamilton (2018), have increased our awareness of the significant racial disparities in the average net worth. The median White adult who has attended college has 7.2 times more wealth than the median Black adult who has attended college, and 3.9 times more wealth than the median Latinx adult who has attended college.

[2] See also Badger and Quely (2017).

More disturbingly, Black and Latinx college graduates have significantly less wealth than White *high school* graduates do, and in the case of Black college graduates, significantly less than White high school *dropouts*. Darity and Hamilton argue that the reduction of wealth gaps by families will reduce (educational) inequality more than simply equalizing incomes will.[3]

Understandably, much research maintains the critical need to address students', districts', and schools' socioeconomic (SES) contexts with policy and interventions, especially because of the correlation of SES with educational outcomes such as test scores, course placements, graduation and college-going rates—all key determinants of long-term economic well-being and productivity (Johnson, 2019). At the same, however, we would argue that the features of inequality are more complex: first, the conceptualization of the problems and mechanisms to attain educational equity have been narrow. That is, we argue, scholars and researchers should expand how we theorize causes and explanations and include a variety of neglected factors of consideration. The same can be said also for the methods many researchers rely on to measure both educational inequality and school success.

On Test Scores & the Creation of Richer, Big-Data Studies

Test scores have long informed the tacit beliefs many have about intelligence and academic success; and, in turn, policymakers have used them to allocate rewards and benefits that disproportionately correspond to the hierarchies of race, ethnicity, and social class. Meanwhile, the full scope of reliable and valid determinants of test-score outcomes has not entirely been accounted for, as suggested by Darity et al. (2018), among other research on wealth disparities (Conley, 2010; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). Indeed, even in the era of big data, where full-population studies are now commonplace, the widespread inclusion of reliable indicators for systemic, social, and political forces still remain elusive. For example, we note the finding by Chetty et al. (2018) concerning the limitations of class mobility for Black men versus White men, and even Black women and White women, who still face formidable challenges in U.S. society despite access to the comparatively "favorable" contextual conditions in family, neighborhood, and school. Although Chetty and his team did not state it directly, owing to the limitations of their measurements, their data implicated anti-Black male racism. The researchers admitted the weak reliability of their measures of racial bias at a wide scale, and this omission is indicative of a trend in many quantitative studies on educational inequality in both the United States and elsewhere (Bowles et al., 2005; Salverda et al., 2014; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993).

Certainly, systemic and institutional forces are hard to measure in causal analyses, though arguably not in experimental and audit studies (e.g., Pager, 2007). Yet, we would argue that White supremacy and racism are critical determinants because many continue to observe their everyday impact. After global media shared the jarring sounds and images of the tragic murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, among others, by the police and racist vigilantes, many opened their eyes and ears to the concepts of systemic and institutional racism. For decades, critical race theorists and activists have hearkened the call for attention to institutional and structural racism and its adverse impact on overall well-being of racially minoritized peoples (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Feagin, 2006; Golash-Boza, 2016).[4] Yet, this operationalization of such forces have not occurred. Scholars like Golash-Boza (2016) have developed a framework integrating both race (as a classification) and racism (as a social force). Such a framing enables us to imagine how the coupling of multiple data sets at the macro and institutional levels might explain racial, class, and gender disparities in both mobility and academic outcomes (Lewis et al., 2019). For example, Chetty et al.'s (2018) large project on intergenerational mobility implicates the disproportionality of Black men's exposure to incarceration as a hindrance to their upward mobility in the next generation. As we now know, mass incarceration is a huge component of the focus on structural racism in the United States and the impetus behind the global Black Lives Matter Movement (Alexander, 2011; Gilmore, 2007).

Analogously, in education research, we cannot ignore the effects of the disproportionality of discipline, which has impacted schooling outcomes adversely via disparate suspensions and expulsions by race, gender, and sexuality (see Haskins, 2014; Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017; Jabbari & Johnson, 2020; Owens & McLanahan, 2020; cf. Carter et al., 2017). In 2014, the Department of Education and Department of Justice jointly issued a Dear Colleague Letter (DCL) on racial disparities in school discipline. Disproportionality in discipline and incarceration comprise just one set of examples that can be operationalized and incorporated in data sets focused on predicted specific educational and other mobility outcomes. Other important considerations for measures of schooling outcomes—for example, test scores, grades, college-going rates—might include measures of highly racialized wealth and wealth inequality (Orr, 2003; Pfeffer, 2017). Wealth inequality, marked by significant racial disparities, is a viable proxy for the impact of limited access to tutors, test preparation, and other resources that money can buy.

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[3] Few nationally representative studies have conducted comparative analyses with Native Americans included. Yet, in another study that analyzed racialized wealth disparities in Oklahoma, Akee et al. (2017) found that race, tribal membership and enrollment status mattered. For example, Muscogee enrolled-member households had financial assets and net worth positions resembling the low levels of wealth of Black and Mexican/Hispanic households. Further, their cumulative wealth assets were significantly lower than Cherokee enrolled-member households whose assets were more similar to Whites in the study.

[4] Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Toure), a notable Black Power Movement activist, and Charles Hamilton, a political scientist at Columbia University, are credited with coining the term "institutional racism" in their seminal 1967 book on Black political movements in combatting historical white supremacy and discrimination.

Researchers will need to hypothesize and conceptualize the relationships among these potentially direct and indirect explanatory factors, however; and critical race scholarship enlightens us about how to think about them. Further, many qualitative—and even survey research—studies capture these observations (e.g., Ipsa-Landa & Conwell, 2015; Lewis, 2003; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Shedd, 2015; Tyson, 2011), reinforced by the innumerable tragedies captured by the media. If causal studies do not attempt to account for racism's effects on achievement and mobility outcomes, then the tendency to deny that these factors are determinative will persist. That is, when generalizable evidence fails to encapsulate a fuller conceptual model of what we need to know about the mechanisms reproducing inequality, then it is also reasonable to conjecture that other forces are at work. A critical task for scholars and researchers is to account for the universe of variables, as well as richer explanations concerning outcomes, both theoretically and methodologically.

Understanding Causes & Effects: Theoretical Responses

The age-old structure versus agency debates in academic research, which also reflect persistent epistemological and disciplinary divides, often distract us from focusing on points of convergence concerning ways to possibly reduce educational inequality. Since the 1960s, scholars have deployed different theoretical responses to explain educational inequality and its concomitant disparities. Social reproduction theorists (Bowles & Gintis, 1994; Willis, 1977), for instance, famously maintained that schools by design largely succeed in reproducing inequality by sorting children according to their social class background. Too often, the result was leveled aspirations and adapted preferences. Cultural deprivation theorists (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966), meanwhile, attributed racial and class achievement disparities to an impoverished culture or home environment, a trend that continues to this day (Adair et al., 2017). Cultural difference theorists (Erickson, 1987; Heath, 1983), for their part, have continued to stress the incongruence between the cultural capital many children possess, and that which the school is designed to recognize and reward (see also Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Carter, 2005; Deyhle, 1995; Lareau, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999).

In the 1970s, anthropologist John Ogbu researched why some minority groups, on average, perform better or worse in school. Like James Coleman some years before, Ogbu argued that one must look at the relevant variables *outside* the school. Unlike Coleman, however, Ogbu conjectured that *community forces* influence students' school success or failure. Community forces broadly describe how different groups perceive, interpret, and strategically respond to schooling in ways that correspond to their unique histories and adaptations to their minority status.

Ogbu's work is best known, perhaps, for a typology that he created to describe different minority orientations to dominant culture generally, and to education specifically. Much of the scholarly research has been devoted to a category he dubbed *involuntary minorities* (or "caste-like minorities"), used to describe persons either conquered for their land (Indigenous nations) or brought against their will to an alien context (slaves and their descendants). Settler colonialism and slavery have separated both groups from their early cultural formations, and their agents forcibly assimilated Indigenous and Black peoples. Owing to a long history of institutional racism, their experience with discrimination, and the widespread conviction that education will not yield a payoff in the labor market, Ogbu posited that many racialized minorities belonging to this category develop oppositional attitudes toward school and, together with similar peers, may even come to see certain markers of identity (e.g., speech patterns, unrecognized cultural traits, performance, and dress) as something to be maintained rather than surrendered to mainstream expectations.

Although Ogbu's typology has come under considerable criticism (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Carter, 2005; Massey et al., 2003; Tyson et al., 2005), its influence on the field of immigrant education is noteworthy (Neckerman et al., 1999). Its theoretical strength lies in its comprehensiveness and cross-national applicability in explaining school success and failure among different types of racially minoritized groups based on their modes of inclusion and exclusion within different societies (see also Foley, 1991).

In other areas, scholars focused on the intersection between race, teaching, and learning have theorized how students comprehend and learn differently, arguing that learning is shaped by the sociocultural contexts in which it occurs (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Nasir & Hand, 2006)—which makes it necessary for educators to account for the influences of socioeconomic, political, and cultural differences. Responding to the deterministic tone of the 1960s and '70s, critical theorists of 1980s and '90s argued that too heavy an emphasis on schooling as social reproduction supplants the agency of racially minoritized and economically disadvantaged students to recognize, reflect on, and resist their subjugation as a means of surmounting it (Brayboy & Castagno 2009; Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Deyhle, 1995; Giroux, 1983; Shujaa, 1994; Tate, 1997).

Meanwhile, since the early 1990s there has been an increasing emphasis on the need for teachers to not only expand their skill set but also know how to use either "culturally relevant" or "culturally responsive" pedagogy (Banks, 2006; Hollins & Oliver, 1999; Irvine, 1990; Nieto, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Notably, Ladson-Billings (1994) and Gay (2010), having observed the practices of exemplary teachers, developed theories of teacher practice—"culturally responsive pedagogy" and "culturally responsive teaching," respectively—needed for educators to support the engagement and achievement of minoritized students. Ladson-Billings highlighted the importance of teachers' self-awareness, as well as that of others; how social relations in the classroom are structured; as well as how, and by whom, knowledge is constructed. Similarly, Geneva Gay (2010) developed a concept of "culturally responsive teaching," or "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them. It teaches to, and also through, the strengths of these students" (p. 29).

Empirically, Kathryn Au's studies of the learning of Native Hawaiian children offers empirical fodder for Gay's conceptual framework. For two decades, Au worked at the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP), whose main objective was to improve the literacy achievement of Native Hawaiian students enrolled in schools situated in low-income communities. Until it closed in 1995, KEEP was the nation's longest-running research and development project devoted to improving the education of students from a particular ethnic group. KEEP used a specific "whole-literacy" curriculum to increase the literacy achievement of over 600 Hawaiian children in 29 classrooms, and it produced significantly different student achievement results. Prior to the start of the intervention, 60% of the students were below grade level in literacy, 40% at grade level, and none above. After one year in the project, 68% of the students were either at grade level or above and only 32% below (Au & Carroll, 1997). Results improved as researchers and educators refined the project over time. Building on the frameworks of culturally responsive pedagogy and teaching, a number of other studies have found associations between teachers' appreciation of racial and ethnic minority students' own and others' cultures with increased reading comprehension, writing performance, and self-esteem (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Gay, 2010).

Attitudes, Beliefs, and Mindsets Inhibiting Educational Equity

Just as we must attend to the practices and policies to usher in educational equity in our schools and communities, so too must we also attend to the idea systems that individuals hold in their minds and hearts about social placement, the distribution of resources, and different groups' and individuals' incorporation into various facets of society (Carter, 2018). Ideas and beliefs about the other, especially when one possesses greater power and higher status, can shape student experiences. Furthermore, ideas and beliefs about oneself can influence students' abilities to perform.

Inequality inheres in the power of both negative and positive stereotypes, racial microaggressions, and/or narratives reproduced about racial, ethnic, gender, and other social groups and engendering disparate academic or other outcomes. Some social scientists theorize and document the impact of subtle forms of everyday racism—"racial microaggressions"—on the mental health and emotional well-being of racially minoritized groups (Ong et al., 2013; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). This research is suggestive about relationships among microaggressions, educational performance, and well-being. Other research found that "stereotype threat" influences academic outcomes (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat occurs when positive or negative expectations are communicated consistently to students, a self-fulfilling prophecy often ensues, such that individuals perform in a way that corresponds to the level of expectations. For example, Steele and Aronson's (1995) seminal study found that in the experimental context, Black students perform less well on tests when the conditions trigger racial stereotypes about the perceived intellectual inferiority of Blacks to Whites, as opposed to taking tests in a politically neutral setting. Some studies found the same results for females versus males when experimental conditions triggered stereotypes about perceived lower math or science abilities for female subjects taking tests. In contrast, when some groups of students are bolstered by positive stereotypes—what Lee and Zhou (2015) describe as "stereotype lift" among Asian Americans—or what

Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015) refer to as “self-relevant representations” among Native American students, then their academic well-being, sense of belonging, and performances either improve or increase.

Another domain of potentially powerful social psychological factors pertains to Dweck’s (2008) concepts of “fixed” versus “growth” mindsets, developed from experimental studies. Dweck found that students who believed that abilities to excel were determined early in life (“fixed”)—compared to those who believed that repeated and additional effort could allow them to grow their skills (“growth)—were less likely to succeed in school. Inequality, for Dweck, consists in the patterns of the significant differences and correlations of social identity with growth and fixed mindsets. Her conceptualization has drawn international attention to the idea of brain plasticity, i.e., how the brain can continue to grow, and how the mindset of children can shape their school performance (Dweck, 2008; cf. Mitchell & Daniels, 2003). In response to both strong reviews and critiques, and even some misapplication of her ideas, Dweck has created a second-generation argument and refinement of her framework to account for fluidity and the idea that each of us may possess some combination of both “growth” and “fixed” mindsets. Still, she maintains that when we attain more of the former (growth), we can reduce achievement disparities (Dweck, 2015).

Although not couched to the same extent in an inequality framing, Duckworth’s (2005) grit concept emphases the role of self-discipline and its greater predictive power of academic performance than IQ. Females, for example, have higher grades on average than males throughout the grade school years and well into college, and much of this is attributable to significantly greater levels of self-discipline reported for girls and women. Notably, the movement for changing traditionally underperforming students’ mindsets and grit gained significant currency over the last several years among researchers and practitioners—ever eager to implement new, potentially effective reforms—and packaged under the rubric of “social and emotional learning” (SEL).

During the latter years of No Child Left Behind, and into the advent of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) era, both Dweck’s and Duckworth’s “grit” research captured the imagination of practitioners and other researchers, finding their way into new accountability and implementation plans for school and student success. (Strikingly, stereotype threat, where the intervention rests less with the individual student and more with social and political dynamics, has not been taken up for reform to the same extent.) An insufficient number of studies have tested the validity of measuring either grit or growth mindset on a wide scale. Yet, many education decision makers were eager to use them as areas of teacher quality assessment. Still, even Duckworth cautions against a fast-paced usage of current measures to access teachers’ effectiveness and their students’ success (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Taken together, all three of these scholars’ research have enjoyed considerable uptake in public discussions about inequality, based on their significant findings in experimental laboratories concerning how different person’s abilities and their achievement patterns might become self-reinforcing, and consequently, breed either school success or underachievement.

Of course, many other theories, conceptualizations, and frameworks operate in the fields of social science and educational research to explain educational inequality. In what follows, we mention several others. Our intent in the preceding section was to summarize some of the most referenced findings in the literature. Often scholars behave as if only a few theories or frameworks are operative in the complex landscape of understanding what causes, influences, or reproduces inequality. Further, as we have seen, many of us focus on only one unit or level of analysis, influenced by one or two of those theories or frameworks. Notwithstanding the best training in the logics of inquiry, some scholars fail to check their disciplinary, epistemological, and methodological egos at the door and concede that the knowledge base is incredibly vast—especially when we are prepared to do cross-national comparative research, and also appreciate the tremendous complexity across large societies (like the United States), not to mention at the levels of community, neighborhood, and family. Although we continue to search for universal, generalizable truths vis-à-vis educational inequality, the diverse nature of the social world inevitably limits our depth of understanding about particularities among individuals and collectivities as necessary.

Strategies for Reducing Educational Inequalities: Policy Responses Institutional Supports to Combat Inequality

In education, what drives the success of *any* school and its students is a complex story, let alone a school serving a concentration of students hailing from families and communities with extremely limited resources. Nathan Hendren and Ben Sprung-Keyser's (2019) analyses of 133 policy changes over a 50-year period reveals that the highest returns of investment of public funds would be the direct investment in health and education programs targeting low-income children. This includes Medicaid expansions, childhood education spending, and greater subsidies for college. In many cases, these policies actually pay for themselves in the end, as children pay back the initial cost in adulthood through additional tax revenue and reduced transfer payments. Depending on which measures are used, anywhere from 13 to 17% of U.S. children live in poverty, and somewhere between 5 and 8% live in deep poverty, or households with incomes at only 50% of the federal poverty line. Tasked with making recommendations for federal policies that could reduce the U.S. child poverty rates, a committee of researchers and practitioners commissioned by the National Academies of Sciences has released a report that suggests that targeted action could reduce the child poverty rate by half (National Academies of Sciences, 2019a). Their analyses show that 50% cut in child poverty rates would come with federal government investment of $91 to $109 billion dollars annually in the expansion of work-oriented programs and policies for parents or guardians. The recommendations include higher earned income tax credits, expanded childcare tax credits, and increased minimum wages, in addition to some means-tested income-support programs (e.g., food support and housing vouchers). Healthy beginnings ensure healthy futures; and setting up economically disadvantaged (and all) children early for success can have long-term positive influence on their well-being and long-term productivity as members of society.

Next, we must understand the factors *inside of schools,* practically any school, and outstanding school leadership and teaching should account for a part of the success (Hanushek et al., 2005; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Kraft et al., 2015; Orr et al., 2008). To tackle many of the challenges caused by concentrated poverty, not to mention various social and cultural conflicts between educators and students, the basic belief that every child has a right to an adequately challenging education must guide the implementation of various institutional supports. To guarantee a quality education for every child, institutional supports must entail that considerable resources are available to build and maintain schools, pay for curricular material, libraries, principal, teacher and custodial salaries, and the like. Over time, school budgets have swelled as the cost of living and inflation have risen to meet demands, but also as schools have taken on more and more responsibility in attending to the needs of school-attending children. The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) allocated federal monies to combat poverty. Additional federal funding from Title I, the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and other state categorical grants allowed the distribution of other resources to schools across the nation: free breakfast and lunch programs, school nurses, physical education equipment, computers, translators, security, enrichment and after-school programs. Further, a wide variety of special education staff, over time, has been added to the local school's list of provisions.

At the school level, state and local education decision makers have implemented a panoply of reforms, all with the aim of reducing inequality in educational opportunity and achievement. On the one hand, studies imply that the specific features of a school's internal organization, culture (e.g., aims and identity), leadership, and community features—all come together in ways that defy the odds. In many cases, the success of these schools turns on the incredible drive and success of a single charismatic leader, who often has been given considerable latitude in hiring new staff and raising the academic bar. Improvements also include strong teacher training programs aimed at greater sensitivity to the needs of children with cultural, linguistic religious differences, children with disabilities or different learning needs, and more generally those facing the challenges of growing up in poverty. Successful school leaders demonstrate considerable skill at community outreach, galvanizing much needed involvement and support from families, churches, and even corporate sponsors keen on turning the neighborhood around. At the individual level beyond schooling, the recommendations include a more proactive approach to diagnostic services, such as ear and eye exams, and attending to the specific economic needs of children who are homeless and food insecure (e.g., Berliner, 2009; National Academy of Sciences, 2020).

New Measures and Conceptualization of "Equity" and "School Success"

When many state education leaders realized that they would not be able to meet the proficiency mandates of the No Child Left Behind law for all student subgroups by 2014, they began to entertain alternative modes of school accountability. The intensive focus on tests proved to be a blunder in educational reform. Targeted goals for specific student groups were not only unattainable by the mandated year, but also not necessarily ameliorative in terms of the wider goals of ESEA, such as "equal educational opportunity" as a reduction of economic disadvantage. President Obama's allowance of waivers from the law motivated certain states and organizations such as the California Office for Reform in Education (CORE) districts and New Hampshire to begin examining alternative ways to address student success.

During the No Child Left Behind era, researchers produced scores of studies trying to parse out the variance in racial achievement disparities in the United States, consequently producing an entire canon on "achievement gaps." Yet as we noted earlier, many have inferred erroneously that test scores primarily indicate student success, competence, and intelligence, and this interpretation has led to the emergence of problematic narratives and myths about different ethno-racial groups. A "crisis" (Berliner & Biddle, 1996) mentality emerged that not only shaped school practices but also family and community practices and perceptions of others based on flawed ideas about the power and implications of standardized tests.

Fortunately, over time many researchers and practitioners have come to realize that relying on a singular indicator of student success (i.e., test scores) was too myopic to appreciate the constellation of factors could lift students toward greater achievement (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Pressured by civil rights groups, teachers' unions, state decision makers, and lobbyists, U.S. Congress approved the inclusion of a number of indicators for school and student success when it passed the law to succeed NCLB—Every Student Succeeds Act (Carter et al., n.d.). ESSA expands the definition of accountability, mandates that states consider multiple measures of student academic well-being in their calculations of student performance, and requires states to create accountability systems that include at least one other measure of school quality and student success. Further, after some assessment of the research, a June 2019 report released by the National Academies' Committee on Developing Indicators of Educational Equity now lays out 16 different ways to examine educational equity, including the following:

- **Kindergarten readiness,** including early math and reading skills, but also attention and self-regulation;
- **K-12 learning and engagement,** including test performance and growth, school grades and credits earned, and school attendance and engagement;
- **Educational attainment,** including on-time high school graduation and entry to postsecondary schools and the workforce;
- **Segregation,** particularly when this coincides with concentration of poverty in schools and racial separation both within and among schools;
- **Access to high-quality early learning programs,** encompassing both the availability of programs and different groups' participation;
- **School climate,** including students' perceptions of safety and an academic focus; and
- **Access to high-quality curricula and instruction,** including teacher qualifications and diversity, participation in rigorous courses and gifted enrichment programs, and formal academic supports such as special education and tutoring.

Notably, these indicators provide a broader and more holistic way to approximate some aspects of "educational equity." Still, as we have argued, other contextual factors exist that will either enable or facilitate educational equity, too. All schooling occurs within a broader social ecology whose various forces permeate classroom ways. These social forces shape systems, ideology, behaviors, and intergroup dynamics among educators, parents, and students within school-communities. Schools alone cannot mitigate the disparate impact of either poverty, racism, anti-Blackness, cultural negation, and their (in)direct impact on relative inequality in educational outcomes. Macro-social and -political factors—such as systemic racism, which trickle down to the classroom levels and appear as various racial microaggressions and the disproportionality in rates of discipline by race, gender, and sexual identity, as well as inattention to culturally sustaining and affirming school practices—mitigate the richness of educational engagement of minoritized students. They matter. But further, the actual operationalization of these dimensions of educational equity into concrete measures are not immune to either partisan political interpretations or significant variation across contexts, even if they provide a basic threshold or floor of "adequate" equity. What happens when collective community wealth and privilege allow many districts and schools to maintain higher degrees of educational inequity through investments beyond state and federal inputs—through the creation of endowment funds in affluent districts, for example? We applaud the broader, multiple, concrete meanings of educational equity that these indicators represent. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore or escape how wider social, political, and economic factors countervail equitable operations within schools. A recognition of the latter, therefore, mandates explicit calls for

the concurrent production of broader equitable, economic (e.g., poverty reduction and jobs), health, housing, and other social (e.g., civil rights) policies.

What Else Will It Take to Get Accomplish Equity Inside of Schools[5]

Many of the strategies we have discussed in the preceding pages can, and do, enjoy modest success when there is the political will to invest in smart and sustainable interventions. Importantly, *how* monies are invested matters infinitely more than actual dollar amounts. We glean from the literature that smart investments often include hiring quality staff with attractive remunerations; adequate time for teachers to plan and grade student work; and staff development in terms of effective teaching strategies, incorporating technology into lessons in ways that enhance, rather than subtract from, learning. Smart investments also promote more dialogue in the classroom, as well as provide adequate staff and facilities that make differentiated instruction that sufficiently challenges all children a real possibility. Inside classrooms, smart educational investments focus on constructive approaches to classroom management and student discipline, with the result that there are fewer students being sent out of the room, let alone being suspended or expelled from school. What each of these examples suggests is that *it matters how system leaders invest per-pupil expenditures and resources.* High levels of expenditure as such do not guarantee better outcomes. Importantly, resources—which cannot always be purchased—must be deployed in ways that matter most for instruction, learning, and belonging (Elmore, 2000; Hampton, 2014; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Kraft et al., 2015; Merry, 2013, 2020; Newmann, Rutter & Smith, 1989). Many of these resources inform the following case profile.

[5] See also Vander Ark (2013).

Leadership: A Case of the Administrator as Catalyst[6]

In April 2012, Tiffany Anderson became the new school superintendent of the Jennings School District, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. Like many other urban and rural school districts, Jennings was facing seemingly insurmountable problems. First, it had a budget deficit of almost 2 million dollars. Second, Jennings was a district serving a student body that was predominantly poor; more than 90% of the 3,000 students were eligible for either free or reduced lunch, and nearly 44% of the community's families lived below the poverty line.[7] Third, Jennings experienced low teacher morale and retention, and struggled to deal with high chronic student mobility and even homelessness. Finally, the achievement levels in Jennings were abysmally low; the schools in Jennings had in fact lost their accreditation four years earlier. The district's challenges, then, were nothing short of overwhelming.

From the moment Anderson assumed the position, she wasted no time reducing expenses less directly related to learning. She either reassigned many staff positions to other tasks or eliminated unnecessary ones. Anderson made a personal commitment to staff at least 30% of the district's employees with local residents and alumni. Defying expectations, she managed to eliminate the deficit in less than nine months. Turning her attention to the learning environment, Anderson made it known that she would not deviate from the belief and expectation that all children are capable of success. Consistent with these beliefs, Anderson set out to staff her schools with teachers specialized in their subject areas. She accelerated the curriculum, reinstated art classes, and increased the number of dual-credit classes available. Superintendent Anderson created a college-preparatory academy, where up to 150 students were eligible to attend six days a week, eleven months a year, graduating with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree. Within a few short years, Anderson was able to report that 100% of her graduates either would attend post-secondary education or be placed in a job upon graduation. By the end of the 2014 academic year, the state of Missouri fully restored accreditation to the entire district.[8]

Well-trained staff and high expectations were not Anderson's only consideration. She also expected that her teachers would engage in experiences to help them better understand the lives and social contexts of their students.[9] Additionally, the district expected teachers to receive anti-racist training with the aim of rooting out unconscious bias and eliminating low expectations. Behind these efforts stood Anderson's conviction that one must first train those who are serving; only then can they understand what children need in order to succeed.

Yet realizing that schools could not accomplish all that they needed to without broader supports in place, Anderson also fought to ensure that the schools could also assist in the provision of sorely needed necessities to its residents. Motivated by the idea that the entire ecology of the child's life is relevant for learning and success, she networked with a number of public and private agencies (e.g., St. Louis Area Food Bank and other non-profits) to provide various goods and services for the students and their families. For example, Superintendent Anderson had washers and dryers installed in each of the district's schools. She transformed an unused high school classroom into a health clinic, which an on-site pediatrician staffed.

[6] See also Raudys (2018).

[7] According to the U.S. Census, this means a total income of less than $24,999 per year.

[8] Seventy percentage points are needed for accreditation. Jennings's total points in the accreditation scheme moved from 57.1% (dramatically deficient) in 2012 to 81.1% in 2015.

[9] Anderson referred to this herself as "poverty training," which involved simulations of living with poverty, the aim being that teachers would come to empathize better with students coming from backgrounds where hunger and stress were routine experiences.

The district acquired a house to serve as a home for homeless students. District officials also established a clothing store to make coats, socks, and other apparel freely available; and district officials opened a food pantry—stocked by students—to feed food insecure families.

Additionally, with the conviction that the school is the center of the community, Anderson worked assiduously to build and sustain relationships with those in her community. “When schools try to do this on their own without the community, it doesn’t work,” she explains. “You have to build relationships.” She mandated home visits for any student who had missed two or more days of school. Educators offered Saturday classes to students falling behind or in need of homework assistance and meetings with local police to discuss issues of youth delinquency and crime.

Myriad challenges continue to confront the Jennings School District. Still, the Jennings School District case serves to provide an example of the kinds of resources that make a tangible difference in young people’s opportunities to learn and thrive.

Critical and Effective Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Curriculum[10]

The Tiffany Anderson case, coupled with the enduring patterns and studies that typically focus on economically disadvantaged and racial and ethnic minoritized students, compels us to reflect on high-quality teaching specifically for marginalized students. In a lengthy *review* chapter on this very topic, published in the American Education Research Association’s *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, Carter and Darling-Hammond (2016) ask: “What is it that teachers need to learn and to become more effective in working with diverse student populations?” is addressed. They assess scores of studies of teacher efficacy and effectiveness focused on the learning and schooling of historically underserved students would embody. As mentioned earlier, many of them found that a central element is valuing student culture and background and centering instruction on the student (Au, 2011; Lee, 2007).

Carter and Darling-Hammond’s (2016) review of studies and frameworks from around the globe, mainly Asian, Europe, and North America, identifies several practices and dispositions that might constitute a typology of traits that characterize culturally responsive pedagogy. These include cultural competency; an ethic of deep care, which Noddings (1988) describes as a teacher’s caring disposition to assist children as they develop and grow; awareness of knowledge socially constructed in historical, social, cultural, and political contexts (Banks & Banks, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002); a sense of efficacy (Irvine, 2003); and having an awareness of the social, cultural, and political contexts of education (Howard & Aleman, 2008).

Notably, a generation of educational research scholars who have significant teaching experience with diverse ethnic-, class-, and language-minority students has emerged to document the utility of incorporating “local” cultural understandings of today’s youth—from hip-hop music[11] to vernacular language and dialect—to develop complex academic skills (Alim, 2004; Au, 2011; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Emdin, 2010; Fisher, 2007; Kinloch, 2005). These scholars, who are primarily qualitative researchers—ethnographers, interviewers and participant observers—share a particular and critical conceptual frame. Teachers will reach and be effective in teaching subject matter to more ethnic-, class-, and language-minority students if they learn how to use the local cultural tools that students bring with them to the classroom.

Characterized as cross-methodological corroboration, Dee and Penner (2017) affirmed what qualitative researchers have learned from decades of observational research. In a causal effects study of the impact of an ethnic studies curriculum on educational outcomes, they found that assignment to an ethnic studies course in various San Francisco high schools increased ninth-grade attendance by 21 percentage points, GPA by 1.4 grade points, and credits earned by 23. The authors concluded that these surprisingly large effects indicate that culturally responsive pedagogy, when implemented in a high-fidelity context, can provide effective support to academically at-risk students. In sum, the research that demonstrates how teachers engage with students and the substance of what they teach are each requisite input in the constellation of more equitable learning spaces within schools and classrooms. “Understanding that learning is an activity shaped by our own cultural meanings enables educators and others to construct a way of seeing how all people learn through the prism of their everyday understandings” (Carter & Darling-Hammond, 2016, p. 606).

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[10] See also Indigenous Corporate Training Inc. (2015).

[11] Carol Lee (2007) makes a useful distinction between membership in cultural groups and participation in cultural practices to help avoid harmfully essentializing students. She uses the example of hip-hop culture, which is historically rooted in African American youth culture, showing that not all participants in these cultural practices are necessarily members of that group. At the same time, not all members of the African American youth group participate in that particular cultural practice.

Lessons from High-Performing Minoritized Schools A Comparative, International Perspective

Despite comparatively lower test scores, graduation and/or college-going rates, in a variety of contexts, some schools serving mostly minoritized and/or low-income and poor students thrive and produce successful outcomes (Bell, 2004; Chenoweth, 2007, 2009; Fech, 2009; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2000; NEPC notable schools; Scheurich, 1998). Given the preponderance of U.S. scholarship in these discussions, suppose we step outside of the American educational landscape and consider evidence from the Netherlands, for example, where we find a very different—and *strikingly pluralist*—state education system, one in which a variety of school types can be found. This includes denominational schools.

At present there are 59 state-supported Islamic primary schools serving roughly 12,500 pupils. After roughly 20 years of struggle, in recent years Islamic schools have managed to make impressive gains. As it concerns *non-cognitive* measures (e.g., task motivation, self-efficacy, overall well-being), Driessen et al. (2016) found that Islamic schools already score highest in an absolute sense. Yet it is the quantitative analysis of the relevant *cognitive* measures where we perhaps find the most surprising outcomes. The authors invite the reader to examine the gross rather than the net effects in order to avoid confusing comparatively lower raw scores with overall schools quality. After having corrected for social and ethnic differences in pupil backgrounds, Driessen et al. write, "although Islamic schools in an absolute sense achieve lowest on all cognitive measurements, they *succeed in raising their pupils' achievement more than the other denominational schools*" (p. 476, emphasis added).[12] In other words, Islamic schools were providing the most added educational value.

Since this study was conducted, these gains have continued. Islamic schools are not only doing very well relative to other schools serving similar populations; since the 2016 study was published, they have been performing *better than* any other state-managed school on standardized high school entrance exams, despite serving overwhelmingly high concentrations of ethnic minority (mainly Turkish or Moroccan background), low-SES children. Consequently, the demand has steadily grown, and the number of children now attending Islamic schools has increased 60% in the past ten years (Goedemorgen Nederland, 2019).

It also turns out that these schools do not suffer from a teacher shortage in the way as so many other schools across the Netherlands, but also in the *same neighborhood*. Further, the demand for their educational services is high. School officials have recognized the value of a greater proportion of teachers from the local areas, whose life stories—but also racial/ethnic and cultural backgrounds—are similar to those of their students. These features also mean that these teachers are able to serve as role models and academic mentors, a matter of no small importance in a system in which a teacher's advice (coupled with a single standardized test score) all too often steers minoritized students into vocational education—and thus *away from* university—from a very early age (Elibol & Tielbeke, 2018).

And it doesn't stop there: the best functioning Islamic schools have established a strong ethos among teachers, work well with their school boards—in which the local community is also well-represented—and provide a school community where parents feel that they are not only taken seriously, but also are able to feel more involved in their child's education. In short, as it concerns efforts to tackle educational inequality, including the cultural and racial dimensions of this inequality, the success of these schools illustrates why it matters that the local community be in control of its own educational affairs. Notwithstanding these undeniably positive trends, both Dutch political elites and the Dutch media continue to portray these schools as being "segregationist," or "bad for citizenship," or worse, as instantiation of a "parallel society" (Boussaid & Merry, 2020).

The Dutch case suggests that a *combination of resources* is crucial: on the one hand, these certainly include administrative support, weighted pupil funding, and tighter regulatory controls (Merry & Driessen, 2016). After all, Islamic schools are also *state schools*. At the same time, however, other non-monetary resources matter significantly: strong leadership, high teacher expectations, shared academic goals, a value-centered learning environment, empathic care, role-modelling and mentoring, and community among peers (Merry, 2007, 2013; cf. Noddings, 2015; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009). Taken together, these *combined resources* serve both to build stronger ties with the parents and community (where trust in the highly stratified school system is otherwise sorely lacking). In addition, they foster high levels of achievement by protecting primary school-age Muslim children from many of the harms of stigma and racism that correlate strongly with teacher bias in a country in which roughly 95% of teachers are White, female, and middle-class (Driessen et al., 2016; Merry, 2020; Merry & Driessen, 2016). State Hindu schools, too, enjoy similar successes both in terms of academic achievement and pupil well-being, again in part because of the combination of relevant resources in the school, including a stronger cultural and ethnic/racial match between school staff and students (Merry & Driessen, 2012).

[12] The authors are aware of the problems of citing only one empirical study. This study remains the only English language publication of its kind at the present time. However, using more recent government data (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2021a), one of us has more recently conducted new quantitative analyses regarding the performance of Islamic schools that demonstrate even more statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) outcomes, further corroborating the findings of Driessen et al. There are plans in the works to publish this new data in 2022.

While there are obvious differences between the Netherlands and the United States, there are key points of similarity, which suggests that this case can be instructive. First, the largest four Dutch cities have majority-minority populations; relatedly, in terms of school segregation indices, the Netherlands rivals the United States (Ladd et al., 2010). Second, schools in urban areas deal with many of the same challenges, including a chronic teacher shortage, an obsession with high-stakes testing, and growing levels of competition between schools competing for the same students (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2021b).Third, racial hierarchies, stratification and inequality are also endemic to Dutch society and the Dutch school system in particular (Merry & Boterman, 2020), even if most Dutch empirical researchers studying educational inequality rarely attend to stigma or institutional racism as a relevant variable in the reproduction of this ethnic/racial inequality (Andriessen, 2020; Mulder & Bol, 2020). Indeed, the Dutch continue to unashamedly invoke labels of "Black" and "White" to designate schools on the basis of their ethnic/racial composition, and these labels unsurprisingly inform the decision of middle-class parents (both White and non-White) to avoid schools labeled as "Black."

There are, of course, important dissimilarities as well. For example, with the exception of very small private sector, the state fully finances all schools in the Netherlands, including religious and other alternative schools (e.g., Montessori) that constitute more than 70% of the total number. Equitable financing irrespective of school type is the outcome of a decades-long struggle to provide equal recognition to the Catholic minority, which resulted in a revised constitution in 1917, and thereby a more expansive interpretation of the constitutional freedom to education. In the final analysis, the equal treatment of denominational and non-denominational schools follows from the recognition that *the education of every child matters, irrespective of which school they attend.* Following that logic, all schools in the Netherlands must comply with the same standardized learning targets; all schools must teach the state-approved curriculum (with some leeway to accommodate its pedagogical or religious orientation); and finally, all schools are subject to periodic inspection to assess for school quality and performance. Schools failing to meet acceptable standards are given some time to improve, and when schools fail in this, they are closed (Merry, 2007).

In our view, the success of high-performing minoritized schools exposes some biases of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in terms of how they measure school success, but also the general tendency to reproduce harmful narratives about racialized majority-minority schools. Indeed, we observe that some scholars (e.g., Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013) may be quick to dismiss these successes as non-scalable flukes propagated by "pro-choice advocates", or else as simply undesirable owing to their being tendentiously framed as "hyper-segregated" (e.g., Massey, 2020).

Yet, the success of these schools is no fluke; rather, it typically is the result of years of coordinated effort to foster improvement, fusing general institutional support, culturally specific local support, and catalytic leadership (Chenoweth, 2007, 2009; Driessen et al., 2016; Hampton, 2014; Kraft et al, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Walker, 2000, 2013).

It is telling that scholarship focusing on educational inequality is conspicuously silent concerning the impressive outcomes of majority-minority schools. The odd silence in the scholarly literature on the successes of majority-minority schools is curious to observe given, as we have seen, the relative disadvantages (compared to their White and Asian peers) for many Black, brown, and Indigenous students in so-called mixed or "integrated" schools. These disadvantages have been well-documented and attributed to structural and organizational inequalities endemic to many of these schools (Carter, 2012; Darby & Rury, 2018; Domina, Penner & Penner, 2017; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Merry, 2020). Yet few scholars exhibit the same willingness to dismiss the positive outcomes of these schools as flukes. Indeed, more often than not these successes are extolled as evidence of what it is possible to achieve when learning environments are more equitably arranged and the right kinds of resources are present (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2007; Johnson, 2019; Kahlenberg, 2004; Minow, 2010; Wells, 2009).

This is where it may be helpful to widen the researcher's lens and weigh the empirical evidence from outside of one's familiar territory. For the penchant of always looking *inward*, to one's "own" system, to perennially examine the same questions without regard for how other systems operate, leads inexorably to a myopia that yields the same kinds of research questions, outcomes and policy proposals. That is, too often *the systems where we find ourselves tend to circumscribe our thinking.* If one is willing to learn from other systems, then there is no reason why American education should have such a circumscribed understanding of public education, one only likely to make itself both impervious to critique and incapable of reform. Accordingly, and given the liberal habit of repudiating educational alternatives as a threat to an idealized yet narrowly conceived "public," we suggest that the Dutch case is instructive.[13]

[13] By suggesting that the Dutch case is instructive, it is not our claim that the Dutch education system is more egalitarian; the Dutch school system is in fact more stratified (Merry & Boterman, 2020) than the American system, but also several other European systems. Hence our point is simply that other ways exist—besides those routinely discussed by American researchers—to imagine the public and devise educational strategies whose aims are to *mitigate inequality.*

Indeed, because educational provision in the United States is also becoming increasingly diverse, particularly in large urban centers with the proliferation of charters, American scholarship could learn a great deal by looking beyond its borders to consider alternative institutional arrangements elsewhere. Rather than pitting "the public" against additional, pragmatic, and viable options in the pursuit of educational justice, we might expand our conception of "public education" concerning what is possible, and perhaps, what is imperative to do. Sometimes, those changes may require a significant reorientation in our thinking, if not also amendments to state constitutions, which are not without precedent.[14]

The examples of these exceptional schools serve as compelling counter-narratives to those who continue to believe that poor children cannot succeed in the absence of middle-class children, or that Black and brown children cannot succeed in the absence of White children. In our view, these are implicitly racist and classist assumptions predicated on deficit thinking about racially minoritized and low-income students.

Whatever the benefits that may accrue to individuals owing to increased access to "resource rich" environments, often very difficult emotional trade-offs ensue. Far too many children go through their entire school careers without ever receiving the education they deserve. Far too many children never manage to feel safe, let alone *feel welcome*, while in school. In contrast to the widely shared view that integrated learning spaces can be leveraged for greater tolerance, understanding, and power sharing, time and again mixed school spaces have been shown to be sites of racist stigma, low expectations, and differential treatment.

For decades, many Black scholars have questioned openly the integrationist thesis (Baldwin, 1963; Bell, 1980; Brooks, 1996; Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Cone, 1970; Darity & Jolla, 2009; Du Bois, 1935; Francis & Darity, 2021; Shelby, 2016). Other scholars have since argued for educational alternatives for those "trapped" in bad schools (e.g., Bell, 2004; Bobo, 2011; Merry, 2013, 2020), in part as a strategy for mitigating the racist mistreatment of one's own children in school—which Dumas (2014, 2016) has described as a key site of psychic violence and suffering for Black children in particular. For far too many Black boys, schooling has also become a pipeline to prison (Kim et al., 2010). More constructively, the demand for educational alternatives is seen as a means of placing the education of vulnerable populations, to quote historian Carter Woodson (1933), back in the hands of those "who understand and continue in sympathy with those whom they instruct" (p. 28). W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) expressed similar sentiments:

> The proper education of any people includes sympathetic touch between teacher and pupil, knowledge on the part of the teacher, not simply of the individual taught, but of his surroundings and background, and the history of his class and group; such contact between pupils, and between teacher and pupil, on the basis of perfect social equality, as will increase this sympathy and knowledge. (p. 328)

Indeed, a number of case studies of schools reveal that their success is at least partly attributable to significantly strong social psychological and cultural support and engagement (Carter, 2012; Chenoweth, 2007; Collins, 2006; Lee, 2007; Rizga, 2016). Their success also results from specific features, notably ongoing professional development and a better cultural or ethnic/racial match between school staff and the students they serve (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Gonzalez, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Merry, 2013; Walker, 1996). Further, their success also ensues from certain kinds of interventions: some pedagogic, such as high expectations for all pupils and increased, but especially intensive, individualized academic instruction; others benefit from a reduction in class size, using assessment to inform teaching practice, or a combination of these approaches (Dee & Penner, 2017; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Hanushek et al., 2005). Still, others appear to succeed by focusing on regular school attendance, more instructional time, and strengthening home-school partnerships (Bryk et al., 2010; Hampton, 2014; Stetson, 2013).

Other studies have highlighted the effectiveness of organizational supports such as efforts to coordinate instruction; systems for establishing an orderly, disciplined learning environment; specialized support for students with emotional or behavioral problems; and coordinated efforts to support parents in shaping their children's attitudes and readiness to learn (Kraft et al., 2015).

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[14] Constitutional changes at the state level occur on a regular basis, as we continue to see with respect to the legalization of marijuana, LGBT protections, death penalty abolition, right-to-die legislation, and many other examples. With respect to education policy, many constitutional changes also have occurred since the 1980s: whether it be chartering laws, disability law, homeschooling laws, or indeed the role that denominational schools can be expected to play in educational provision (e.g., voucher schemes in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and elsewhere). Cf. Zelman v. Simmons-Harris 536 U.S. 639 (2002).

What Will It Take to Get Accomplish Equity Outside of Schools Macro-Social and Economic Policy

The macro-structural/policy narrative is multifaceted and complex. The thrust of the emergent narratives from research is this: the remedies to myriad disadvantages that afflict marginalized, economically disadvantaged schools and communities entail adopting policies whose aim is to promote a *more equitable distribution of resources.* To combat the challenges many minoritized and marginalized children face—both inside and outside of school, scholars and researchers have argued for a variety of helpful interventions. They range from free visual and audiological exams to early childhood education programs, to an expansion of Section 8 vouchers, to an expansion and more efficient distribution of Title I and IDEA federal funding, and to the decoupling of school spending from the local tax base (e.g. Berliner, 2013; Rothstein, 2004).

Other policies, too (e.g., guaranteed basic income in Alaska or expanding the earned income tax credit and increasing the minimum wage for workers) can have a significant impact on poverty and its related ills (see more recently Hendren & Sprung-Keyser, 2019; National Academies Report, 2019b). Baby bonds, too, constitute another program that researchers have promoted for the reduction of economic inequality. These would provide a savings account of a specified allocation to every child born in the nation, with additional contributions added to accounts based on families' household incomes and maturing at the young person's eighteenth birthday for the investment in either a college education, job skill development, or entrepreneurship (Darity & Hamilton, 2010; Zewde, 2018).

Baby bonds are not a new policy idea. Across the Atlantic in the United Kingdom, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair made baby bonds the center of his Labour Party's platform in 2001, and his Chancellor Gordon Brown began implementing the plan in 2003, only to have the policy cancelled seven years later by the Conservatives, upon taking power in 2010. From the British example, we note (again) that frequently political ideology obstructs significant reductions in opportunity gaps. Further, in addition to the requisite political will required of voters, not to mention the evidence needed to persuade members of Congress to pass such practices into law, we would require research into the long-term impact of these programs.

Finally, beyond the socioeconomic disparities in education lie still deeper problems, deeply entrenched in all societies: White supremacy, sexism, homophobia, and disablism. Academics continue to debate the independent and interdependent or intersectional nature of race, class, and gender forces. Attention to both the independent and international nature of these forces require different forms of intervention. Concerning race and ethnicity, some now call for redemption of the economic, social, and cultural violence imposed by U.S. chattel slavery, genocide, and conquest on three of the most educationally challenged groups in the United States: African Americans, Native Americans; and Latina/o/x students. Influenced by the research of economists William Darity et al. (2018), several of the 2020 candidates for the Democratic nomination for President of the United States included reparations in their platforms as a means to reduce the significant wealth gaps between these groups and Whites and Asian Americans. To our knowledge, no study has been able to account truly for how the reduction of racialized wealth inequality might reduce educational inequality—certainly, an area for future research report should wealth reduction interventions occur.

The Meso-Level: Neighborhoods, Schools, and Families

Socioeconomic and Racial Integration

An argument often touted for reducing educational inequality is school integration. To buttress this claim, in recent years research has purported to document "resegregation"[15] occurring, fueling renewed calls for the urgency of integrating schools (Clotfelter, 2006; Johnson, 2019; Minow, 2010). Integration arguments motivated by equality typically maintain that schools integrated by race/ethnicity, and especially social class, will improve the peer effects, which means that children can learn at least as much from each other as they do from their teachers Further, researchers producing equality-motivated integration arguments appear to base them on the belief that the presence of more middle-class children in the school translates into greater overall *parental involvement, network ties* and informational resources, and these benefits will "rub off" on families with less social capital (Kahlenberg, 2004). A related belief is that schools with more middle-class children will assist in retaining teachers, which contributes to the stability of the school. In recent years, political philosophers have also joined the conversation, arguing that school integration is an "imperative" (Anderson, 2010).

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[15] There is, in fact, considerable evidence in the United States demonstrating that while its urban centers remain as segregated as ever, mid-size cities and suburbs across the country have diversified at rapid speed since the 1980s (Farley, 2021; Hall & Lee, 2010). Whether more diversity entails less within school segregation, however, is another matter. See also Badger et al. (2019).

Inspiring though the integrationist account is, it is beset with various challenges. Surely one problem is the immovably high segregation index in a majority of neighborhoods and schools, and not only in the United States.[16] Under these conditions, "integration," as various scholars imagine it, is an *improbable option*. Another difficulty is the tendency many have to conflate *desegregation* or *spatial mixing* with the more demanding conditions of true integration, which presumably would ensure real equality of opportunity (Carter, 2012; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Merry, 2013; powell, 2005). For equality of opportunity to get any traction at all, there first would need to be equality of recognition, status and treatment. Equality of recognition and status would require that all children are seen to have the same intrinsic value irrespective of personal traits, cultural or socioeconomic background, or racial identity. Meanwhile, equality of treatment points toward equity concerns, namely that students are educated in ways proportionate to need. As we have seen throughout this paper, we continue to be a considerable distance from this ideal.

Lastly, empirical findings from the past sixty years concerning structural inequality, which, as we have demonstrated in this paper, is endemic to school systems in several countries to one degree or another, challenge the integrationist account. Even in so-called "integrated" schools, limited evidence shows the existence of very heterogeneous peer groups or high school classrooms in terms of race, social class background or ability, no matter how mixed the school population might be (Conger, 2005; Darby & Rury, 2018; Darity & Jolla, 2009; Downey & Condron, 2016; Eyler et al., 1983; Francis & Darity, 2021; Hallinan & Williams, 1989; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2015; Vasquez-Heilig & Holme, 2013). Where we have evidence of mixed classrooms, much of it points toward differentiated treatment owing to teacher bias and stereotype threat (Castro, 2008; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Steele, 1997). Further, magnet schools—whose purpose by design was to mitigate segregation—continue to be organized in ways that often benefit more privileged students (Davis, 2014; West, 1994), in large part because of how more educated and affluent parents game the system by ensuring that their own children are advantaged in those settings (Brantlinger, 2003; Calarco, 2018; Gilbertson & Dey, 2021; Kelly & Price, 2011; Merry, 2021; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013; Saatcioglu & Skrtic, 2019).

In sum, we are able to highlight a number of key facts about the social segregation and the limited integration of schools and students. First, the research repeatedly implicates the effects of inequality of opportunity created by de jure—imposed and hence involuntary—segregation.[17] Across the globe in countries where there is a legacy of de jure segregation – whether based upon caste, ethnicity, tribe or race—many highly segregated schools do not perform as well on the outcomes that we use to "measure" mobility, greater well-being, and productivity later in life. Berkeley economist Rucker Johnson's (2019) new book, *Children of the Dream*, carefully advances this point through critical findings from a longitudinal study of a cohort of adults who were children in the 1960s and '70s who attended segregated versus more racially and economically diverse schools. Across the United States, Johnson found that adults with the best life outcomes, on average, had attended more economically and racially balanced schools.

Yet despite Johnson's and other researchers' findings on the critical importance of opportunity-rich schools and neighborhoods (tacitly understood often as "integrated"), enduring ideological and political resistance to racial and ethnic integration in the United States since the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Topeka, KS Board of Education* decision have led to the most anemic forms of implementation. First, federal and district court decisions have virtually dismantled any widespread existence of de jure "integration," and second, the authentic practices of "true integration" (powell, 2005) exist minimally in U.S. schools.

Indeed, improper attention to more robust understandings of integration, or deeper inclusion, very likely explains why the *within-school/between-race-ethnicity* disparities in academic outcomes have not been as impressive as the *between-school/within-race- ethnicity* differences that Johnson and others have found (Chetty et al., 2018; Reardon, 2016). Strikingly, in the United States, many well-resourced school districts—several of which are found in liberal college towns and cities such as Palo Alto, Chapel Hill, Madison, and Ann Arbor—have some of the *widest racial achievement disparities* (see the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford data and the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University). Such findings remind us of the salient differences between *absolute* and *relative* gains. That is, in theory, school desegregation and/or "diverse" schools as they currently function have the potential to chip away at accumulated disadvantages experienced first-hand by youth previously exposed to impoverished schooling conditions. Nonetheless, most studies—ironically including those whose authors argue most passionately for school integration—consistently show how the practices of "integration" in the United States and elsewhere (e.g., South Africa and the Netherlands) effectively renders select groups of ethno-racial minoritized students as second-class citizens (Carter, 2012; Darby & Rury, 2018; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Merry, 2013; Tyson, 2011). Not surprisingly, then, we find that the reduction of the relative gaps between Whites, African Americans, Latinx, and Native Americans has moved at a snail's pace. That, we argue, is because stratification within diverse schools is not a proxy for integration.

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[16] See, for instance, the multiple national studies in Bakker et al. (2011).

[17] Although it is possible to disentangle de jure and de facto segregation, very few have attempted to do this. But see Merry (2013), who has examined in detail the various ways in which voluntary clustering of persons sharing a similar background often—though not always—coincides with involuntary forces, such that the dynamics of historical discrimination indiscernibly intertwine with a preference for "being with one's own." One expression of this complex dynamic is described by George Cain (1970) in his novel, Blues-child Baby: "There is one reason I don't visit my people like I should, they live too far away from the warmth and protection of the community. Always vulnerable, naked and defenseless out there, away from your people" (p. 84).

None of this is to deny that occasional integration successes occur, or that any number of individuals may have greatly profited from a transfer program or mixed educational setting. From time to time, evidence of this sort comes to light (e.g., Johnson, 2019; Wells, 2009). Nor do we reject the *ideal* of integration—arguably, important for substantive social progress and harmony. Instead, what we take issue with is the belief that integration will somehow naturally produce equal status and treatment to historically marginalized groups incorporated in educational environments, from K-12 to higher education. Derrick Bell (1980) argued several decades ago that in the rush to embrace the promise of the 1954 *Brown* decision, the (White) liberal establishment adopted a patronizing attitude toward the urban (non-White) poor, coupled with a faith in school desegregation as a social panacea. Accordingly, he argued, the liberal establishment belied its denial of the "permanence of racism."

Finally, as the previous section on top-performing minority schools has made clear, we must not conflate segregation with harm. Segregation per se is not the issue where educational success is concerned. Rather the question is whether segregation coincides with an absence of relevant and enabling resources; conventionally, it does. When those resources are absent, then schools and communities need to search for the most effective responses. However, it is not a foregone conclusion that weakly implemented forms of either socially diverse schools is the most feasible—or even desirable–way to address the matters at hand.

Educational Inequality from a Developmental Perspective

Individual or micro-level forms of inequality occur not only in differences of social and emotional learning, personal traits and qualities (e.g., Duckworth, 2016; Dweck, 2008), but also with respect to differences of human development, which unsurprisingly are affected by social and economic contexts. More than 25 years ago, researchers stressed the long-term impact of poverty on *young* children and their long-term well-being (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1994). Again, using the logic of how well children score on tests and diagnostics, studies have found significant academic disparities between young children (age 5 or less) from affluent, middle, low-income, and poor families (Chaudry et al., 2017; Garcia & Weiss, 2017). Further, studies from economics, biology, and psychology links early differences not only to being born into poverty but also to the intergenerational and epigenetic effects of poverty and low parent education. At present, we either read or hear in the media increasingly about the impact of "toxic stress" from a host of environmental factors, including poverty and trauma, and how these affect the brain structures of young children in adverse ways. As a recent report declares, "the weight of the causal evidence does indeed indicate that income poverty itself causes negative child outcomes, especially when poverty occurs in early childhood or persists throughout a large portion of childhood" (National Academies of Sciences Report, 2019a, p. S-2).

For toddlers and young children, the "achievement gap" had become the equivalent of the so-called "word gap," which one widely cited study whose findings gained much traction showed that low-income children enter kindergarten and first grade with significantly few words than their affluent peers (Hart & Risley, 2003). Since then, the exact scope of these alleged differences has been both debated and debunked (e.g., Adair et al., 2017; Gilkerson et al., 2017; Sperry et al., 2019). Nevertheless, evidence continually reveals that achievement disparities compound as students move farther along in grade school (Chaudry et al., 2017).

Notably, investments in early education for disadvantaged children from birth to age 5 help some to reduce the achievement disparities among young children; reduce the need for special education; increase the likelihood of healthier lifestyles, lower the crime rate, and reduce overall social costs (Campbell et al., 2014; Heckman, 2011). Policies that provide *high quality* early childhood education (ECE) and support to the most disadvantaged children produce greater social and economic equity (Chaudry et al., 2017; Hendren & Sprung-Keyser, 2019).

Increased attention to high quality early childhood practices should demand that we continue to invest more funds into understanding this critical development period of human development. Noticeably, few schools of education emphasize ECE training, especially since states

do not mandate credentials for ECE teachers and other practitioners. From a research perspective, there are fewer sociological studies about this population because of the difficulty of the study of—we can't really interview them well, for example—and access to young children and toddlers outside voluntary clinical or lab settings. Meanwhile, federal, state and local policymakers are now calling for universal high-quality preschools and kindergarten. However, we lack a depth of understanding about the varied measures of young children's ways of knowing, their expressions and engagement. Instead, we get the same patterns and narratives that we hear about older youth in terms of the discourse of "achievement gaps." Yet, just what does it mean to "achieve" at two and three years old? How much does variability in individuality account for developmental and "achievement" differences? New questions could abound, and they do, especially for many parents who observe anecdotally differences between their children and others. This, we believe, is a terrain where more diverse and other types of research could flourish with the proper theorization and method building.

Some Enduring Challenge Areas to Educational Equity The Shortage of Effective Teachers

Few will disagree that one of the most crucially important resources essential to any child's education is an effective teacher. Virtually everyone can remember a teacher who stood out from the crowd, someone who inspired and motivated students to believe in themselves, achieve new things, aspire to become a different kind of person. Effective teachers usually have high expectations for all of their students, they strive to treat everyone equitably, i.e., according to need, and many good teachers serve as the an important role model in a child's life. This line of thinking has motivated efforts to introduce incentives to attract the most experienced teachers to the schools with the highest need (Merry, 2020).

Unfortunately, effective teachers are not in abundance; indeed, most countries struggle with a significant teacher shortfall, and even when there are enough teachers to go around, relatively few will be above average. Typically, schools serving high concentrations of disadvantaged children are more likely to have teachers with less experience and fewer qualifications (Clotfelter, 2006; Clotfelter et al., 2009; Hanushek et al., 2004). Pupils with teachers who have fewer terminal degrees in their area of teaching are less likely to be adequately challenged. Additionally, most public-school students in the United States are less likely to be taught by teachers who come from similar social backgrounds or have some depth of insight into their students' economic and social realities. In 2015–16, there were an estimated 3,827,100 public school teachers in the United States. More than 80% of them were White and middle-class, while less than half of public school students fit that description, and 77% of teachers were female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Elementary and secondary school teachers are disproportionately Whiter and more female than the students in their classrooms, despite a strong body of research that indicates that a diverse teaching staff benefits students of all races, and particularly racially minoritized students (Cherng & Halpin, 2015; Gershenson et al., 2018; Rizga, 2016). Professionals often have their own reasons for wanting to enter education, and more specifically, to avoid teaching in schools where the workload is often demanding, has lower status, and pays less than other fields (Ingersoll, 2001; Merry, 2020). Further, for underrepresented minorities, the allure of higher-paying professional fields likely pertains to desires to build greater economic foundations for themselves than teaching can provide. As the data show, college-educated African American and Latinx persons generally do not go into the teaching profession.

Previously, we discussed the power of the implementation of culturally responsive curricula and the ethics of care and attention to students from historically marginalized

backgrounds as means to support equitable education and produce stronger academic outcomes. What we know is that far too many teachers are not properly trained to do any of this effectively (Carter & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Sleeter, 2001), nor are many of racial, ethnic, or economic backgrounds that would equip them with deeper insights about the ecology of their students' lives. All of this urgently points to a need for a multi-pronged strategy: a need to diversify the teacher workforce; to incentivize and improve teacher education programs; to promote deeper, reflective learning in teacher education programs in schools of education; and to finance and expand more adequate teacher support in induction programs and professional learning communities.

School Choice and the Charter School Debate

A polemicized term in the American lexicon, and in other countries, "school choice" continues to divide scholarly opinion about the direction of the types of schools in which states should be investing for equity. Emerging on the education landscape more than 30 years ago, partly in response to theory about effective school organization and outcomes (Chubb & Moe, 2011), and partly in response to "new" grassroots reformers' calls to action in large cities across the United States for alternatives to traditional public schooling,[18] charter schools now constitute a critical mass of new public schools. Charter schools serve more than 10% of the metropolitan area public school population (Epple et al., 2015); and they "compete" with traditional public schools (TPSs) in many urban school districts—often plagued by incessant narratives of underperformance in low-income schools and communities—on matters such as per capita student dollars, effective leadership and teachers, and family support. Responsive to increased political support from various constituencies desirous of significantly better educational outcomes for their children; some favorable public opinion; and the existence of successful performances in select schools and networks, charter schools have proliferated significantly during the last 25 years. Natural disasters (Hurricane Katrina), political conditions, and/or consumer demand even facilitated the unprecedented situation of a district's moving to 100% charter schools (New Orleans, Louisiana), or to a hybrid model of the co-existence of a critical mass of charter schools and traditional public schools (e.g., Oakland, California).

Notably, in the United States, charter schools serve higher proportions of African American, Hispanic/Latinx students than typical public schools (TPSs): 29% versus 17%; and 27% versus 23%. Charters and TPSs serve roughly similar proportions of students on free and reduced lunch, 51% versus 48%, respectively. Due to the selection bias inherent in the choice process at many schools—that is, the selection of charter schools for attendance is non-random because of choice—measuring the direct effect of charter schools on student performance has been difficult to assess. There are exceptions, of course, in the case of lottery-based charter schools. As Epple et al. (2016) state, "[a]cross the various geographic locations, researchers have generally found no overall average effect, small positive, or even small negative average effects." Further, many studies show that student achievement for charter schools in their initial years are often negative, but student achievement—as one might expect—generally improves as these schools mature, which suggests that policymakers should not expect charter schools to produce success overnight. The overall impact of charter schools as a major reform movement has yet to be determined. Whatever the case, for now, they add to the mosaic of school types available for families seeking educational opportunity for their children.

Studies using quantitative methodologies in political science, economics and sociology continue to debate about the "right" methods to assess charter effectiveness, with some arguing that studies relying upon lotteries to assign students randomly to a charter and TPSs are more conclusive and find larger positive effects of charter schools on student performance (e.g., Hoxby & Muraka, 2007). We know less about the attributions of these larger effects: is it, for instance, more per capita spending on students and philanthropic support? Or, is it more stringent teacher selection and sorting owing to fewer regulations? For the time being, researchers disagree about the right techniques and comparisons to make truly causal statements about charter schools' efficacy (for a summary, see Epple et al., 2016).

Meanwhile, others have relied on the CREDO studies led by Stanford researcher Margaret Raymond because of its innovative, longitudinal design. Initially, charter school students' results did not show significant improvement from their TPS peers, but the CREDO findings have been interpreted optimistically since the overall performance of charter schools has been shown to improve over time. At the same time, however, students' performance in many charter schools are still lagging behind students in TPSs and, overall, the results across the two [CREDO] studies do not show a pattern of systematic improvement (Epple et al., 2016). As it stands, research evidence about the overall effectiveness of charters is mixed. Additionally, charter schools often share services with local school districts, including busing. Typically, they serve fewer special needs students, who generally require additional services (Epple et al., 2016). Although many TPSs also do not serve children with a variety of disabilities (or do not serve them well[19], there are many examples of charter schools that specialize in serving students with disabilities (e.g., autism).

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[18] Many consider civil rights activist Annette Polly Williams and Howard Fuller, former school superintendent in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the creators of the first school choice legislation in the United States.

[19] There are in fact many reports of children with disabilities being "warehoused" in regular state schools. See for example Truong (2018) or from the UK, Brooks (2018).

Therefore, it is important that we are even-handed when assessing the evidence about what charters ostensibly do or do not do. We cannot ignore, however, that the demand for services and resources following students who leave TPSs for charters poses a significant systemic challenge for school districts across the United States, however, one might assess the evidence.

There are many arguments opposing charter schools. Some simply oppose "school choice" full stop (e.g., DiMartino & Jessen, 2018). Others assert that choice policies lead to greater "racial isolation" (e.g., Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). A third perspective is to express concern about the capacity of poor people to make informed choices where their own children are concerned (e.g., Ben-Porath & Johanek, 2019). While there are reasons to be worried that low-income individuals may have less access to reliable information and privileged social networks, there are several difficulties attending the "choice skeptic" analysis.

First, labels like "anti-choice" are used as proxies for "progressive" attitudes vis-à-vis educational inequality, but such labels generally elide the ways in which school choice operates by default, i.e., via residential location. Regardless of one's politics, those with more fiscal resources can complacently oppose choice policies for "other people's children," knowing that they do not have to make a choice. Indeed, a high-quality school often comes with the price of one's real estate. Second, we note how concerns about "racial isolation" are selectively applied to minoritized communities, brown and black people in particular; and rarely does one hear about the racial isolation of White and affluent communities[20], or the habit of White parents—irrespective of their political leanings—avoiding brown and Black space (Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Merry, 2021).[21] Third, as we have seen, there is a troubling deficit mentality used to describe low-income parents generally, and low-income parents of color in particular, coupled with an implicitly racist assumption concerning the ability of low-income and racially minoritized parents to make informed decisions about the education of their own child.[22]

Additionally, across the world there are strong legal protections, coupled with morally principled reasons, for parents to select a form of education they believe is best suited to their child's needs. These protections have long been enshrined in state constitutions, the European Convention on Human Rights [art. 2], and the Declarations of Human Rights [art. 26.3]. Further, in all societies the freedom to choose and voluntarily associate with similar others coincides with segregation, whether by ethnicity/race, culture, religion, or social class. And the moral principle of voluntary association, coupled with constitutional liberties on offer in all liberal democratic societies, have inclined low-income and minoritized parents to pursue educational alternatives for their children[23] *under existing conditions of de facto segregation*, whether they be denominational schools, charter publics, or increasingly in many countries, homeschooling (Gaither 2017). Importantly, too, given the focus on this paper, we can stress that many parents exercise their constitutional rights to choose an educational alternative for their child to mitigate the effects of institutional racism in the school system.[24]

The Private Domain of the Family

Considerations of the role of family in the reproduction of educational inequality is a double-edged sword. Nearly all parents unconditionally love their children and do what they think is best for them. Yet some expressions of parental support clearly yield educational advantages. First, going back to the seminal work of Bowles and Gintis (1994), the cultural ethos of schools is argued to favor upper- and middle-class families over low-income ones. Indeed, the differential resources due to inherited wealth and wide disparities of jobs, income, housing, health care, and other factors can easily countervail an increase of in-school resources. Second, the acquisition of social and (dominant) cultural capital predisposes some students to have greater school attainment than others (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Some involve parents' passing along their passions and interests in the form of cultural capital, whether these take the form of teaching and learning (e.g., exposing children early to independent reading or knowledge about things deemed to have mainstream cultural importance); or forming specific social ties through peer groups; or selecting high-performing schools and classes; or fostering modes of self-expression (e.g., table talk and being socialized to articulate one's ideas and preferences). Further, advantages come from the ability to spend one's free time effectively (e.g., structured play, or participating in team sports and other social clubs), or even how to think about one's future (e.g., advice on which courses in school to take, but also how to think ahead and plan for university or a career).

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[20] This includes White clustering in highly mixed environments. For an example from London, see Vowden (2012).

[21] See Norman (2017).

[22] Importantly, as other researchers have noted, even high levels of education and social capital do not guarantee that one is able to activate one's social capital if they are not familiar with how the "field" of school choice operates (Lareau Evans & Yee, 2016; Merry & Arum, 2018).

[23] See for example Shapiro (2019).

[24] Several authors (Brynard, 2007; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2013; Olatunji, 2017) report that Black parents increasingly are interested in homeschooling for precisely this reason: to protect their children from the deleterious effects of school-based racism.

Annette Lareau's work on social class and parenting is relevant here. Lareau (2011) coined the term, *concerted cultivation* to refer to the conscious and sometimes unconscious ways that well-educated middle-class and affluent parents seek to educate their children inside and outside of the home by encouraging certain etiquette and behavioral norms, membership in recognized social clubs, but also a particular communication style, including negotiation and dialogue. In contrast to working-class parents whom Lareau describes as possessing a parenting style that facilitates what she calls the *accomplishment of natural growth,* where children defer to adult authority because their opinions do not seem to matter, concerted cultivation entails the ceaseless pursuit of "teachable moments" throughout the day with one's child.

Notice that parents—including scholars such as ourselves researching educational inequality—may pass along these advantages to their children without any kind of explicit competitive motivation in mind, even if doing so unquestionably provides real competitive advantages. Notice, too, that parents who advantage their children in various ways need not be opposed to efforts or interventions aimed at reducing unfair inequality. Indeed, one vexing challenge for those of us committed to reducing educational inequality is that we can be *simultaneously engaged in doing both.*

The critical point here is that we recognize how much inequality is in fact rooted in the resource context of family unit itself, where, again, resources are both material and immaterial, And notice: (a) most of us believe that the family serves a child's interest; and accordingly, (b) few are likely to argue we ought to give it up.

Here, then, is the inescapable conundrum: some relative educational inequality of opportunities is likely to persist, in large part because of the freedom given to families and value of their autonomy as social entities (Merry, 2020). The troubling implication here is that educational inequality is not likely to gain much traction so long as we look *exclusively* to institutional changes and not to cultural change. Different models of self, community, and beliefs about the functions of education exist. That is, dominant educational ideology of both K-12 and higher education engenders competition for socioeconomic mobility; it promulgates self-interest.

Further, it conflicts frequently with other belief systems about education for the collective and common good (Labaree, 1997), toward which many historically marginalized, racially minoritized, and lower-income communities lean (see Ishimaru, 2019; Warren et al., 2011). That is, contrary to the conventional parental involvement research, which views parents as agents reproducing the tacitly understood school culture, new critical frameworks of *parent engagement* designate parents as citizens in the fullest sense—change-agents who dare to transform urban schools and neighborhoods (Shirley, 1997).

To be sure, persons subscribing to beliefs of equality and justice—which again includes members of the education research community—will also need to interrogate how they view the fundamental purposes of education, as well as their own behaviors (e.g., social preferences, residential choices, advocacy behaviors) and ask whether these—however "innocent" they may seem—in fact contribute the maintenance of the status quo. Inequality will not diminish itself without focused attention to all domains that breed it, including the private domain of family decisions and our individual choices that collude in its reproduction.

Summary and Conclusions

Economic and social inequality are often significant factors inside of schools and communities. Racist thinking and institutional norms, too, continue to permeate schools, neighborhoods and wider society. And perhaps, the most insidious thing about racism is the fact that it so often does not manifest through explicit fearmongering, or through slurs and hate, but through the very institutions designed to lift people up and through the very words and deeds of many individuals who genuinely care about those whom they teach and look after.

Although we observe the enormity of these problems, from classrooms to the playgrounds and beyond, often we fail to address them, instead making modest reforms in order to create some room for a few more students from historically underserved communities to get by. Obviously, we are not doing enough.

From the stated missions and goals of foundations with multibillion-dollar endowments, such as Ford, Gates, and Chan-Zuckerberg Foundations, to bills of legislatures and Congress to the hundreds of journal and books articles, we find many wrestling with the issues. Well-meaning individuals desire to reduce inequality of opportunity in the name of a fairer and more just society. The body of educational inequality research is vast; and scholars and researchers approach it from numerous perspectives, disciplines and methodologies. Also, they address the social problems of education from multiple levels of analysis and different research designs, some generalizable and others more interpretative. A point of convergence is this unavoidable fact: (educational) inequality endures, and it is highly correlated with specific race, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender backgrounds—or some combination of these—across societies. Researchers have designed studies and proffered innumerable explanations for why inequality occurs. Yet, few have actually ventured into the study of *how* to reduce it substantially (Carter & Reardon, 2014). When we do, unsurprisingly, there is a great deal of disagreement not only concerning how best to devise, implement, or scale up, successful strategies that – however imperfectly – can reduce inequality.

Then there is the inevitable declaration about the high costs of reducing inequality and achieving equity. “We can’t really afford it,” many argue. Yet, as we see how schools and demographics are rapidly changing, we arguably cannot really afford not to reduce it either, not if we care to avoid an economic apartheid society in the United States and to lessen the likelihood of declining productivity and overall national health.

Academic or educational mobility, as we know it, is a competitive social and cultural process, and the allocation of resources within stratified educational systems around the world benefits those with the competitive advantages. Individually, those who will avail themselves of this mobility will hail from myriad social backgrounds. However, the proportional representation of the various social *groups* of individuals will not likely reflect the population as a whole, in part because of the nature of inequality and the political will and commitment needed to attain equity. We have seen argued that a narrow focus on *schools* alone will not suffice to overcome the myriad challenges of inequality in education. Based on the cumulative amount of evidence that has been produced by scholars and researchers globally, we do not believe that the greatest possibility of the reduction of educational inequality will occur without society’s paying off their “debts” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and attending the needs of their historically marginalized, minoritized, and economically disadvantaged groups.

Focused attention on the reduction of poverty and wealth inequality should be an aspiration of a society that desires to take care of all of its children and youth holistically. Clearly, that aspiration would take sustained political movements and acts of Congress in the case of the United States to move us forward. Comparatively, some of these practices are baked already into the national cultures of other societies.

Despite all of this, absolute growth and improvement within social groups, schools and communities are possible. Based on the research literature, we have attempted to synthesize and highlight how an attainment of ample resources and inputs—materially, culturally, institutionally, and organizationally—in disadvantaged communities can and will produce greater equity, and even further, enhance democratic society. Further, we suggest that given that test scores are largely explained by SES conditions in families and schools, the educational research community could broaden the scope and meanings of “success.” How might students’ educational trajectories be shifted if researchers discontinued the use of tests as the main signifiers of their success, and instead focused more deeply on what the factors needed to sustain their engagement and overall well-being? To be clear, we do not disavow the diagnostic power of tests. However, we cannot ignore that they have produced ongoing “symbolic violence”—harmful narratives (masked as either benign or unintentional) about specific groups’ ability to perform and learn. These practices and narratives persist amid massive evidence about the wide differences in the ecology of these children’s lives and the opportunity gaps between their families, communities, and schools, and the ones of their more affluent peers.

Finally, successful schools with a majority of minoritized youth exist across societies. We must inquire more deeply about and seek to emulate—to the extent possible—societies, states, districts, and schools where the highest performances among minoritized youth occur. What meta-level studies can the research community produce that illuminate the most effective practices and policies across these contexts? What are the in-school resources and inputs in such that are that effective, in the face of the current national economic climate/ethos in the United States and around the globe? In sum, *inequality itself is multi-faceted and complex, and so too are the approaches and strategies necessary to tackle it*. Significant reductions of educational inequality demand equity, a constellation of resources that range from economic to human, social, and cultural resources to make it possible that society’s members all have a fair chance to thrive and succeed in life. We know a great deal about what is causing our troubles. It takes courage and significant will, however, to overcome them.

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