Fifty years after the Coleman Report delineated deep inequities across race and ethnicity in school contexts and outcomes, American families still navigate largely inequitable educational systems. The Coleman Report—perhaps with only slightly veiled surprise—also revealed the deep value African Americans place on education, their strong motivation to succeed, and the high expectations that they have for academic success. This article provides a critical analysis of the policies designed to increase equity in and access to high-quality education. With a special focus on adolescents, we show how these policies are experienced differently by families in ways that sustain inequities across ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic background. We also review research on the experiences of students in schools, arguing that policy attempts to mitigate disparities in educational experiences across race and socioeconomic conditions have had little if any effect.

Keywords: educational inequities; school choice; Coleman Report; parenting; school context; race

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DOI: 10.1177/0002716217730618
call to many at the time of its release—a decade after court rulings on desegregation (e.g., *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*) (Coleman et al. 1966). According to the report, 80 percent of all Euro-American/white students attended schools that were 80 to 100 percent Euro-American. African Americans were the most segregated, with nearly 100 percent segregation in the South. In 1966, the average African American attended schools where 65 percent of the teachers were African American, with racially matched teachers nearly 100 percent in the South. Further, African Americans had less access to facilities that promoted achievement (e.g., science labs, gymnasium) and weaker curricula in 1966. This was especially true in the South. Not surprisingly, African Americans scored lower than Euro-Americans on standardized tests, and Asian Americans scored higher than both groups.

Within the schools and classrooms in 1966, African American children were more likely to be in classes with peers whose parents had less educational attainment than were their Euro-American counterparts. African American students were exposed to schools with greater turmoil and academic issues than the average Euro-American student. For example, African Americans were more likely to attend schools with high dropout rates and lower attendance rates than their Euro-American counterparts. One in four African American students was likely to be exposed to schools with high dropout rates, while this was true for only one out of every ten Euro-American students. Further, African Americans were more likely to attend schools with less experienced teachers. These characteristics of the school context (e.g., peers, teachers, curriculum) were more strongly related to academic outcomes for African Americans, compared to Euro-Americans.

Similar disparities and inequities remain today—more than 50 years later. Indeed, segregation is deepening, rather than declining (Ayscue and Orfield 2015; Orfield and Frankenberg 2013). As was the case in 1966, Euro-American students today attend schools with a majority of other Euro-Americans (81.9 percent; Walsemann, Bell, and Maitra 2011). In contrast, African Americans attend schools comprising an average of 35 percent Euro-Americans. Latinos attend the most segregated schools in the nation (Hill and Torres 2010). Further, African American and Latino youth are much more likely to attend schools that have fewer resources, less experienced teachers, high rates of behavioral problems among students, fewer advanced courses, and fewer guidance and career counselors than are Euro-American youth (Hill and Torres 2010; Hill 2011; Reardon and Bischoff 2011). There are disparities in the quality of the curriculum. African Americans and Latinos are also less likely to have teachers who match their racial/ethnic background today than in 1966.

One clear difference today, compared to 50 years ago, is the significant increase in Latino students in U.S. schools. Although the Coleman Report included Latinos, especially Puerto Rican youth, in its figures, the emphasis was on disparities between African Americans and Euro-Americans. In 2017, the demographics of the American school population reflect diversity that has increased substantially. Even between 2003 and 2014, the Euro-American student population in the United States decreased from 59 percent to 49 percent, whereas the Latino population increased from 19 percent to 25 percent and the
African American population remained relatively flat (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics 2015). With inequities in access to high-quality education persisting and ethnic and racial gaps in achievement pernicious and resistant to improvement after more than 50 years, both market-based and empowerment strategies to reduce inequality of access and achievement gaps have been employed.

In this article, we analyze policy attempts to mitigate educational inequality, and how those policies have been experienced by parents and families and by youth in American schools. We pay particular attention to adolescents as they prepare for postsecondary transitions into college and the labor market.

A range of policy approaches have aimed to redress inequalities and inequities. These include school finance policies (see Rebell, this volume), cross-sector collaborations (see Riehl and Lyon, this volume), market forces and privatization such as school voucher programs (see Mizala and Torche, this volume), and standards-based reforms, among other policies. This article focuses on student assignment policies aimed at improving school equity, including empowerment strategies such as choice and voucher policies. Legal means to reduce inequalities, and demand desegregation and equitable funding across schools have not been effective—it has instead resulted in “white flight” from urban districts (Ryan 2010; Edsall and Edsall 1992; Orfield 2001). Indeed, the Coleman Report described the ways that Euro-American families exercised “choice” in 1966: moving their children to predominantly white suburbs or enrolling them in private schools. A report commissioned in 1970 to document the progress of desegregation reported the significant increase in the establishment of segregated private schools to receive the “white flight” from integration (Fancher 1970). Providing parents with market-based strategies, such as school choice, charter schools, and vouchers, arose as a means for reducing inequality, by providing low-income and families of color with choices that are not tied to economic means. That is, they address inequalities and inequities through parental empowerment. These strategies serve the dual goal of allowing middle-class and Euro-Americans more options to stay in an urban district while navigating racially diverse schools and providing low-income parents the options to leave low-performing schools in their neighborhoods—thereby attempting to create equity and equality by putting parents “in control.” Such policies shift the responsibility from schools to parents—parents can select their desired school. Thus, equity in school means giving parents sufficient choice to obtain the education they want for their children (Scott 2013).

**Assignment Policy Tools to Address Inequality**

Around the same time as the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Friedman (1955) envisioned vouchers that parents could take to any school of their choosing—taking their public school per capita budgeted expenditure with them. Vouchers would allow parents to exercise choice and signal high- and low-quality
schools without moving neighborhoods. Friedman predicted that market pressures would entice low-quality schools to improve or close. And the significant reduction in budget due to voucher transfers would almost ensure that schools not chosen by parents would become worse. It also was assumed that high-quality schools would be replicated, merely because of demand. Friedman imagined that schools would have children from many different neighborhoods, enhancing the demographic diversity of the school. However, his primary goal was the creation of competition among schools, not diversity (Friedman 1955).

Within market-based systems, consumer choice provides the key mechanism by which forces are applied to producers to incentivize quality goods. In the education marketplace, parents are these consumers (Friedman 1955). Consumers make decisions in their individual best interest or, in the case of the education market, in their child's best interest. Therefore, if a goal of school choice policies is to increase equitable access to high-quality education or racial/ethnic/economic integration, they will require individual parents to support this goal by simultaneously considering the needs of their own child and the impact of their choice on the needs of all students in the system. That is, such policies rely on the outcome of a collective movement and assume that individual family decisions in the best interests of one's own child will also benefit other students in the school district. In reality, families are making individual decisions based on the best interest of their children and these individual choices have not resulted in a collective movement that reduces educational inequality in the way that policymakers often say or hope that they do (Jonathan 1989; Ryan 2010). An analysis of parents' decision-making preferences, sources of information, and selection processes provides evidence of how well equipped school choice policies are to achieve these goals.

In the 1990s, Chubb and Moe revitalized Friedman's idea that parents, behaving like consumers in an education market, could motivate competition and thus innovation in schools. They argued that empowering parents to choose would allow the specific needs of individual students to be central to the process (Chubb and Moe 1990). However, even early on, they understood the potential limitations that would need remediation to ensure efficiency and equity in the market. Specifically, they understood that varying access to information could result in parents making choices that are not in their child's best interest (Chubb and Moe 1990). Because public education serves both the individual and society, choices that are not in the best interest of the individual child are also not in the best interest of society. When some parents are able to make decisions in their children's best interest and others are not, if the empowered parents do not then consider the interests of less advantaged children, the market creates winners and losers. And those winners and losers are children and society.

As such, economists, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, conservative and liberal policy-makers, and advocates disagree about how those imperfections affect the merit of parent choice as a policy, with concerns about equity at the forefront of the debate. Researchers theorize that truly free, rational choice in the education market is compromised because Euro-American middle-class and wealthy parents have greater resources and information and have fewer
“market constraints.” Some argue that minority parents do not consider the most academically rigorous schools, which are predominantly Euro-American, in part, due to a lack of trust in majority-dominant institutions (Wells and Crain 1992) and because of their desire for culturally inclusive environments. In contrast, other theorists prefer policies focused on parental choices over government driven reallocation of educational resources, suggesting that parents evaluate schools as effectively as experts and know their children’s needs best (Bast and Walberg 2004). However, parents are not always able to effectively judge the quality of schools. Parents often misidentify the reading proficiency rates, racial composition and discipline incidences at the schools that they choose (Schneider et al. 1998; Van Dunk and Dickman 2002) and may move their children into failing schools (Stein, Goldring, and Cravens 2011). Even as parents’ choice processes are similar across ethnicity, actual choices differ in academic quality (Bell 2009).

Regardless of whether parents are equipped to make individual choices that benefit all children, there has been a significant increase in school choice policies since the 1990s that requires parents to make such choices. From a combination of parents’ self-reports and inferences based on actual choices, parent preferences for school characteristics vary considerably based on urbanicity and the structure of the school choice system studied. For example, parents consistently show a preference for school proximity, but their willingness to trade location for academic achievement varies based on context and, presumably, the availability of free public transportation (Hastings, Kane, and Staiger 2005; Glazerman 1998; Goyette 2008; Fuller and Elmore 1996). Indeed, Coleman’s analysis in 1966 anticipated this finding, reporting that African American parents preferred enrolling their children in schools closer to home because of the high cost of transportation (cf. Coleman et al. 1966, 472).

Another consistent finding that is at odds with the goals of integration and equity is that parents seek schools comprising mostly their own race (Hastings, Kane, and Staiger 2005; Glazerman 1998; Goyette 2008; Fuller and Elmore 1996; Saporito and Lareau 1999). Further, parents choose schools where the average achievement score or academic reputation matches their child’s achievement (Glazerman 1998; Bell 2009).

While, on average, parents of all races prefer schools where their race is in the majority, Euro-American parents demonstrate an active avoidance of majority African American schools (Saporito and Lareau 1999). Indeed, an analysis of the characteristics of schools selected as parents’ first choice in a diverse urban district (i.e., 31 percent African American, 42 percent Latino, and 14 percent Euro-American) showed that parents seem to prefer ethnic and racial diversity, but only when there is a critical mass of “same race” students in the school (Johnston 2015). While racial composition is less likely to cause African American parents to eliminate a school, they do show a slight avoidance of high-poverty schools (Saporito and Lareau 1999). Coleman anticipated that alternative assignment plans might impact racial/ethnic compositions of schools and, in fact, they do. Coleman quotes a superintendent who did not want to publish data of school demographics because he feared that white parents would avoid schools with “too much of a minority group in it” (Coleman et al. 1966, 463). In terms of
socioeconomic status (SES), high-SES parents are more likely to choose schools with high test scores (Hastings, Kane, and Staiger 2005), whereas low-SES parents are more likely to choose schools for reasons other than academics and in balancing competing demands often choose failing schools (Bell 2009). Not surprisingly, these preferences suggest that parents are unlikely to consider the needs of society as a whole, or broader equity goals, when making school decisions for their child.

Despite indicating preferences for certain school characteristics over others, parents’ decision-making does not always result in the selection of a school that matches their own preferences; nor does it always lead to a choice that will create equity for all students (Bell 2009; Stein, Goldring, and Cravens 2011). Given that there are often more options than parents can deeply evaluate, they often narrow their set of choices early on based on broad criteria. Bounded rational choice models suggest that humans cannot take into account all factors and information when making choices (Simon 1986). They use strategies to limit the options before digging into the deep analysis of options (Simon 1990). As part of this process, parents narrow their choice set based on information and beliefs about schools shared in their social networks (Holme 2002; Bell 2009; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003). While some ascribe the creation of narrowed choice sets to only the best-informed consumers, others find that most families engage in a two-step elimination and evaluation process (Bell 2009; Saporito and Lareau 1999; Buckley and Schneider 2003; Schneider et al. 1998).

While this two-step process of first eliminating and then evaluating exists among all racial groups, Euro-American families tend to eliminate schools in the first step based on race, whereas African American families tend to eliminate schools in the first step based on concentration of poverty (Saporito and Lareau 1999). Additionally, ethnic minority parents are more likely to choose programs with which they are familiar, but are less likely to be familiar with magnet schools and other choice options (Henig 1996). However, in an urban district with a range of SES among the African American and Euro-American populations (i.e., ethnicity and SES are less confounded), African Americans were not significantly less familiar with schools in the district (Hill 2017). While all parents appear to use information from social networks to make school choices, high-SES parents are more likely to rely on parents of their student’s school peers, while low-SES parents depend on information from family members (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003). In the end, even if their full set of choices are similar, differences in making the first cut results in inequitable choice sets (Bell 2009).

In addition to preferences about school characteristics and decision-making processes, an understanding of the sources of information used by parents to evaluate these factors is essential to assessing their effectiveness as choosers and, therefore, the effectiveness of school choice policies. In fact, the most relevant question when considering school choice effectiveness might not be an evaluation of parents’ capacity for rigorous decision-making, but an evaluation of the availability and quality of the information with which they can make those decisions (Lubienski 2008). As use of choice programs has increased, so have the number of choices available for parents to consider, as has the amount of
information about those choices. With the Internet and the enormous amount of information of varying quality and accuracy available, there may be too much for parents to assess (Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000). Through an analysis of parent Internet behavior, researchers found that few school websites offer information on programming or themes, instead focusing on objective input (i.e. student-to-teacher ratio) and output (i.e. achievement data) statistics. However, determining a school’s effectiveness, the value added to a student by attending, requires a sophisticated analysis of complex factors, not simple statistics, especially if it is based on students’ interests and learning styles (Lubienski 2008).

The limitations of formal school websites, however, may be less relevant for some parents. Based on a survey of what parents find useful, the perceived helpfulness of school-based and formal information sources decreases with parents’ education level, while the perceived value of information from their child’s peers’ parents and other social networks increases (Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000). Additionally, Euro-American parents also find fewer school-based and formal sources useful, while finding information from social networks more useful than do ethnic minority parents. In fact, Euro-American and highly educated parents find fewer sources of information useful overall (Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000). While parents of all races and backgrounds value information from their social networks (Holme 2002; Bell 2009; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003; Jonathan 1989), on average, urban minority parents talk with only one or two people about school options (Schneider et al. 1998). Therefore, for poor, minority parents, social networks may contain far fewer sources of information about schools and those sources are likely to be equally as disconnected as the parents themselves (Schneider et al. 1998).

As the original market-based school intervention, voucher programs aspire to grant low-income students access to formerly cost-prohibitive private schools. However, analyses of voucher programs’ impact on student achievement are mixed (Rouse 1998; Metcalf et al. 2002; Krueger and Zhu 2004; Howell et al. 2002; Greene 2000, Belfield 2006). If voucher-provided access to private schools does impact the achievement of individual students, especially students of color, as some of these studies suggest, an assessment of who uses voucher programs is essential. For vouchers to have a broad social impact, they must ensure equity as much as they ensure individual access. Unfortunately, voucher users are not representative of all public school students. Voucher users are more likely to have attended private schools before being offered a voucher, begging the question of whether they are subsidizing the status quo, instead of increasing social mobility (Belfield 2006; Paul, Legan, and Metcalf 2007). Further, admission procedures at schools accepting vouchers can lead to increased sorting by both income and ability (Chakrabarti 2013). Voucher recipients are disproportionately Euro-American or Hispanic, with African Americans underrepresented (Metcalf et al. 2002). In fact, after applying for and being awarded a voucher, low-income and minority students are less likely to use it (Paul, Legan, and Metcalf 2007). As the Coleman Report found, voucher and “freedom of choice” programs have resulted in the “token enrollment” of a few African American students in predominantly Euro-American schools (Coleman et al. 1966, 467). Thus, while voucher
programs might allow a number of students access to private schools, questions remain about who these programs benefit and if they serve the goal of achieving equity.

Contrary to the goal of desegregation and increased equity, school choice policies have enabled parents of all races to self-segregate in a way that reifies and continues to perpetuate institutional inequality. In fact, the effect of school choice on segregation has been one of the most well-documented and researched phenomena regarding the effects of school choice policies after Brown v. Board of Education (cf. Orfield and Frankenberg 2013). These policies have been implemented with the goal of giving parents more options to secure high-quality education for their children and, in the process, reduce inequities across racial and ethnic background. However, they have fallen short in part because true market pressures are not applied. That is, failing schools are not systematically closed or improved and parents do not systematically receive their top choice. Further, to reduce inequalities, such policies rely on parents’ choices to serve the needs of their own children while also serving the collective needs of society. Given the implicit individualism and competition in American culture, it is unreasonable to expect parents to make choices in the best interest of society rather than that of their own children. Even the language around having schools “compete” signals and triggers competition among families. Only some students will “win the lottery” for a seat in the best schools. This framing elicits a competitive, individualist mindset, rather than a collaborative one. Parents across race and ethnicity, then, experience these policies differently.

Parents’ Experiences with Choice across Ethnicity

Ethnic minority and low-income parents experience higher stakes when making school-choice decisions for their children. Often, these parents are not experiencing “choice” as opportunity but, rather, as navigating a set of unsatisfactory options and constraints. There are greater constraints on the options for African American, Latino, and low-income families, compared to middle-class and wealthy Euro-American families. Middle-class and wealthy Euro-Americans can use social capital and resources to increase their choices to include private schools outside their district and options to move out of a district to access schools that match their priorities. This means they can be more flexible in choice options and more “risky” in their choice of urban schools (Kimelberg 2014). Many such parents see themselves as taking a chance on urban schools, knowing they can move or consider private schools should it not work out. This flexibility is less true for African Americans, Latinos, and low-income families (Kimelberg 2014).

Further, ethnic minority parents often find that they must make trade-offs between academic excellence and affirming their child’s ethnic and cultural identity. Such trade-offs are often required for ethnic minority parents who send their children out of district to academically rigorous suburban schools or to
predominately Euro-American private schools (Hill 2009). These are schools where youth find themselves as cultural minorities and where they are likely to experience discrimination (Carter Andrews 2012) and diminished expectations (Tenenbaum and Ruck 2007). However, many endure the misfit and the discrimination and marginalization to gain access to academically rigorous schools—an inequitable cost.

Similarly, ethnic minority parents are often required to trade quality for safety. Like most parents, African American parents highly value academic achievement. However, when living in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty and crime, they must prioritize safety and often look for schools that have both strong academic standards and high levels of structure and discipline (Rhodes and DeLuca 2014; DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010). Many of these parents have concerns about sending their children to schools that are predominantly Euro-American. At the same time, they may find that their local school and its neighborhood are unsafe. Therefore, they often opt into charter schools that are more heavily concentrated with students of their own racial and ethnic backgrounds to allow their children to feel safe and comfortable in their school environments (Lewis and Danzig 2010). This increases racial segregation and often exposes African American youth to schools with no-nonsense disciplinary policies and strict expectations for conformity. Some research shows that strict monitoring and discipline does not facilitate the development of aspirations, creativity, and self-expression that is encouraged in higher-income private school and suburban settings (cf. Hill and Wang 2015). Similarly, low-income parents might choose a school that is farther away—not because it is academically better, but because doing so removes youth from neighborhoods or schools where there are gangs or where they find it too dangerous for their children to walk. Whereas the Coleman Report, in 1966, documented “token enrollment” of a few African American students in predominantly Euro-American schools as a result of choice plans; in 2017, choice plans experience far greater minority student and parent participation, but this results in enrollment in predominantly African American and Latino charter schools, rather than increasing integration.

African American, Latino, and low-income families more often find themselves juggling the high costs of the logistics of family life. Even while highly valuing academic achievement in selecting schools, the realities of balancing before-school and afterschool care, transportation, and navigating dangerous neighborhoods around neighborhood schools eclipse these parents’ ability to choose schools for academic rigor (Rhodes and DeLuca 2014; Kimelberg 2014; Condiffe, Boyd, and DeLuca 2015). For most low-income families, the best schools based on academics are far from where they live. Parents should be able to match their children to schools that fit their interests and learning styles. Low-income, urban parents are less able to actualize these goals than are middle-class parents; their choices often dissolve into choosing a school that is “not bad,” rather than a school that is great (Rhodes and DeLuca 2014).

African American and low-income students often find that their options for high school enrollment and school choice are diminished, and they often have fewer knowledgeable adults available to guide them through the school selection
process (Condliffe, Boyd, and DeLuca 2015) compared to middle-class students (Kimelberg 2014), even if they remain in the same urban district. In selecting high schools through school choice policies in an urban district, middle-class parents were more hypervigilant about the high school options than they were for elementary school options (Kimelberg 2014). If unable to get into the charter, exam school, or another academically rigorous high school, these parents had more options for accessing out-of-district schools including private school and moving out of the district. In contrast, African American and low-income students’ options were more restricted for high school. In the opposite pattern of middle-class families, the low-income African American students were often making the decision about high school enrollment on their own, with little parental involvement (Condliffe, Boyd, and DeLuca 2015). Further, because of the inadequacies of their elementary and middle school academic record, many low-income African American students are ineligible for academically rigorous exam schools and charter schools. These youth are penalized and have their academic and future opportunities foreclosed because of academic mistakes and poor schooling options at the elementary and middle school levels. Indeed, attending a predominantly African American elementary school was found to have a negative effect on high school grades even after controlling for individual- and school-level characteristics (Mickelson and Heath 1999).

Even after parents navigate their options and make their choices, there are different ethnic implications based on the ultimate school assignment. When engaging school choice policies, the risk is that youth may not get their first choice. Whereas most district websites indicate that there are no demographic differences in those who get their first choice and those who do not, at least one study has found that getting one’s first choice school was associated with the amount of information that parents reported they received and used in making choices (Yettick 2016), and there are ethnic and SES differences in amount and quality of information that parents receive (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003). Gaining access to one’s first choice school is related not only to improvements in academic achievement but in reductions in problem behavior, including involvement in crime and increased chances of attending college (Deming 2012). The positive benefits of gaining access to one’s first choice school were stronger for African Americans, compared to other ethnic groups. Further, after enrollment, African American and Latino families were less likely than Euro-American and Asian families to leave a school when they are unsatisfied with it (James 2014). Euro-American and wealthier families have more contingency options when they do not get their first choice (Kimmelberg 2014). This means that African American and Latino families are likely to remain in underperforming and failing schools, compounding their negative effects. This affirms that, in the context of school choice policies, the stakes are higher for low-income and African American families than for Euro-American and middle-class families.

The school choice and enrollment process is riskier for African American, Latino, and low-income families. The schools that comprise the default options for African Americans and Latinos are worse and more limited than they are for middle-class and Euro-American families, even when they are in the same
districts. This means that the burdens and costs of inequality are more strongly felt by students of color and low-income students. Ultimately, these policies are called “choice,” but in reality, parents are not guaranteed their first choice. If their preferred school lacks sufficient seats, families lose control of where their child will attend school. Given that it is politically difficult to close or improve low-performing schools and that there are insufficient seats in higher-performing schools, certain students are relegated to failing or underperforming schools. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the students who end up at these schools tend to be ethnic minority and low-income students. Again, this is the same conclusion that Coleman made in 1966. He stated, “Voluntary transfer plans have been widely criticized as ineffective and even deceptive. It is argued that they place all of the burden—including the burden of expense and initiative—on the [African American] child and his parent, that the [African American] is least able to bear these burdens” (Coleman et al. 1966, 472).

Policy Reinforcing Inequality: The Student Experience

As Coleman found in 1966, there are significant racial and ethnic disparities in students’ experiences at school today. Despite school choice, open enrollment, vouchers, and other policy mechanisms, the vast majority (about 70 percent) of students attend the school where they are assigned based on their residence (Rhodes and DeLuca 2014). This results in differential school experiences. African American students’ experiences at school often work against their ability to achieve. There are disparities in the quality of the curriculum. Only 57 percent of African American students attend schools that provide access to a full range of math and science classes (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights 2014). The same report shows that only 66 percent of schools with high African American and Latino enrollment offer a course in Chemistry and only 74 percent offer Algebra II, gateway courses for college. Even with equivalent ability levels, African American and Latino high school students are more likely to be tracked into courses that are less rigorous academically than are Euro-American students (Darling-Hammond 2004; Mickelson and Everett 2008). High-ability African American students are less likely to be placed in gifted or advanced classes than are Euro-American students with average ability levels (Mickelson and Heath 1999).

Apart from differential curricula and schools, desegregation does not ensure equality and the reduction of inequities. Within schools, African American and Latino students have more negative experiences with teachers and other adults in the building than their white peers. The evidence of differential expectations for achievement by teachers and treatment in the classroom is well established (Tenenbaum and Ruck 2007). Based on a meta-analysis of thirty-nine studies (Tenenbaum and Ruck 2007), African American students were less likely to experience teachers who made positive referrals for them, engaged them with positive speech, or encouraged them. Further, teachers held lower expectations for their
achievement. In a separate study, lower-achieving African American students were most vulnerable to unsupportive teachers, with significant negative impacts on achievement (Midgley, Feldlaufer, and Eccles 1989) and lower levels of school satisfaction and engagement (Buehler et al. 2015). There are similar challenges in interactions with school guidance counselors.

African American youth are challenged by the inability to develop effective relationships with school counselors (Bryant 2015). Schools with the largest African American and Latino enrollments have an average of 332 students per counselor (Bryant 2015), making it nearly impossible for students to develop the kind of high-quality relationships needed to assist them with college and career readiness. In our own research with an ethnically diverse high school with 59 percent Euro-American and 41 percent students of color (n ~ 1,100), we found that African American students were more likely to meet with guidance counselors than were Euro-American students. Further, African American students reported that these meetings were more valuable to them than did Euro-American students (Hill et al. 2016). While there is a shortage of school counselors in most high schools that African American students attend, these findings suggest that when counselors are available, African American students both seek out and value relationships with them. Indeed, the beneficial associations between positive adult relations at school and envisioning a meaningful future and beliefs about the job market were stronger for African American youth compared to Euro-American youth (Hill et al. 2016). However, most African American and Latino students attend schools with few counselors. Adolescents need an adult at school who knows them and supports them (Eccles 2004), whether a teacher or a counselor. When adolescents are unable to develop a close relationship and instead feel as though they do not belong at school, they are more likely to engage in problematic behaviors such as substance use and report higher levels of depressive symptoms (Barber and Olsen 2004).

There is strong and consistent evidence that African Americans are more likely than Euro-Americans to be suspended and receive in-school detentions that exclude them from school (Fabelo et al. 2011; Losen and Gillespie 2012), although there is little evidence that African Americans have higher rates of problem behavior (Losen and Skiba 2010; Skiba et al. 2015). Indeed, between 2000 and 2014, the disparities in disciplinary practices between African Americans and Euro-Americans increased. Whereas the suspension rates for Euro-American students decreased, the rates increased for African American students (Losen and Skiba 2010). Although these studies focused mostly on adolescents, disparities in suspensions and expulsions have been found as early as the preschool years (Meek and Gilliam 2016). Suggesting teacher bias, the disparities are greatest for infractions that can be interpreted subjectively, such as defiance or disruption, compared to explicit rule violations such as truancy or cigarette smoking (Fabelo et al. 2011). Further, disparities are most prominent among teachers with less experience. Given that African American youth are more likely to attend schools with novice teachers, the risk of receiving discipline that is harsh and it resulting in separation from school is even greater.
African American students experience broader discrimination at school through differential treatment by teachers, both regarding their academics and behavior. The negative impact of discrimination on mental health and academic achievement is well documented (Hughes et al. 2006; Umuna-Taylor et al. 2014). African American boys and girls report experiencing both racial and gender discrimination. Contrary to what one might expect, African American boys reported greater amounts of gender discrimination than did African American girls (Cogburn, Chavous, and Griffin 2011). In the Cogburn, Chavous, and Griffin (2011) study, there were no differences across genders in levels of reported racial discrimination. Cogburn, Chavous, and Griffin interpreted these findings through the lens of social dominance theory (Sidanius et al. 2004), whereby, in hierarchical societies, discrimination is more acutely targeted toward males because they are viewed as greater threats to the power structures.

Discrimination is experienced in a variety of ways, is more likely to be experienced in integrated schools, and is negatively associated with well-being and mental health. Among more subtle types of discrimination, students describe being expected to speak as if they represented the entire race, being stared at by Euro-American students when curricular material focused on race or African Americans, having one’s thoughts ignored or devalued in class or when working in small groups, and being wrongly accused of behavior infractions due to race (Carter Andrews 2012). The subtle and not-so-subtle micro- (and macro-) aggressions weaken African American students’ connections to school. Further, there is a positive relation between the size of the Euro-American school population and African American students’ depressive and somatic symptoms (Walsemann, Bell, and Maitra 2011). This association was explained by experiences of discrimination. Thus, African American students’ achievement often occurs despite feeling unsupported and marginalized at school. This marginalization occurs at the hands of school personnel and fellow students.

In addition to navigating relationships with teachers and counselors, and the broader classroom context, African American youth must navigate the peer context. The ubiquitous notion of high-achieving African American students being accused of “acting white” and developing oppositional stances toward school, first identified by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), has been well studied and widely reported in the scientific and popular literature. African American youth are discouraged from achieving, hide their achievement, and experience sanctions from their African American peers for focusing on schoolwork, diminishing their academic performance. The premise of “acting white” fits the stereotypes of African American youth as less intelligent, unmotivated, and underachieving and explains African American youths’ feeling that they do not belong at school in a way that preserves their self-esteem. Further, by separating academic achievement from its long-standing, deep-seated place within African American history and culture, it has the pernicious effect of becoming a litmus test of “blackness” among African American youth at a time when they are exploring and developing their African American identities. As African American youth develop their African American identity (i.e., becoming black, experience nigressence; Cross 1991), they try on, explore, and endorse aspects of African American culture and
During this phase, they may eschew characteristics and activities that are not deemed “African American” or “black.” If their experiences at school do not feel inclusive or provide models and examples of African American achievement, achievement may be wrongly deemed as “not African American.” That is, African American students’ academic performance will not be affirmed as part of their identity. This can occur especially when the curriculum does not reflect their culture and when peer groups or teachers are not available to help connect achievement with African American culture.

The complexities of navigating African American peer groups and achievement have been documented as they relate to identity exploration and affirmation, and aspects of African American culture. African Americans are accused of “acting white” because their academic achievement itself. However, Sankofa et al. (2005) distinguished high-achieving African American students who achieve through values that are consistent with African American culture (e.g., interdependent, communal mindsets) from those who achieve through Euro-American cultural values (e.g., competition, independence). They discovered that it was not academic achievement but the misalignment of cultural values that resulted in being accused of “acting white.” Only those who were perceived as achieving through Euro-American values and practices were deemed as “acting white” by their peers. Those who achieved at similar levels but were viewed as maintaining their cultural values were not accused of acting white. The challenge for schools and for African American youth is that the “hidden curriculum” undergirding many classes and especially advanced classes requires and highlights competition and individualism (Giroux 1981). Indeed, these students may be “acting white,” as one of the only means of achieving, even as their achievement itself is wholly valued as African American.

Similarly, research on ethnic and racial identity development demonstrates the complexities of the relations between achievement and “acting white.” Distinguishing between “reactionary” and authentic identities, Spencer and Harpalani (2008) demonstrated that youth who have erected shallow and oppositional identities, in response to discrimination and marginalization, are more likely to devalue achievement. In contrast, African American youth who have developed an authentic and deep ethnic identity have high self-esteem, achievement goals, and achievement that is positively related to their Afrocentricity (Spencer et al. 2001). It is not achievement itself that reflects “acting white” but the interactions of African American students’ understanding of the centrality of education within African American culture and history. The school context that does not affirm African American identities in its curriculum or in its interactions with African American youth, and the ways in which African American youth must engage in school to succeed, create an unnecessary conflict between achievement and African American identity (Cross 2003, 2011; Spencer et al. 2003).

Indeed, the peer context is among the most challenging for achievement for African American and Latino youth. In a study of sixty-five African American and Latino youth and their parents participating in eighteen focus groups about resources that support and impede achievement, a consistent theme that
emerged centered upon significant concerns about the negative influence of peers and the need to manage them to succeed (Hill 2012). They stressed the importance of staying away from negative influences and making sure that they were not near misbehavior (lest they be deemed guilty by association). As one mother described, her teen needed “internal strength” to deal with the peer context. Many parents stressed the importance of identifying the “right” crowd. As another teen expressed: “My mom always tells me that I’m judged by the company that I keep. So she tells me to choose who I hang out with, don’t mix with the wrong crowd” (Hill 2012, 117). When African American youth are unable to effectively navigate toward peer groups that support their own achievement, African American parents will move their youth to different schools. As one mother said, “I had to get them out, I am glad I got them away from that environment. It took me a long time, but we did get away from [the gangs]” (Hill 2012, 120). This is consistent with the work of others who document the role of navigating peer groups through school choice (Kimelberg 2014).

This raises the question of how youth navigate the peer context in relation to their personal achievement. Social networks and cliques within middle and high schools vary in the extent to which they value and affirm academic achievement (Hamm et al. 2013). Affiliating with a friendship group that values and promotes achievement can buffer youth from the social costs of achieving within the broader peer group (Horvat and Lewis 2003; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). Whereas African American peer groups have been cast as monolithic and devaluing academic pursuits, these groups vary in their promotion of effort and academic achievement among African American youth (Hamm et al. 2013). In the predominantly African American schools in their study, the peer groups that promoted academic achievement were central to the social network structure. African American boys who affiliated with peer groups that promoted academic achievement, not only had better achievement, they were more liked by others and had similar popularity, compared to boys in other peer groups. Twenty-four percent of boys remained in a peer group that affirmed academic achievement across the entire academic year. African American peer groups that support achievement are present even in schools with high levels of underachievement. Youth who value achievement navigate the peer contexts to find these groups. Within these groups, there is no social cost to achievement, and youth are able to develop the positive association between their African American identity and academic excellence. However, without a critical mass of African American students, it is more difficult to identify this need for social support. Indeed, in schools where African American youth are in the minority, the negative association between African Americans’ perceived acceptance within their peer group and their achievement orientation is strongest (Fuller-Rowell and Doan 2010).

Since the time of the Coleman Report (1966), much has changed in the United States’ educational landscape, while much has remained the same. School assignment policies have been the target for solving inequities in access to high-quality schools and have been attempted across the decades with only modest progress. Today, just as in 1966, schools are highly segregated. Differences today include that African American youth are less likely to have African American
teachers; African American parents feel less welcome in the school building (Hill 2009); and the school climate, including interactions with teachers and peers, often does not affirm African American identities. Integration policies in the decade post the Brown v. Board of Education decision often led to wide-scale dismissal of African American teachers from public schools (Fancher 1970). However, having teachers who affirm and support youths’ emerging ethnic identities is essential for healthy development and academic achievement.

Nevertheless, because of decades of modest attempts at integration, a small number of African American students attend high-quality schools that are predominantly Euro-American. Given the knowledge and resources required of ethnic minority and low-income families to navigate school choice policies and send their children out of district or to schools that are far from their homes, only a select few are able to take advantage of these opportunities. These families tend to be the most advantaged. This has resulted in a within-ethnic group segregation of the most advantaged African Americans from the most disadvantaged, resulting in even higher concentrations of poverty and low academic performance among urban schools today compared to 1966. The connection between individual families’ interests and the interests of the greater good is even more strained for African Americans than it is for their white counterparts. African American students whose parents have the social and financial capital and knowledge to effectively navigate the school choice system or access private schools often leave behind their local schools and communities. What is good for the community is not necessarily what is in the best interests of individual African American families. This paradox is acute and pernicious for African Americans and the African American community. In 1966, all African Americans—lower, working, and professional classes—were in the same situation. Indeed, the youth interviewed by Fancher (1970) foretold this possible outcome, and many at that time were dubious of the “integration” and “free choice” policies as solutions. Many youth reported wanting financial and curricular control of their schools and saw the real costs of moving from their neighborhood schools that were connected to their communities and employed teachers who resided in their neighborhoods to schools that were far away and controlled by whites. Their concerns ring true today.

Conclusion

There have been many policies to address and much discussion about the importance of educational equity in the United States, but there has been little success in improving the disparities in educational experiences across racial classifications and socioeconomic status. School choice and other market-based policies, as drivers for equity, imply scarcity and competition and rely on parents to undergo market-based analyses of schools and make informed decisions with similar conditions and constraints. Market-based policies also create “winning” and “losing” schools and, ultimately, “winning” and “losing” children. In our view, this should not be the goal of an educational system.
Reliance on a market-based system to reduce educational inequality implicitly accepts that certain students will be relegated to, or forced to attend, schools that are failing. Often the students who are relegated to these schools are low-income students of color, whose families have fewer resources, lack of information, and less comprehensive choice sets. They create a false and unfair choice for low-income minority families, who face the choice among academically weak schools; highly segregated no-nonsense schools; culturally isolating private schools, accessed by vouchers; or out-of-district, suburban, predominately Euro-American schools. School enrollment policies, regardless of whether they include partial or full choice, will work only if there are enough schools (and seats in schools) that provide high-quality education so that all students can achieve regardless of where they go to school. Choices should be relegated to differences in extracurricular activities, curricular emphasis, and schedules and not on differences in academic excellence or college and career preparedness.

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