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Source: *Review of Research in Education*, Vol. 28 (2004), pp. 47-99

Published by: American Educational Research Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3568136>

Accessed: 07/10/2009 19:41

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Chapter 3

How Society Failed School Desegregation Policy: Looking Past the Schools to Understand Them

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In America we have deemed desegregation too difficult a social process to be dealt with by realtors, bankers, clergymen, and community leaders. We have assigned the task to the children. (Mack, 1968, p. 459)

It is a noteworthy coincidence that the year of publication of this volume, 2005, sits chronologically between the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 2004 and the 40th anniversary of *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (also known as the “Coleman report”) in 2006. This juxtaposition is symbolic given that, while both the Supreme Court ruling and the congressionally mandated Coleman study ultimately supported school desegregation policies, they differed relatively dramatically in terms of *why*, and these distinctions related to different views of the role of schools in society. It is fitting, then, that this chapter, which argues that we cannot understand the success or failure of school desegregation until we consider the complex relationship between desegregated public schools and the larger society, is wedged between these two important anniversaries.

The strongly worded *Brown* ruling discussed at length the importance of public education in preparing students for their adult lives as workers and citizens. For instance, Chief Justice Warren wrote: “Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education in our democratic society” (p. 7).¹

In contrast, the Coleman report muted the *Brown* decision’s interpretation of public education as a paramount institution and argued instead that the variation in school curriculum and facilities and, to a lesser extent, teacher quality accounted for

relatively little difference in student achievement, especially among students of color. According to the report, “Attributes of other students account for far more variation in the achievement of minority-group children than do any attributes of school facilities and slightly more than do attributes of staff” (Coleman et al., 1966, p. 322).

Thus, the implication of the Coleman report was that school desegregation policies would help raise the achievement of students of low socioeconomic status (SES) because they would attend school with high-SES students. And while news coverage of the report’s central findings varied greatly, the *New York Times* reported that “differences in schools had very little effect on the achievement scores of children with a strong educational background in the home” (cited in Grant, 1973, p. 30). The message was that family background was more important than schools.

Over time, the Coleman report came to be seen as evidence that schools do not matter—at least not as much as people had believed—and that family background, especially parents’ education and income, mattered much more (Grant, 1973). Thus, while both the *Brown* decision and the Coleman report advocated for school desegregation, one did so by pointing out how important schools are to students’ life chances and the other did so by pointing out the importance of outside-of-school forces, especially family background.²

We begin by highlighting this distinction between these two landmark documents because we believe it reflects the ongoing ambivalence in the United States over how much responsibility we can and should place on our public schools to solve problems that the schools themselves did not create, even when the schools have done their share to perpetuate such problems. In many ways, the 12 years between the *Brown* decision and the Coleman report marked one of the first swings of an ongoing political pendulum vacillating between an argument that schools can solve most inequality in our society and an argument that schools do not make much of a difference at all in overcoming inequality in the lives of children. In the years since the Coleman report, we have seen the pendulum swing far back toward the position that schools alone can solve the problems of poor children because, with the right incentives or sanctions, educators can close the achievement gap between privileged and disadvantaged students.

In the first section of this chapter, we trace the history of this pendulum swing from Coleman to the current federal law, No Child Left Behind—from an argument that schools matter very little to a focus on schools as the sole solution to social problems—and consider various political trends that have propelled it, including racial politics and the backlash against school desegregation. We also consider the role of social science research in our collective understanding of what schools can and cannot accomplish and ask why more researchers have not examined schools within their contexts.

In the second section, we consider how and why so little of the post-Coleman research on school desegregation offered a more balanced understanding of the role of schools in society, given what these studies were revealing about the difficulty schools faced in overcoming racial inequality and, at the same time, the

relative success of desegregation policies in comparison with other school reform models. We argue that, for the most part, research on school desegregation inadvertently contributed to the swinging pendulum by focusing solely on what schools accomplished or failed to accomplish on their own, despite the challenges they faced in the context of a racially segregated and unequal society. And yet, ironically, nowhere should the relationship between schools and society be more apparent than in communities struggling to implement a policy such as school desegregation that so rubs against the societal norm of racial separation.

In the third section of this chapter, we discuss our own 5-year historical study of six high schools that were desegregated in the 1970s and their now-adult graduates from the class of 1980 to provide a new framework for understanding the intertwined relationship between schools and the larger society. Through this study, we note the many ways in which the local community context of these schools and the broader social context at that time affected educators' and policymakers' efforts to implement school desegregation policies. For instance, we found that the schools and communities we studied often reproduced racial inequality by maintaining the White privilege of the larger society within the context of desegregated schools. Yet, at the same time, these schools provided venues where students and educators crossed the color line in ways they had never done before and many have not done since (Wells, Revilla, Holme, & Atanda, 2004). For the most part, the students of color who attended these schools thought they received a better education than they would have in more racially segregated schools, but they also recalled facing the same kind of discrimination inside these schools that they experienced in the larger society (see Revilla, Wells, & Holme, 2005).

Such research helps to explain the space between the pendulum swings, that is, the places where we can see the impact of schools on their students *and* the impact of society on schools. It allows us to consider a more fluid and iterative relationship between schools and their social context—a relationship in which schools both perpetuate and occasionally circumvent broader inequalities. Through such understandings, we can see schools as places where social reproduction occurs but also where human agency matters and makes a difference in students' lives.

In many ways, this wider-angle lens enabled us to understand that school desegregation policy was not a simple failure, as it has so often been portrayed (Armor, 1995). Rather, we learned that in many ways our society failed school desegregation policy by providing a context that worked against its goals at every turn. We hope our findings will cause policymakers to reconsider the extreme arguments representing the two sides of the pendulum: that schools alone can solve our societal problems and that schools do not matter much at all.

Thus, we use our own work as an example of what happens when researchers examine schools within their social and political contexts and thus explore the complex relationship between schools and the larger society—a relationship that both complicates equity-minded policies such as school desegregation and makes these policies all the more important. In the end, we argue that such studies can best shed light on the

many ways in which schools matter and, at the same time, the many ways in which schools' efforts to make changes are compromised by larger social forces.

Finally, we make a case for more educational research that looks carefully at the relationship between schools and society, not just families, as Coleman and others have focused on, but the local and global contexts of schools and families. While we recognize the important role that families play in preparing their children for school and in supporting their education, we think it is naive to talk about families as if they were making child-rearing decisions in a vacuum protected from powerful social forces such as racism, poverty, and a highly competitive form of capitalism. Thus, we argue, there are too few empirical attempts to place educators, students, and parents into a broader social and political context to understand how their local communities and the larger society constrain or enable educational policies and the effects that schools have on children. Throughout this chapter, we discuss some of the methodological reasons for this empirical neglect of context and conclude with suggestions that might help researchers design studies that can answer broader questions.

The point of this chapter, then, is to encourage researchers to consider and conceptualize a more complex and iterative relationship between schools and society. We think that the vacillation between political arguments that place far too much burden on the schools to solve huge societal problems and arguments that “schools don't matter at all”—that only families do—is extremely problematic. Both arguments ultimately erode public support for public education, either because of frustration that schools are not doing enough or because of a lack of belief that they can do anything.

WHEN SCHOOLS MATTER TOO MUCH OR TOO LITTLE: THE SWINGING PENDULUM OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

In the decade following the Coleman report, despite many protests from educators, the pendulum remained on the “schools don't matter” side of the spectrum. This was due in part to other social scientists, most notably Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Christopher Jencks, who put forth somewhat similar arguments in their writing and public engagement.

For instance, in 1972 Jencks and colleagues published *Inequality*, a book arguing that the most effective way to create greater equality in our society was not through educational reform but through more equal distribution of income. This study, with its focus on structural inequality and social reproduction, discounted the impact of several factors, including family background, cognitive ability, and schooling, on adults' economic equality and thus differed somewhat from the Coleman report, which had emphasized family background as it relates to educational outcomes.

As a result, the Jencks et al. (1972) argument was broader than the Coleman report's because it focused on inequality in terms of the income of adults rather than the test scores of students. The authors claimed that while equalizing school resources and opportunities might be an important moral and political goal, the long-term impact on overall equality would be negligible. The headline of a front-page story in the *New*

York Times read “Harvard Study Disputes Impact of Schooling on Future Income” (Tanner, 1972). *Inequality* fueled the “schools don’t matter” argument even as its more radical implications regarding income inequality and how to lessen it were ignored.

Meanwhile, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who served as counselor to President Richard M. Nixon before becoming a senator, strongly supported the findings of the Coleman report, especially its conclusion regarding the importance of the family. According to Grant (1973), Moynihan was interested in the Coleman report because the findings were in sync with his own earlier report on the decline of the Black family. Moynihan’s report, however, had been controversial, and he was criticized for what was seen as a negative portrayal of Black families and culture (Grant, 1973).

Thus, Moynihan welcomed the Coleman study because it also spoke to the importance of families, and he worked at getting more attention for the report. Grant (1973) argued that Moynihan “had more to do with the way the Report was received, analyzed and subsequently made an instrument of policy than any social scientist other than James Coleman himself” (p. 32).

Before joining the Nixon administration, Moynihan was part of a team of professors and graduate students at Harvard who reanalyzed the Coleman data and came up with the same findings. Their results were published in a book—*On Equality of Educational Opportunity*—that helped to place the findings of the Coleman report into the public domain (Mosteller & Moynihan, 1972). As Nixon’s counselor in the early 1970s, Moynihan brought Coleman’s message to federal policymakers (Grant, 1973; Moynihan, 1991). Nixon tried to use the report to justify major cuts to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare budget and his unwillingness to enforce school desegregation. While he did not succeed in making these cuts in the short run, such arguments gained much attention (Grant, 1973).

Moynihan, Jencks, and Coleman all tried to articulate the educational policy implications of their research. And while they did not always embrace the same goals or agree on the contributions of various factors to inequality, often their messages were interpreted in their simplest forms to mean that schools did not matter, and thus spending more money on public education was fruitless.

Thus, at its best, the Coleman report was seen as a rationale for school desegregation and compensatory education for poor students to help schools do what families were not doing (Moynihan, 1991). At its worst, this research, coupled with the writings of Jencks et al. (1972) and Moynihan (1991), became a rationale for not equalizing highly disparate expenditures across schools and districts, no doubt contributing to the separate and unequal educational system we have today.

Researchers, Educators, and Advocates Respond to Coleman: The Effective Schools Movement

The first attempt to swing the pendulum back in the direction of “schools matter” started with a group of researchers and educators who, in the late 1960s and 1970s, set out to disprove Coleman’s conclusions (Bickel, 1983). Ronald Edmonds,

an educator and advocate for disadvantaged students, was influenced by the research of James Comer, George Weber, Wilbur Brookover, and Lawrence Lezotte, who were studying the education and development of poor children. In particular, Edmonds drew on Weber's early 1970s research on successful urban schools serving poor students to develop a set of correlates of what came to be called "effective schools": schools that made a difference in the lives of students from poor families (Becker, 1992).

The five correlates—strong administrative leadership; a climate of high expectations; a quiet, orderly atmosphere; an emphasis on basic skills; and educators' awareness of pupil progress through frequent testing—provided the foundation for what would soon become the very popular and widespread "effective schools movement" (Becker, 1992). By the mid-1980s, most states and many school districts across the country were implementing certain aspects of the effective schools reform model.

Most observers of the rise of the effective schools movement credit its success to a deep sense of frustration among educators and advocates that the "schools don't matter" argument was at best exaggerated and at worst disingenuous. Bickel (1983) referred to the origin of this movement as both an effort to dispel the Coleman report and a strong desire among educators across the country "to hear a more hopeful message about the ability of schools to educate children" (p. 3).

Indeed, Edmonds himself provided a very powerful critique of the argument that schools do not matter. In 1979, he wrote that the belief that large differences in students' school performance can be attributed to their social class and family background was popular because of the "many social scientists and opinion makers" who continued to espouse it. This belief, he wrote, "has the effect of absolving educators of their professional responsibility to be instructionally effective" (cited in Becker, 1992, p. 6).

More specifically, the effective schools movement started out as an African American movement and was partially an outgrowth of anger and frustration with the racial inequalities in the educational system and the "White liberal" reliance on school desegregation policies to solve this inequality. Meanwhile, massive White flight from urban school districts sent a clear message to Blacks that racial integration was not a feasible means of bringing about much-needed change in urban schools.

The National Council on Educating Black Children was founded in 1986 to promote the effective schools philosophy. The council's leaders argued that African Americans needed to take the education of their children into their own hands. According to Arnold Cooper (1995), one of the leaders of the council, "The African-American community must ultimately rely upon itself to reinforce a substantive and relevant education for its children."

Yet, the tenets of the effective schools movement, which squarely place the responsibility for educating disadvantaged children back on the schools, resonated with a much larger constituency beyond the African American community. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the effective schools movement continued to

influence educators and policymakers around the country. For instance, in 1988, Congress passed the Hawkins-Stafford School Improvement Act, which permits school districts to use Chapter 1 (now called Title 1) money for effective schools programs (Bradley, 1989). This act marked the first time effective schools principles were included in a federal law (Snider, 1989).

By 1989, a U.S. General Accounting Office survey estimated that 58% of the nation's school districts had implemented or were planning to implement programs based on "effective schools" research; this was up from only 17% of all school districts in 1984–1985. According to Snider (1989), these findings offered the first official confirmation of the rapid spread of the effective schools movement. According to Richardson (1995), "In sheer numbers, the effective-schools model appears to be one of the most successful efforts at scaling up—spreading a reform idea or practice beyond a few schools."

Thus, what had started out as a grassroots movement within the African American community had, by the 1990s, become far more "mainstream." And in the process of scaling up the effective schools movement, researchers and advocates added new correlates to the original five (Taylor & Bullard, 1995). Helping to fuel the movement's popularity was a growing body of research literature on classroom- and school-level variables that influence student achievement. In a review of the effective schools research, Rowan, Bossert, and Dwyer (1983) argued that this literature went beyond estimating the overall effects of schools on student achievement and instead attempted to identify more specific factors that have an impact. This specificity, Rowan et al. (1983) noted, is what distinguished the effective schools literature from previous studies on school effects, which they said "focused on gross measures of school facilities, funding, and staffing that are far removed from important teaching and learning processes" (p. 27).

Similarly, Wenglinsky (2002), in a more recent review of literature on whether schools matter, noted a methodological distinction between the large-scale quantitative Coleman-era studies, which tended to show few if any school effects, and the qualitative effective schools studies, which emphasized just how much schools do matter:

Quantitative research on whether schools matter has generally supported the notion that the problems of U.S. education lie outside of the schools. . . . A possible reason for the lack of large school effects in quantitative research is the failure of such research to capitalize on an insight from qualitative research: the central importance of the classroom practices of teachers. (p. 2)

Indeed, it is no coincidence that the effective schools movement took off around the time qualitative researchers began to pay close attention to student-teacher interactions and the effects of classroom dynamics, especially teacher expectations, on student achievement, motivation, and self-esteem. Authors such as Brophy and Good (1974) and Rist (1970) published groundbreaking work on teachers and students in their everyday activities and demonstrated the powerful effects of schools on children. Brophy and Good (1974) noted that researchers should focus on actual teachers as

they interact with their own students in the context of their classrooms. Then and only then, many qualitative researchers would argue, do we really gain an awareness of school effects or effective schools (see Mehan, 1992).

According to Rowan et al. (1983), the large-scale quantitative research on so-called “gross measures” was not very successful in identifying specific features of school organizations that influence student achievement. They argued that the effective schools research, in contrast, has focused on features of school organization and culture that are “both intuitively sensible and manipulable” (p. 27).

Still, Rowan et al. (1983), like Purkey and Smith (1983), argued that overall qualitative studies of the effective schools movement left a great deal to be desired, especially in terms of generalizability of findings from one school to another. For instance, in their extensive review of effective schools research, Purkey and Smith (1983) noted that these studies generally examined “good” schools or classrooms and their characteristics or compared the characteristics of “high-scoring” and “low-scoring” schools. Purkey and Smith (1983) argued that it is unlikely that adoption of the characteristics suggested in the literature would work in all schools. Furthermore, they noted that these characteristics “may not work as expected in many schools and may in fact be counterproductive in some schools” (p. 440).

Of course, the effective schools movement also had other detractors, including scholars who critiqued the movement for ignoring the social and political context of schools (see Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Lawrence, 1986). By the 1980s, however, in the midst of the Reagan administration and deep into the political backlash against civil rights policies and the welfare state (see Edsall, 1991), it was clear that examining the social and political context of schools was not on the policy agenda.

In fact, as time went on, many of the tenets of the effective schools movement were absorbed into the so-called “excellence” movement that has fueled recent waves of educational reform, most notably the standards and accountability measures that characterize the current era in education (see Taylor & Bullard, 1995). As Richardson (1995) noted, “The emphasis on believing that all children can learn, the central tenet that undergirds effective schools, has become the rallying cry for the current push to raise education standards.”

While the leaders of the effective schools movement were justified in their frustration with African American student achievement levels in public schools in the 1970s, it is more than a little ironic that a school reform movement that was originally intended to alleviate the inequality remaining after *Brown* was eventually used by White policymakers to justify the maintenance of a separate and unequal educational system—albeit with high standards for all.

Political Backlash Against the “Schools Don’t Matter” Argument

It is difficult to say how strongly or directly the effective schools movement influenced the broader standards and accountability movement that would begin to dominate the educational policy agenda by the late 1980s. Yet, philosophically the central

themes of the effective schools movement supported a reform agenda that would place a large part of the burden of solving inequality on the public schools. As stated by Lezotte, one of the founders and advocates of the effective schools movement, in a way it “contributed to the call for standards because we were always asking people where they want to go” (cited in Richardson, 1995).

This connection between the effective schools movement and a standards movement that would call upon schools to solve inequality almost single-handedly began in the early 1980s. According to Cuban (1993), the widely read and politically powerful 1983 report issued by the Reagan administration, *A Nation at Risk*, borrowed the central beliefs of the effective schools movement and gave the movement a political platform. “Effective-schools principles became a national agenda: All children can learn; schools must have high academic standards; for a school to achieve its goals, texts, tests, and the curriculum must be tightly coupled; and, finally, test scores will prove to a skeptical public that schools are accountable.”

Thus, by the early 1980s, the pendulum had swung all the way back to emphasizing the crucial role of schools in society. Cuban (1993) noted the irony that, within two decades, “policymaker ‘wisdom’ on schooling had flip-flopped from schools not making much difference to the local school being the single most important instrument in securing equity and excellence for all children.”

Yet, by the 1980s, the message from Washington, D.C., to the schools was highly critical, as *A Nation at Risk* and other reports stressed both the importance of education and the failure of the nation’s schools in preparing students for a globally competitive workforce (Cross, 2004). As part of a larger political backlash against many public policies of the 1960s and 1970s such as school desegregation, *A Nation at Risk* set a tone of impatience and intolerance toward public schools while simultaneously placing the burden of solving most of society’s problems back on them. For instance, one of the report’s most oft-quoted phrases is that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 1).

This rhetoric and the educational “excellence” policy agenda that evolved from it set a tone of public educational failure and the need for higher standards, more requirements, and more sanctions for schools and students. In fact, the central theme dominating educational policy debates for almost 25 years has been that public schools are seen as critical to the future of the nation but woefully inadequate in their capacity to meet the demands of this burden. Most notably, Reagan’s second education secretary, the bombastic William J. Bennett, used his position as a bully pulpit to draw attention to what he saw as multiple problems with the public schools (Cross, 2004).

Thus, while the once-grassroots effective schools movement and the then-emerging Reagan administration agenda on education and excellence shared some philosophical roots—namely, they both sought to address a perceived lack of responsibility on the part of schools and educators for student failure—there were several inconsis-

tencies as well. For instance, Boyd (1987) noted that the Reagan administration's strategy for school reform exhibited several weaknesses:

The national-commission reports suggest that we can change schools by external mandates, that we can, in effect, "legislate learning" by heaping new requirements and accountability demands on schools. But this approach neglects the internal workings of schools and what we have learned from the "effective schools" movement. Instead, it focuses on such matters as course and certification requirements, the length of the school day and year, and supervision of instruction. (p. 3)

Furthermore, as the effective schools movement seemed to fade from the public spotlight in the late 1990s, the so-called excellence movement, which subsequently became the standards and accountability movement, took off and became codified in several pieces of federal legislation beginning with the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 (Riley, 1995; Schwartz & Robinson, 2000). This landmark legislation provided funding for states to establish standards and tests to measure student progress, creating the apparatus for a more punitive policy of accountability to be put in place.

Such a policy was passed in 2002 when President George W. Bush's educational reform agenda was embraced by Congress and became the No Child Left Behind Act. The cornerstone of this massive legislation is more testing for students and a strict accountability system of sanctions associated with schools' failure to make progress in meeting student outcomes. Furthermore, test score data are broken down by student subgroups defined according to race/ethnicity, poverty, gender, disability, and limited English proficiency. This provision, in theory, will help schools and the government ensure that no children are being left behind (Cross, 2004).

But it has become clear since the outset that the rhetoric of No Child Left Behind has not matched the reality. For instance, some observers have been quick to point out that the sanctions and punishments associated with schools failing to achieve "adequate yearly progress" are laid down upon a highly unequal educational system in which some students—particularly those in high-poverty schools—have access to far fewer resources and opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Sizer, 2004). To make matters worse, the law has been underfunded since the year it was passed, meaning that such inequalities in the educational system are not being offset by federal funding targeted toward poor students (Robelen, 2004; Sanger, 2003).

Still, in recent years, journalists and policymakers have often argued that the best way to achieve "equity" is not through redistributive policies such as school desegregation but, rather, through policies that hold separate and unequal schools equally accountable for student outcomes. Accordingly, President Bush claimed that his new policy would attack "the soft bigotry of low expectations" ("Bush Warns Against," 1999)—a phrase that connotes the central beliefs of the effective schools movement. But the No Child Left Behind policy itself, grounded in a belief that schools alone can overcome virtually all of the inequality in society, has done little to offset this unevenness in the system (Karp, 2004). The burden was once again laid firmly on the schools' doorstep.

Note the following excerpt from a 2004 U.S. Department of Education newsletter:

“Raise the bar!” “Close the gap!” These enthusiastic exclamations may sound like new-age workout instructions, but to teachers in the era of *No Child Left Behind*, they are familiar educational objectives. And they are achievable, thanks to over a decade of research that has delivered promising school improvement models. (Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2004, p. 1)

Indeed, the larger context of schools—poverty, inequality, and segregation—has been completely missing from recent debates about educational policy (Karp, 2004). For instance, some of the most prominent news coverage of the *Brown* 50th anniversary in spring 2004 focused on how school accountability systems or court cases providing poor schools with “adequate” funding had replaced desegregation as the promise of greater educational equity. Articles in publications such as the *New York Times* (Winter, 2004) and *U.S. News & World Report* (J. E. Barnes, Bentrup, Ekman, & Brady, 2004) ignored, for the most part, the inequalities in the educational system that would not be corrected by providing some poor districts with more “adequate” funding while maintaining a high degree of racial and socioeconomic segregation. While more funding for poor school districts serving poor students of color is worth fighting for, there is no reason to believe that, if all else remains the same—especially the high concentrations of rich and poor students in different rich and poor communities and schools—it will create equal educational opportunities (Orfield & Lee, 2005).

In essence, it appeared as though the *Brown* anniversary commentators were settling for *Plessy v. Ferguson*’s promise of “separate but equal” despite the lack of evidence that such a condition can exist in the field of education. And while the “separate” dimension is not sanctioned by law, it is wholeheartedly supported through many public policies and private practices in a manner that creates outcomes similar to de jure segregation (Drier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2004; Massey & Denton, 1993).

But it also seems that as long as accountability systems are in place and there is at least a perception that equality of outcomes is being enforced—even when outcomes remain extremely unequal in a way that reflects so much of the disparity in our society—policymakers and pundits feel they have done justice to the goals of “equity” and “excellence” (see Robelen, 2002, 2004). In fact, many argue that they can achieve more equality than school desegregation policy did by focusing on excellence instead of equity. According to the authors of the *U.S. News & World Report* special issue on the *Brown* anniversary, it was surprising in 2004 that Chief Justice Earl Warren’s opinion in *Brown* made little reference to student achievement. Rather, it focused on the psychological damage of segregation and asserted that as long as education is separate, true equality of opportunity cannot exist.

But now, as the racially charged fights over desegregation recede into the past, a new national debate over how to close the minority achievement gap has emerged. Not only is integration hard to achieve, but it is no longer universally assumed to be the key to excellence. If anything, the argument had been reversed:

To have any hope of luring whites into majority-black schools, educators must first raise academic achievement in those classrooms. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act is the most prominent example of this intellectual shift. The law does not concern itself with how integrated a school is. It simply demands achievement from every student, in every school. (p. 66)

Meanwhile, as policymakers and their proposals maintain some now-far-removed philosophical connection to the effective schools movement in terms of the emphasis placed on the role of schools in serving all students, the so-called “excellence” reform agenda that began in the 1980s and continues today as the standards and accountability agenda does not continue the effective schools focus on within-school relationships and dynamics. Instead, the current agenda appears to use blunt policy tools—new standards, tests, and sanctions—to try to achieve higher student outcomes. In addition, the current educational policy agenda calls for greater privatization, marketization, and competition among schools, another tactic that appears to only exacerbate inequalities across schools (see Wells & Holme, in press).

In this way, the decontextualized coverage of the *Brown* anniversary worked well to absolve White Americans of responsibility for the perpetual segregation and inequality in our society and to lay the blame and burden back on the public schools. These arguments implied that all that was needed to close the achievement gap between White and Asian affluent students and poor Black and Brown students was more standardized testing and punitive measures for schools that do not raise scores (J. E. Barnes, 2004). This is an example of both a misguided and an exaggerated understanding of the role of schools in society: of schools as the single institution that can equalize so many inequalities—those that most adults turn their backs on every day.

The Role of Educational Research in Debates About Schools and Society

As policymakers have been busy creating a more complex and punitive accountability system that mostly ignores the larger context of education, educational researchers have been, for the most part, also ignoring the larger context of schools and thus not challenging the popular paradigm that schools alone (or almost alone) matter. Thus, we must lay some of the blame for this all-or-nothing thinking regarding the role of schools in the laps of educational researchers and ask why so few studies have even attempted to examine schools and student learning in a way that sheds light on the relationship between schools and the larger society.

For instance, we ought to consider why so little research and writing in education have made the connection between low-income students’ achievement and the living conditions of these students and their families in our postindustrial society. Furthermore, very little research in education assesses how racism and racial inequality in society as a whole affect the policies we try to implement in schools. And why have educational researchers failed to examine the effects of growing income inequalities coupled with ongoing racial segregation on public education in this country? Why do we not focus on the fluid boundaries between schools and society and at least occasionally ask whether society has failed the schools?

As Riehl (2001) noted in her review of interpretive qualitative studies in the sociology of education, apart from a few neo-Marxism and historical-comparative analyses of education within larger systems, U.S. mainstream sociologists of education have not linked studies of schooling to broader social, political, and economic issues. She wrote: "Not only are the core processes of schooling not subjected to rigorous conceptual and theoretical development, but they are not connected to social theories of a wider scope" (p. 127).

Thus, studies exploring the relationship between schools and society remain the exception, even among sociologists of education, many of whom were studying desegregation in the 1970s and early 1980s. And if most sociologists fail to examine schools within that larger social context, what hope do we have that other researchers in the field of education will do so? Thus, it is far more likely that even those researchers who do fieldwork and collect data inside of schools will not also collect data at the district or community level. At the same time, we know it is rare for researchers who examine the political or social context of schools to set foot inside the schools themselves and think about such connections. As Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton, and Oakes (1995) found in their review of research, "Despite the obvious link between district politics and change within schools, most researchers who study the politics of education at the local level tended to stay outside of schools" (p. 20).

Some of the more notable exceptions to the decontextualized norm in educational research would include Willis's *Learning to Labor* (1977) and MacLeod's *Ain't No Making It* (1995), because they took readers both inside and outside of schools to explain why working-class and low-income boys become disillusioned with the achievement ideology put forth by educators and the larger society. These two somewhat parallel studies—one from the United Kingdom (Willis) and the other from the United States (MacLeod)—explained the larger social and political context associated with young boys and how it shapes their interpretations of school and academic success and their creation of an oppositional identity against the achievement ideology. These studies explain why poor or working-class boys often feel shut out of the so-called meritocratic system of education and mobility and why they resist rather than embrace this system.

For instance, in his insightful ethnography of working-class English boys, Willis (1977) showed us empirically and theoretically how the choices these students make about their schooling and their lives are inextricably tied to their understanding of where they and their families fit into the larger capitalist society and the opportunities available to them as a result. In connecting the lives of these boys inside and outside of schools, Willis (1977) helped his readers understand that students' choices are limited but that, even within these limits, they will exercise the human agency that allows them to participate and to some small degree mold their own social reproduction. Willis (1977) argued that "we need to see what the *symbolic* power of structural determination is within the mediating realm of the human and cultural" (p. 171).

In other words, Willis's contribution to the literature is not simply to help us understand the complex lives and decisions of working-class boys but to help us

understand that schools are but one institution that helps these boys make sense of who they are and where they are going. Both Willis and MacLeod helped us appreciate that while schools do matter to these students—in part because they espouse an achievement ideology that these boys penetrate and critique while legitimizing their school failure—clearly their larger social context matters a great deal as well, especially in how they make sense of schools and schoolwork. While neither of these books was written to be part of the “school effects” literature, they both have a great deal to say about the role of schools in the lives of working-class boys and in industrial societies at the end of the 20th century.

Other exceptions to the regularly decontextualized descriptions and analyses of schools and education include the works of well-known author Jonathan Kozol (1991, 1994), who, in a more journalistic way, has shown his readers the extremely problematic link between context and classroom for students situated in the poorest communities and schools. In *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol (1991) took his readers to six disparate cities to examine not only school budgets, sciences labs, and libraries but also the broader social, political, and economic context of poor children and their schools. In this way, Kozol (1991) avoided simply blaming school personnel in these communities for the educational failure of their students (although he did not apologize for educators who were taking advantage of a dismal situation), and he asked difficult questions about how, in a society as affluent as ours, these urban communities and public schools came to be as separate and unequal as they were from wealthy neighborhoods and school districts across the tracks, across the river, or up high on the bluff.

The end result was that Kozol (1991) drew his audience into the world of these schools and their fragile students in a way that helped to provide an understanding of school “failure” as far more complex than unmotivated teachers. For instance, in his chapter on New York City and a school in the Bronx, he first discussed the inequality between the city schools and those of the surrounding suburbs and the inequality *within* the city school system, between the more and less affluent neighborhoods. After setting this scene, Kozol (1991) took us to Public School 261:

In order to find Public School 261 in District 10, a visitor is told to look for a mortician’s office. The funeral home, which faces Jerome Avenue in the North Bronx, is easy to identify by its green awning. The school is next door, in a former roller-skating rink. No sign identified the building as a school. A metal awning frame without an awning supports a flagpole, but there is no flag. (p. 85)

The many problematic realities within this unmarked public school—including class sizes of 37, an almost bookless library, and a lack of windows and fresh air—are not less egregious because of the larger context Kozol (1991) provided his readers, but they are seen as more complex than simple laziness or neglect on the part of educators. In fact, Kozol’s (1991) powerful argument was that the learning conditions experienced by all of the children described in his book represented a form of societal neglect that can be solved only at a societal level; laws such as No Child Left Behind cannot alone address the issues he presented. Yet, why do so few educational researchers consider this larger context of schools?

In the 1990s, Jeannie Oakes and the first author of this chapter conducted a study of racially mixed schools implementing forms of “detracking.” Interviews with parents, school board members, and community advocates showed that much of the struggle over creating more diverse classrooms within schools reflected the larger context of privilege and inequality in the surrounding communities. Thus, parents’ and often educators’ understandings of which students deserved more challenging curricula and greater opportunities within these schools were strongly related to who had economic and political clout in the district and the school community.

Several publications resulting from that study, including Oakes, Wells, and Associates (1996); Wells et al. (1995); and Wells and Serna (1996), demonstrated the powerful role that context played in local communities’ efforts to “detrack” racially diverse schools. These publications made it clear that local political resistance to detracking reform had a major impact on the progress (or lack thereof) of reform-minded educators.

Similarly, Lipman’s (1998) book on two racially diverse middle schools in a southern school district that was implementing a “restructuring” reform demonstrates how teachers’ practices within schools were embedded in a context of racial and social class struggle and conflict within the local community. In this case study of the district and town context and the two schools nested within, Lipman (1998) wrote: “In Riverton, parents, community members, and teachers viewed restructuring through the long lens of historical struggles over race and class and the dynamics of reform were played out within present-day relations of power and privilege” (p. 4).

In the same vein, Brantlinger’s (2003) book on social class and school advantage included extensive interviews with parents, local school officials, and educators in an effort to portray the political power more affluent families have in a small community and how they are able to influence education policy and practice in a manner that advantages their own children. Yet, such empirical work examining these dynamics and how they shape the experiences of students within schools is hard to find (see Riehl, 2001; Wells et al., 1995).

In fact, much of the work that critiques the broader social and racial stratification in our society and discusses the impact of this inequality on public schools is theoretical and conceptual, not empirical. While such work is helpful for scholars who are trying to make sense of our postindustrial society and the ways in which class and race privilege are manifest symbolically, it does not provide insight into how and why educators and school officials are so strongly influenced by this privilege and how such privilege shapes—in both subtle and not so subtle ways—the opportunities available to different students.

Examining each of these empirical contributions to the literature, it appears as though the more labor-intensive qualitative research—namely, case studies and ethnographies—is best able to examine schools and students within their broader context. Yet, historical research can also be more conducive to examining schools in a contextual manner, as we can see from Walker’s (2002) extensive review of research on segregated African American schools from 1935 to 1969. The point of this literature

review was to challenge popular assumptions about Black schools as universally inferior owing to their lack of resources and lack of parity with White schools.

Yet, Walker's (2002) point was that when we look more closely at these schools via historical research including extensive interviews with former educators, students, and other members of the Black communities that surrounded these segregated schools, we learn something else. We learn of the seamless connections between these schools and the African American communities that supported and sustained them in spite of a larger political and social context of racism, racial violence, and severe oppression. This multilayered story of African American schools and their communities in the middle of the 20th century—before the *Brown* decision was enforced in any meaningful way—demonstrates the many attributes of these schools despite their lack of resources. Walker (2002), in this and other writings, enabled readers to understand how schools are molded by that context and the extent to which African Americans—in the schools and surrounding communities—struggled to make the best of a very bad situation, namely the racist Jim Crow system.

And because this limited literature exists, we know that it is possible for educational researchers to examine schools within their contexts, even if it is not the norm. Yet, we are beginning to see some evidence that, increasingly, more researchers appreciate the need for studies designed to help us better understand the role of schools in society and thus move beyond the simplistic debate over whether or not schools matter.

For instance, one area of educational research in which we now see researchers trying to make these crucial connections is policy research on standards-based reform and accountability. Whether it is school-based researchers who are paying far more attention to the federal, state, and local policy context of the educators and students they study, or whether it is researchers who begin by examining the policy context of schools and then look at the schools themselves, there are greater connections being made (see C. Barnes, 2002; Burch, 2002; Carnoy, Elmore, & Siskin, 2003; Little & McLaughlin, 1993).

Furthermore, despite the political trend of the past 25 years to place a large amount of responsibility on the schools, there is mounting evidence and analysis suggesting the pendulum needs to shift back toward the middle of the schools do not matter/schools are all that matter spectrum. Such research—some of which has been well publicized—reminds us of how student outcomes are influenced by forces external to schools, especially parents and families, but also the social conditions in which these families exist.

Several recently published books, including those of Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom (2003) and Richard Rothstein (2004), point to the importance of family background and child-rearing practices in discussions about achievement gaps across racial and socioeconomic lines. These two publications, which have received a fair amount of attention, summarize other research on the achievement gap between Black and White students. And while there are important distinctions between them, both of these books have broadened the debate from simply an argument that

schools alone are responsible for closing large gaps that often begin well before kindergarten.

The Thernstroms well-publicized book, *No Excuses* (2003), offered a somewhat odd mix of arguments on these issues. For instance, one section of the book praised a handful of educators and schools helping low-income students of color achieve, implying that they are the exception and not the rule in the field of education. Then, after critiquing most educators, the authors blamed African American parents for not fostering home environments that help their children succeed in school. They presented statistics, for example, on the number of hours that Black versus White and Asian students spend watching television. They were also highly critical of many Black parents' child-rearing techniques. In the end, the Thernstroms (2003) blamed not only Black parents but also the public schools and policies that support them for the Black-White (and Black-Asian) achievement gap. Yet, what is missing from the Thernstroms' book, as well as the popular press coverage of school desegregation and educational inequality more generally, is a thoughtful critique of the ways in which *larger* social forces—forces larger than the family unit—affect policies designed to provide poor students and students of color equal educational opportunities.

Rothstein (2004), in contrast, argued that social-class differences deeply affect students' educational outcomes. Yet, his argument went well beyond class-related distinctions in child-rearing practices to talk about inequality writ large in our society and its impact on schools and children. For instance, he documented evidence that the lack of health and dental care, substandard housing, and poor nutrition characteristic of low-income students' lives all have profound influences on these students' learning in schools—so much influence that school reform alone cannot close the gap: "As is argued in this book, the influence of social class characteristics is probably so powerful that schools cannot overcome it, no matter how well trained are their teachers and no matter how well designed are their instructional programs and climates" (p. 5).

Although Rothstein (2004) praised educators who work hard to help disadvantaged students succeed and was quick to point out that improving education is an important goal, he was clearly trying to move the debate beyond the ideology that schools can "do it alone." At the same time, he cautioned that his argument should not be interpreted to mean that "schools don't matter."

What is so refreshing about Rothstein's (2004) argument is that he clearly implicated institutions other than public schools and Black parents in explaining the inequality of student outcomes. His policy recommendations included universal health and dental care for children, more stable housing for the working poor, and more equal distribution of income. These are not the typical set of educational policy recommendations, but Rothstein (2004) presented evidence that improving poor students' lives in these ways could increase their achievement. In fact, he wrote: "If the nation can't close the gaps in income, health, and housing, there is little prospect of equalizing achievement" (p. 131).

A handful of other recent publications have put forth similar arguments. For instance, Levin and Belfield (2002) argued that while the educational achievement

of students is dependent on both family and school, it is much more dependent on the former than the latter. While these authors focused mainly on the role of families and the home-school relationship, they pointed out that “more than 90 percent of a child’s waking hours from birth to the age of eighteen are spent outside of school in an environment that is heavily conditioned, both directly and indirectly, by families” (p. 2).

The demand for a broader focus on what is failing and why in terms of the academic achievement of low-income students and students of color is also heard in Noguera’s (2003) *City Schools and the American Dream*:

Educational problems in poor inner-city neighborhoods cannot be addressed without also responding to the social and economic conditions in the communities where schools are located. It is unfair and unrealistic to expect schools to raise test scores and focus narrowly on the task of educating children when a broad array of unmet nonacademic needs (e.g. food, housing, and health care) invariably affect their ability to learn. (p. xiii)

Another recently published book, *Supplementary Education*, edited by Gordon, Bridglall, and Meroe (2004), stated quite boldly that schools alone cannot close the achievement gap between White and Asian students, on the one hand, and African American and Latino students, on the other. This book called for far more political support for supplemental programs such as after-school care and youth development programs.

Similarly, in *Unequal Childhoods* (2003), Lareau looked carefully at children’s lives outside of schools in an effort to explain differences in child-rearing practices across social classes and how the highly scheduled lives of middle- and upper-middle-class children advantage them in school and in their adult lives. While this book primarily focused on parenting and the role of the family vis-à-vis the school, it also discussed the institutional arrangements and the class structure and privilege that allow some children to have so many more after- and outside-of-school learning opportunities.

And finally, in her 2005 book *Radical Possibilities*, Jean Anyon was not shy about the need for policymakers to address poverty and all of its related variables—jobs, wages, housing, and so forth—before we can hope for more equal educational outcomes. This book, although not an empirical study of the policy context as it relates to the daily experiences of students and educators in poor schools (Anyon’s, 1997, earlier writing did do this), provides ample evidence that the current conditions of poor schools and families cannot be transformed by educational policies alone.

Despite the compelling arguments put forth by these authors, their perspective is swimming against a tide that says schools should solve most of the problems in society, and if they fail to do so, it must be because schools are bad and educators are poorly trained, lazy, or uncaring. It is as if once policymakers argue that schools matter, then somehow the prevailing wisdom is that they are *all* that matters—or at least the only thing that matters that can be fixed by public policy. Thus, major cuts in welfare and Medicaid, coupled with policymakers’ unwillingness to ensure that all

children have access to preschool, an “adequate” K–12 public education, health care, or livable housing, occur alongside punitive educational policies that demand schools close the gap between poor and nonpoor students in terms of achievement (see Brown, 2003; Halpren, 1995; Noguera, 2003; Rothstein, 2004).

Clearly, what we need is additional research and writing on the iterative relationship between a society that neglects many of its poor children of color and the schools that are left to solve the problems of those children. If there had not been such a dearth of research exploring these issues over the past 25 years, perhaps our public policies would be different today. In particular, if more of the school desegregation literature had considered the challenges schools faced in trying to institute an ostensibly antiracist policy in the midst of widespread racism, we may well have learned a different set of lessons from the integration efforts that were the legacy of *Brown*. Perhaps the discussions around the 50th anniversary would have been different—more focused on how to tackle racial inequality and the ongoing racism that drives today’s rampant de facto segregation. In the following section, we review a large portion of the research literature on school desegregation to try to understand why this work—which in many ways began with the Coleman report—rarely placed desegregated schools or students into a larger context.

LOOKING FOR CONTEXT IN THE SCHOOL DESEGREGATION LITERATURE: SO LITTLE, SO LATE

In theory, the body of research on school desegregation, perhaps more than most areas of educational research, should provide a great deal of insight into the role of schools within society and not simply focus on educational outcomes in a decontextualized way. We say this for two reasons. First, much of this work was conducted by sociologists of education, whose focus we would expect to be broader owing to the nature of their discipline. Second, given the racial tension and political resistance to school desegregation symbolized in the angry, mob-like actions of Whites in places such as Little Rock, Arkansas (see Beals, 1994), researchers studying this policy should have been attuned to the significant contextual issues surrounding its implementation.

Prior to launching our 5-year study of the relationship between the social and political context of districts and schools involved in school desegregation and the long-term lessons learned by students who attended these schools in the late 1970s, we combed the desegregation literature to see who, if anyone, had done something similar. We were not trying to answer simple questions about whether or not school desegregation “worked.” Rather, we wanted to understand how the specific contexts of these schools and the details of the policies that made them racially diverse shaped the experiences of their students.

We learned through our literature review that most of the earlier school desegregation research either had ignored context completely and focused only on student outcomes or had talked about the politics of desegregation in one district or across the country without connecting that political context to the lives of students and

educators in the schools. A smaller subset of the literature included studies examining just one school more in depth and sometimes relating schools' stories to their local political context. But for the most part, these in-depth qualitative studies focused on what was happening *inside* the schools as students and educators grappled—or failed to grapple—with important issues of race.

While much of this prior research has helped to answer some very important questions about school desegregation policy, as we describe subsequently, there was a gaping hole in the literature; namely, far too few desegregation studies have examined how an educational policy that goes against the grain of a racially segregated and unequal society is affected by that context. To explain the gaps in the large body of school desegregation literature, we have organized our review into three categories that emphasize important differences in the scope of this research. Thus, beyond the basic quantitative demographic studies of school-level racial makeup and students' exposure across racial groups (see, for instance, Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003; Orfield & Lee, 2005), we see three major categories of school desegregation research: (a) student outcomes, (b) within-school relations and experiences, and (c) political context/public opinion.

These three categories can help us understand that most studies have focused on one important part of the overall school desegregation experience. The problem is that very few studies have transcended these categories and looked, for instance, at how the political context of school desegregation may influence students' experiences within schools. As Braddock (2004) has noted, social science research on school desegregation has rarely been embedded in rich theories of social mobility, community power, or discrimination.

Because we use narrow theoretical perspectives to generate research on school desegregation effects, social researchers have failed to direct the policy debates on this issue toward a renewed public interest in the contemporary meaning of American ideals such as opportunity, social justice and individual rights. (p. 5)

Student Achievement and Outcomes Without the Context

While many researchers have measured interracial contact in desegregated schools, the bulk of school desegregation research has examined the academic achievement of students in racially mixed schools (see Clotfelter, 2004; Crain & Mahard, 1978; Levin, 1975; Wells, 2001). According to Crain and Mahard (1978), in an extensive review of the literature:

The effect of desegregation on the performance of black and white students on achievement tests has received an undeserved emphasis in the desegregation literature. There are over a hundred studies of achievement test performances following desegregation. When this is contrasted with the number of studies on other aspects of desegregation, the emphasis is embarrassing. (p. 17)

In terms of methodology, the Coleman report profoundly shaped the subsequent research on school desegregation. For instance, much of the early research on school desegregation that followed the Coleman report in the late 1960s and 1970s was

similar in design and thus examined student outcome data using quantitative analyses in which the racial makeup of schools was the dependent variable.

Thus, most of these student achievement studies were “input-output” studies that examined the relationship between the racial composition of a school (the input) and student achievement as measured by test scores (the output) (Crain & Mahard, 1978; see also Crain & Mahard, 1983). Such studies tell us very little about what was happening inside of schools—in the so-called “black box”—let alone anything about the local context of these schools and how issues of race and class affect the social and political dynamics of their communities.

In fact, this student achievement research generally included no consideration of the conditions of desegregation: whether protests or school boycotts occurred, whether students were in fear of their safety, or how desegregation shaped and was shaped by the actions and attitudes of educators in desegregated schools. The degree to which White teachers in racially mixed schools welcomed African American students or believed that they were as smart as White students was not discussed in these studies, although such factors may well have affected student test scores (Crain & Mahard, 1978; Orfield, 1975; Schofield, 1989 ; St. John, 1975). As Crain and Mahard (1978) argued:

If desegregation occurs under certain conditions, the short-run effects will not be positive. Student performance can be affected by community conflict, by school desegregation that is not reinforced by neighborhood integration, and by the racial attitudes of black and white students and staff. (p. 22)

Furthermore, these studies were not able to consider the many different types of desegregation plans. Thus, there was no information about whether the students were reassigned by their districts under a mandatory desegregation plan or whether they volunteered to be transferred to a more desegregated school. Nor was there recognition of the age at which students were desegregated or how long they had been in desegregated schools (Crain & Mahard, 1978). In addition, this early literature was not able to calculate the prevalence of *within*-school segregation via tracking or the extent to which Black and White students were exposed to the same curriculum (St. John, 1975).

The lack of information on these very important contextual elements significantly lessens the implications of these input-output studies, which for the most part were inconclusive. Clearly, other research suggests that these contextual variables matter a great deal and that caring educators who believe in African American and Latino students’ ability and help to build their confidence make a huge difference in how these students thrive or fail in desegregated settings (see Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1997).

Indeed, in their review of desegregation research that focused on academic achievement, Crain and Mahard (1978) found that the very small number of studies that did include data on what was going on in the community and the schools were the most helpful and gave the test-score data more meaning. For instance, they reported that one or more of the following variables could influence student performance: type and scope of the plans, community reaction, staff preparation for desegregation, grade levels at which students were desegregated, and the curricula provided in the schools. Crain and Mahard (1978) concluded that several favorable

conditions must exist before desegregation has beneficial achievement effects on African Americans students. (They also noted that none of the research revealed that desegregation had a negative effect on White students.)

For instance, they found that if Black students transferred into schools with better facilities, better teachers, high expectations for all students, a flurry of in-service programs for teachers, new curricula, and so forth, they were more likely to experience major achievement gains. Thus, Crain and Mahard (1978) argued that large numbers of academics have been fascinated by what they considered to be the most intellectually interesting question: “All else being equal, will the mixing of races alone result in higher black achievement? That question cannot be answered because in the real world, desegregation is never an ‘all else being equal’ situation” (p. 49).

Given that most of the school desegregation research on student achievement outcomes did not factor in these contextual variables of desegregation across different states, towns, or schools, it is not at all surprising that the results of these studies were inconclusive (Crain & Mahard, 1978; Schofield, 1989; St. John, 1975). While the majority of these studies showed that African American students’ achievement—as measured by test scores—improved with school desegregation and that White students’ achievement levels rarely if ever declined in racially diverse schools, this literature left us with very little understanding of *how* or *why* these results occurred or *where* and *when* achievement was greater (see Crain, 1976).

Basically, this early post-Coleman school desegregation research was trying to answer whether schools and thus school desegregation mattered, with a focus solely on students’ test scores—often after only limited exposure to desegregated schools. This focus grew out of the belief that the goal of desegregation was mainly to raise Black students’ test scores. While raising the achievement levels of students whose families had faced discrimination for centuries is definitely a worthwhile goal, this focus tended to downplay the fact that school desegregation is a legal remedy for the racial discrimination that Whites had instituted and supported for so long (see Wells, 2001; Wells & Crain, 1997).

Thus, what appeared to be a limited impact of school desegregation on student outcomes may have been more of an indictment of White educators’, policymakers’, and parents’ failure to embrace school desegregation policy as a remedy designed to challenge their racial privilege. In other words, a more contextualized study of student outcomes in this early era of school desegregation research may have yielded critical insights into how this racial privilege was simply reproduced within desegregated schools, albeit in a kinder and gentler form.

The Long-Term Effects Research: Positive Findings but Little “How” or “Why”

A second body of work focusing on the so-called long-term effects of school desegregation on students’ life chances, mobility rates, and adult accomplishments also

comprised mostly input-output studies. This work, while very helpful to us in framing our study, was mostly quantitative research examining the experiences of African Americans and the effects of their school experiences on their adult lives. Conducted mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, this work explored the ways in which the racial balance of a graduate's school (the input) correlated with various postsecondary variables such as college attendance and career and housing choices (the outputs).

Thus, these studies share many of the strengths and shortcomings of the research described earlier on student achievement within desegregated schools. In other words, the long-term effects research for the most part did not provide information on the conditions of school desegregation that African American students experienced. Yet, at the same time many of the "outputs" measured by these studies were quite impressive.

For instance, in a review of 21 studies on the long-term effects of school desegregation, Wells and Crain (1994) found that Black graduates of racially integrated schools were more likely to have higher occupational aspirations and expectations and to be aware of the steps they needed to take to obtain their goals. This finding suggests that professional information flows through institutions and social networks, which are often racially segregated (see DuBois, 1935; Granovetter, 1973).

The long-term effects literature also showed that African American graduates of desegregated high schools were more likely to attend predominantly White universities and more likely to work in integrated environments (see Braddock, Crain, McPartland, & Dawkins, 1986). Also, with one exception, this research revealed that these graduates end up completing more years of education, earning higher degrees, and majoring in more "nontraditional" occupations than graduates of all-Black schools (Braddock & McPartland, 1987; Wells & Crain, 1994).

The final set of findings from the long-term effects literature demonstrates that Black graduates of desegregated schools are more likely to work in white-collar and professional jobs in integrated corporations and institutions (see Wells & Crain, 1994). While the findings just described are quite encouraging in terms of the impact of desegregation on African Americans' life chances, this quantitative, survey-based research tells us very little about *how* or *why* these outcomes occurred among graduates of desegregated schools. Thus, in considering the perennial question regarding the pendulum swing discussed earlier, this research cannot tell us whether these findings reflect the effect of the desegregated schools per se (e.g., their resources, curricula, and teachers) on African American students, whether they reflect the peer influences that Coleman described, or, quite possibly, both.

In other words, if we are to analyze the findings from this research and suggest, as we did earlier (see also Wells & Crain, 1994), that the social networks formed in desegregated schools are likely to assist African Americans in leading more educated, lucrative, and integrated adult lives, then we would have to assume that peer effects are a critical part of their school experience. Still, we would not want to rule out the impact of other within-school factors, including the racial attitudes of educators, the school's academic press, and the school's reputation in the community and with higher education institutions.

Yet, this quantitative long-term effects literature does not allow us to draw conclusions about school effects because it does not include the needed information about the daily experiences of these adults when they were in school, local political reactions to school desegregation, or educators' efforts (or lack thereof) to make schools more equal or fair along racial lines. A more recent book by Eaton (2001) fits into the category of the long-term effects of school desegregation literature, but it was a qualitative study that entailed in-depth interviews with 65 African American graduates of an urban-suburban voluntary transfer program in Boston known as METCO. These adult graduates of the METCO program had, as children of color growing up in Boston, been assigned to predominantly White and mostly affluent suburban schools. What this study lacked in breadth it made up for by helping us understand, through the eyes of the adults who lived through it, *how* and *why* this educational journey from Boston to the suburbs was meaningful.

Interestingly enough, Eaton's (2001) findings echoed and extended some of the powerful themes of the quantitative long-term effects literature just described. For instance, she found that METCO graduates felt far more comfortable in racially diverse and predominantly White settings than their friends and family members who lacked such desegregated experiences. She also found that the METCO graduates tapped into powerful social networks in their suburban schools and that information about postsecondary school experiences, including the college application process and job opportunities, flowed through these networks.

The African American graduates in Eaton's study (2001) also talked about the downsides of participating in METCO, including the racial discrimination they faced in the suburban schools, the assumptions many White students and educators made about their families and backgrounds, and a sense of disconnection from their own communities. Still, overall, nearly all of the adults interviewed said that they would repeat their METCO experiences again if they had the chance. Such decisions, Eaton (2001) wrote, were "influenced . . . by their discoveries that the exposure they had in suburbia comprised fair approximations and decent preparation for life as blacks in white-dominated America" (p. 21).

Eaton's (2001) book gives us an in-depth look at how and why urban-suburban school desegregation in the Boston metropolitan area changed the lives of graduates of desegregated schools. Still, because Eaton (2001) interviewed METCO graduates who attended different suburban schools in different districts during different years, this study did not provide any analysis of the suburban schools or their local communities. Thus, the only understanding of the "context" of the schools and how the METCO program was accepted or rejected comes from the interviews with the METCO graduates from these different schools and eras. As a result, this book does not provide a clear sense of how the experiences of students in desegregated schools related to the social and political context of those schools. While we certainly learn that school desegregation matters from this long-term effects literature, it is still not clear exactly why.

The Intergroup Relations Research: Getting Along One Desegregated School at a Time

Another body of school desegregation literature—often called the intergroup relations literature—was, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, also composed primarily of quantitative input-output studies that attempted to assess “the effect” of school desegregation on indicators of relations between Blacks and Whites “such as racial attitudes or the formation of close friendships” (Schofield, 1991, p. 381). In many ways, this research was grounded in the belief that “schools matter” not simply because they teach children to read and do math—the value added measured on standardized tests—but also because they develop children socially and emotionally. Thus, these researchers examined the social skills and relationships students develop in desegregated schools, which are important while the students are in school as well as after they graduate and enter the adult world.

In fact, Schofield (1989) noted that while student achievement data are critical, schools do more than teach academic subject matter: They have a profound potential for shaping individuals and their social networks. Schofield (1989) cited the Jencks et al. book, *Inequality* (1972), which “demonstrated that academic achievement does not have the kind of overwhelming impact on later occupational successes that might justify making it the exclusive focus of most research on the outcomes of desegregated schooling” (p. x).

In her extensive review of this intergroup relations literature, Schofield (1991) discussed different historical periods of school desegregation and the type of intergroup relations research that was conducted in each, noting that up until the late 1960s there was relatively little school desegregation and thus little evidence of its social consequences. Between 1968 and 1975, the research on intergroup relations in desegregated schools grew rapidly, but most of it involved cross-sectional portraits focusing on students’ racial attitudes at one moment in time (Schofield, 1991). Nor was there much discussion of the context of these students and their schools or the ways in which schools were working against larger forces of racism in society. Thus, like the research on student achievement and desegregation mentioned earlier, the focus of the intergroup relations research up until the mid-1970s was “clearly . . . on outcomes rather than on the processes that might account for these outcomes” (Schofield, 1991, p. 344).

For instance, Schofield (1991) noted that many of these earlier researchers did not indicate whether the schools studied were desegregated via mandatory, voluntary, or residential “neighborhood” desegregation. Nor did they indicate whether the classrooms within desegregated schools were resegregated, with mostly White students in the higher-level classes and most of the African American or Latino students in the lower-level classes. Such resegregation within racially diverse schools is common and has multiple implications for so-called “intergroup” relations (Oakes, 1985). But if researchers examine intergroup relations only as an outcome variable and do not pay attention to within-school resegregation, they may be far too quick to conclude that “desegregation”—as a poorly defined “input” variable—has a negative effect on

intergroup relations when it may actually be the resegregation of students within nominally desegregated buildings that hampers such relations.

As a result of these shortcomings, reviews of this earlier research failed to draw any hard and fast conclusions about the effects of desegregation on students' racial attitudes and their relations across racial lines. Schofield (1991) noted that this inconclusiveness was due in large part to researchers' unwillingness to frame their work theoretically in a way that would help readers better understand the role played by desegregated schools in shaping how students interact along racial lines:

Typically, researchers study a particular example of desegregation and look for changes in students' attitudes or behaviors that can be attributed to their desegregated experiences. Because they bring no theoretical framework that would suggest what characteristics of the desegregated setting might relate to those changes, most researchers have paid little attention to what the desegregated setting was actually like. (p. 359)

At the end of her extensive review of this intergroup relations research, Schofield (1991) argued that those who study these delicate issues in desegregated schools should ask "What is going on here?" and pay more attention to the social processes that lead to the various "outcomes." Examples of studies that have provided such insights include those that have examined one or two desegregated schools in depth, paying far more attention to what is going on within these schools.

In fact, Schofield was one of a small group of researchers who, in the late 1970s, took their work inside schools to study desegregation up close and in depth in a small number of cases. These later studies gave readers a more holistic view of what was going on within schools and how intergroup relations shaped and were shaped by different learning environments, student success, and the self-esteem of students, particularly students of color. While more limited in scope, this literature focused on the structures and cultures of desegregated schools and how they influence relationships between students and educators and between different groups of students. These mostly qualitative studies, including the work of Grant (1988), Metz (1978, 2003), Oakes et al. (1996), Patchen (1982), Rist (1970), Schofield (1989), and Wells and Crain (1997), raise important issues about which types of school desegregation policies and practices are most effective in creating successful schools.

In particular, these qualitative studies help to illustrate the problems related to within-school segregation or the process of placing African American students in lower-level classes resegregated from their White peers. Some of this work highlights complex issues related to teachers' attitudes and beliefs about the ability of Black students to succeed as well as their willingness to talk about race (in particular, see Metz, 1978, 2003; Oakes et al., 1996; Rist, 1970; Schofield, 1989).

Furthermore, many of these qualitative, intergroup relations studies provide important information about the local context of desegregated schools and thus about how these schools shaped and were shaped by that context. Some of the studies included interviews with local officials responsible for implementing school desegregation. Others provided at least basic demographic or historical data on the

surrounding communities and school districts. For instance, in Metz's revised edition of *Different by Design* (2003), she wrote that the book's story of three urban magnet schools in the early 1980s remains timely because she examined these schools' internal "processes and realities" while looking,

as little research until very recently has done, at the interplay of school-level organizational processes and the policies and specific decisions at the district level. [*The book*] explores processes in the conduct of school district decision making that balance district-level needs and district political processes against the educational welfare of students in individual schools. . . . While current pressures on districts are quite different, the links and disjunctions between districts and schools that the book explores still reveal much about the fundamental character of, and processes in, the relationship between districts and schools. (pp. viii–ix, italics added)

Similarly, in Grant's (1988) study of one racially diverse and demographically unstable school that he called Hamilton High, he provided much of the historical background and contextual information needed to help readers understand how things got to be the way they are in this school and its local community. Furthermore, Grant (1988) made the much-needed connections between the tensions and changes taking place within this increasingly diverse public high school and the many layers of policies and political pressures that have shaped the school's demographics and culture.

As helpful as this intergroup relations research is, for the most part, researchers either employed quantitative data that provided little insight into the local context of schools or engaged in in-depth qualitative studies of individual schools that offered a detailed portrait of what it was like to be a student or educator in these schools but little insight into the role of the broader context in shaping those experiences (Schofield, 1991). While most of these qualitative studies provided helpful in-depth examinations of one school, it was clear to us that what was missing from the literature was a systematic study of many schools across different district and community contexts.

Political Context Studies and Opinion Polls: Looking at Context but Not the Schools

In addition to the desegregation research mentioned earlier, there have been a few notable studies of the politics of school desegregation and several opinion polls throughout the years that have included questions about desegregation and racially diverse schools. This research tells us a great deal about the political contexts of desegregation but usually does not connect these broader contexts to the experiences of students and educators or how politics have compromised the goals of desegregation at the school and classroom levels. Thus, these studies only partially shape our understanding of how and why schools matter.

Politics of Desegregation Research: The Context Without the Schools

While the work of Coleman, Jencks, and Moynihan was receiving a great deal of attention, other studies that offered different and more complex perspectives were

overlooked in the policy debates. One of the best examples of this was a study of nine local communities struggling with the issue of school desegregation. This set of qualitative case studies was published in a 1968 book, *Our Children's Burden*, edited by Raymond W. Mack. This research, like the Coleman report it was intended to supplement, had been commissioned by Congress in Section 402 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In fact, Mack wrote that he worked with James Coleman and his coauthor Earnest Campbell to design this study of nine communities in a way that might “put flesh on the bones of the survey data by learning something from observation and unscheduled interview about definitions of situations and the interactional contexts of the data sought by survey methods” (1968, p. xi).

These case studies offer often riveting portraits of the struggles and tensions within the nine communities undergoing school desegregation. The authors of these chapters provided important historical and demographic information on these towns and districts to help readers better understand the political barriers to meaningful desegregation. For instance, in his chapter on Riverside, California, Duster (1968), a sociologist, wrote about Whites' resistance to desegregation. He quoted a White woman who stood up at a public hearing on desegregation to say “We have the right to discriminate. We've earned it. This is American, not Red country, where the state tells you what to do and think” (p. 35). She received applause from many people in the audience.

These contextual data are critical to our understanding of the political opposition to school desegregation, and thus they help explain the extent of the “burden” we placed on children and educators when we asked schools to do what no other institution in society—with the exception of the military—was willing to do. Hence, the title of the book and the central finding highlighted in the introduction—“Americans are asking their children to bear the brunt of the difficult social process of desegregation” (Mack, 1968, p. xiii)—speak to this important theme. Still, the scope of the Mack (1968) study did not allow inclusion of data collection within the schools themselves, the places where the students and teachers bore that burden. It was a study of the local politics surrounding school desegregation.

Similarly, Crain's (1969) landmark study, *The Politics of School Desegregation*, examined the role of school boards in the school desegregation process in 15 cities. The main finding was that the most important factor determining the behavior of the school boards in these cities was the influence of the local civic elite: the businessmen and other nongovernmental local leaders who participated in city decision making (p. 3).

Crain's collection of political case studies, like those in the Mack (1968) book, provided valuable insights into the local political contexts of desegregated public schools. Still, this study, similar to Mack's book, did not examine what was actually happening within the schools—or even within the school districts, for the most part. In fact, Wells and Crain (1997) wrote in their book analyzing the St. Louis desegregation plan almost 30 years later that the city of St. Louis had, when Crain (1969) wrote his book, looked politically progressive as local leaders embraced the *Brown*

decision and banned de jure segregation, but the reality in the schools and neighborhoods was far more problematic.

For instance, they found that during the period that Crain (1969) was describing, the St. Louis school board was also redrawing neighborhood school boundaries to exclude Black neighborhoods from White schools' attendance boundaries. Meanwhile, the Black schools were severely overcrowded, and at least once, when Black students were reassigned to a White school, they were on their own separate floor of the school, their school day started and ended at different times than for the White students, and there were separate White and Black recesses and lunch times (see Wells & Crain, 1997). Thus, had Crain (1969) tried to connect the talk of the local political elites in St. Louis to a systematic study of what was actually happening within the schools and neighborhoods, he would have offered a far less optimistic view of school desegregation in that city in the 1960s.

Another seminal book on school desegregation that fits the politics of education paradigm is Hochschild's *The New American Dilemma* (1984). In her thoughtful analysis of Whites' resistance to school desegregation policies and the many ways in which racism is symbiotic with the American dream—as opposed to being an anomaly in an otherwise equal society—Hochschild (1984) captured the national political context of desegregation. Her central argument was that incremental approaches to implementing school desegregation will never work in a society in which many Whites have benefited from racial inequality and segregation for so long. This political analysis provides an important framework to help researchers, educators, students, and parents who struggle on a daily basis to make school desegregation work in schools and communities. But Hochschild is a political scientist whose expertise is analyzing opinion poll data and other primary sources and drawing new insights from them. She did not explore the multiple ways in which this political context affects schools and local communities or how the struggles at those sites might shape the experiences of educators and students.

The Hochschild (1984) book was similar in this way to a spate of books published in the period leading up to the 50th anniversary of the *Brown* decision. Most of these books were political, legal, or historical analyses of *Brown* and its legal legacy and significance (see, for example, Bell, 2004; Cashin, 2004; Klarman, 2004; Ogletree, 2004). These books, like Hochschild's (1984), help readers place the *Brown* decision and subsequent efforts to desegregate schools into a larger perspective that speaks to the past and present direction of this country in terms of racial equality and public policy.

Empirical evidence drawn from local desegregated school sites would help in making such macro-micro connections between the politics of the local context and the schools. Case studies of school desegregation in particular towns or school districts stand the best chance of doing this. And yet, for the most part such in-depth case studies do not do this. Rather, they tend to focus on the local political context or on legal battles or court orders related to the district they are studying.

For example, Gaillard's (1988) *The Dream Long Deferred*, focusing on the Charlotte school desegregation case, provides a rich and detailed description of the struggle in

that city to come up with a politically and logistically viable student assignment plan after many false starts. But Gaillard (1988) did not, for whatever reason, explore what was happening inside the schools so profoundly affected by this plan. In any event, Gaillard's (1988) focus on the court case and the political fallout from that case is not unusual in terms of how most case studies of single towns or districts are conducted. For instance, in another, even more detailed study of the Charlotte case, Douglas (1995) provided a powerful analysis of the legal and political developments in the city's two-decade fight to first resist and then implement a school desegregation plan.

Many of the local case studies of school desegregation across different contexts are similarly focused on the local political and often legal battles over desegregation. They often provide invaluable data on student demographics and other quantitative data on resources, enrollment, and so forth, but they do not offer an analysis of what is happening inside the schools affected by these legal battles and demographic shifts (see, for instance, Orfield et al., 1996).

Of course, there is also a body of research examining White flight from desegregating school districts that is based mostly on demographic data. Much of this work has been conducted by expert witnesses for legal teams trying to limit or dismantle school desegregation plans across the country. This research attempts to prove the strong and causal relationship between school desegregation and White flight (see Armor, 1995, for a review). On the opposing side of the debate, other researchers have made the claim that the relationship between White flight and school desegregation is overblown and that a great deal of White flight occurs in cities with neighborhood school assignments (see Orfield & Monfort, 1988; Orfield et al., 1996). While this research is very important in terms of the demographic shifts taking place within and around school desegregation policies, it does not help us understand what White flight looks like at the school or community level or how people make sense of their school choices as they relate to race.

Some of the case studies of individual locales provide insight into the experiences of particular people involved in school desegregation. For instance, Lukas's (1985) account of school desegregation in Boston portrayed the court order and its aftermath through the eyes of three families. Similarly, a more recent case study of desegregation in Austin, Texas, focused on the 18 teachers who were the first to be reassigned to historically segregated schools at the outset of desegregation (Wilson & Segall, 2001). Walker's (2005) historical work linked the grassroots efforts of African American teachers in Georgia to the larger legal and political struggle for desegregation and equal educational opportunities for Black students.

Meanwhile, the Wells and Crain (1997) study of the urban-suburban school desegregation plan in metropolitan St. Louis explored the experiences of different African American students from the city: those who remained in city schools, those who transferred to suburban schools, and those who transferred to the suburbs and then returned to city schools. This book, therefore, provided the legal history and local political context of this unique school desegregation plan as well as insight into the impact of the plan on individual students and the schools they attended. As a

result, the book offered some insight into the relationship between the broader context and the schools, educators, and students whose daily lives were affected by desegregation.

The problem with these case studies is that even when they do go more in depth to look at the impact of desegregation on students' or educators' lives, they tend to focus on only one city or district or one school desegregation plan, often leaving the reader wondering whether the phenomena they describe are anomalies or themes and issues that emerge across different sites. The next section provides data on the political context writ large as measured via public opinion polls.

Public Opinion Polls: Research Focusing on What People Say but Not What They Do

Beyond the literature on the effects of school desegregation on the achievement and opportunities of African American students or on local politics, there is a body of literature on attitudes toward racially mixed schools. This literature provides insights into broader public perceptions of school desegregation and thus helps to explain what happens in local contexts and in schools themselves; however, this research does not, in itself, make connections to these experiences. In other words, it tells us what people *say* and not what they actually *do*.

For instance, Orfield's (1995) review of literature on public opinion and school desegregation showed that recorded attitudes had changed relatively dramatically in the 40 years since the *Brown* decision. In fact, the percentage of Americans of all races who believed that the Supreme Court was right in its *Brown* decision increased from 63% in the early 1960s to 87% in the mid-1990s. And in the South, where only 19% of people agreed with the landmark ruling in 1954, only 15% in the 1990s said that they did *not* agree with the ruling. This marks a dramatic shift in attitudes in the region of the country that has experienced the most school desegregation.

Furthermore, there is a great deal of evidence from the past 20 years that the majority of Americans say they see some value in having their children attend racially diverse public schools. For instance, a 1994 Gallup poll revealed that the percentage of Americans who believed that "more should be done to integrate schools" had risen rapidly in a short time span, from 37% in 1988 to 56% in 1994. Among African Americans, 84% supported efforts to achieve integrated schools (Orfield, 1995).

And then there is the Public Agenda (1998) report *Time to Move On*, which included polling data and argued that today most parents put academic achievement ahead of racial integration as the priority for their children—as if integration and achievement were mutually exclusive. Yet, despite the authors' simple conclusion in this report, closer examination of their data reveals a picture that is far more complex. For instance, toward the end of the report, the polling data show that 80% of Black parents and 66% of White parents surveyed said that it was either "very important" or "somewhat important" that their child's school be racially integrated. In fact, only 10% of Black parents and 16% of White parents said that it was "not important at all" for their children to attend racially diverse schools. Echoing these

national findings in a city that has seen much racial strife in the past several years, a poll conducted in the greater Cincinnati area showed that 80% of Whites and 90% of Blacks believe children develop better when they attend schools with children of another race (see Pilsher, 2001).

Among people who have had first-hand experience with desegregation, the findings are positive. A 1978 survey of graduates of desegregated schools showed that 63% of Blacks and 56% of Whites believed their school desegregation experience had been “very satisfactory.” Only 8% of Blacks and 16% of Whites said the experience was “unsatisfactory” (Orfield, 1995, p. 663).

These polling data suggest that public opinion toward racially mixed schools has become more favorable—at least in the abstract—at the same time judges and policymakers have led the way toward dismantling school desegregation policies. Thus, we need to better understand how these stated opinions interact with the lived experiences of students, educators, and parents in desegregated schools. Somewhere between what people say in opinion polls and the choices they make and support in their daily lives is the underlying story of school desegregation in the United States.

Clearly, while the body of research literature on school desegregation is quite expansive, what has been missing is a study of how school desegregation policy was shaped and compromised by its social and political context and how these influences in turn shaped the personal experiences of students and educators in desegregated schools. In fact, our study, discussed subsequently, is the first to look carefully across different communities at the relationship between the social and political contexts of different racially diverse schools, including their desegregation policies and the experiences of students and educators.

Using this broader framework in a study of six racially diverse schools during the late 1970s and the lives of their graduates today, we questioned the value of placing all of the burden of equalizing society on public schools or on Black parents. To paraphrase the Honorable Judge Robert L. Carter, who was one of the lead NAACP attorneys on the *Brown* case, segregated public schools are but a symptom of a larger disease: the disease of racism in our society.

THE UNDERSTANDING RACE AND EDUCATION STUDY: QUESTIONS AND METHODS FOR LOOKING AT DESEGREGATED SCHOOLS WITHIN THEIR CONTEXT

In 1999, we set out to conduct in-depth case studies of six high schools within districts that had undergone some form of desegregation by the late 1970s. We planned to examine these schools in light of political and historical trends and to conduct lengthy interviews with at least 40 class of 1980 graduates from each site.

Our study was designed to answer qualitative research questions about how the broader policy contexts of these schools shaped their students’ experiences and understandings. Furthermore, we wanted to know how the 1980 graduates of these schools understood their school experience and its effect on their lives—their racial

attitudes, educational and professional opportunities, personal relationships, and social networks. We set out to learn how and why these desegregated schools mattered in the lives of their students and how school effects were mediated by larger social forces. Qualitative historical case studies of these schools and their graduates within local political contexts were the mechanisms we chose to answer these interpretive questions.

Data Collection

We designed a three-tiered data collection strategy: Tier 1 consisted of the historical case studies of the six high schools; Tier 2 entailed interviews with graduates of the class of 1980 from each high school; and Tier 3 involved in-depth “portraits” of at least four of the graduates interviewed during Tier 2 from each high school.

Tier 1: Historical Case Studies

The first tier of our data collection involved historical case studies of the high schools and their social and political contexts in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These historical case studies were based, in part, on interviews with community members, lawyers, elected officials, and educators who were involved in the six schools during that time. In addition, we collected an array of historical documents, such as school board minutes, newspaper articles, yearbooks, and legal documents, to help piece together the stories of what was happening in these six schools during the study period.

Our goal in choosing the six communities in which we would conduct the historical case studies was to find school districts across the country that varied in terms of their size and region, the racial/ethnic make up of their general population and public school students, the social class of their residents, and the ways in which their schools became desegregated. We wanted districts with significant school desegregation plans, but, to better understand the role that context plays in this process, we wanted their contexts to be different. We came up with an initial list of about 20 potential districts by asking school desegregation experts from different regions of the country for suggestions.

We chose the following six communities to study: Austin, Texas; Charlotte, North Carolina; Englewood, New Jersey; Pasadena, California; Shaker Heights, Ohio; and Topeka, Kansas. These cities vary not only in terms of their geographic locations but also in terms of how and why their public schools became racially diverse. In some, there was court-ordered mandatory student reassignment. In others, the high school(s) became desegregated via efforts to create racially diverse residential areas.

Thus, each of these six school districts had at least one high school that was racially mixed³ during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the four districts with more than one high school, we ended up choosing among these schools on the basis of the racial and social-class composition of their enrollments and the role they played in desegregation

programs within each district. We wanted the high schools across the six sites to be diverse in terms of these criteria. The six schools selected were as follows.

- *Austin High School, Austin, Texas (Austin Independent School District)*: This school was desegregated via majority-to-minority transfers from several attendance areas. Its racial makeup during the 1970s was 15% African American, 19% Hispanic, and 66% White.
- *Dwight Morrow High School, Englewood, New Jersey (Englewood Public Schools)*: Dwight Morrow was desegregated by receiving White students from Englewood Cliffs High School via a sending-receiving plan. It was already somewhat integrated as the only public high school serving the racially diverse town of Englewood. Busing and reassignment began at the elementary level. The school's racial makeup during the 1970s was 57% African American, 7% Hispanic, and 36% White.
- *John Muir High School, Pasadena, California (Pasadena Unified School District)*: John Muir was originally desegregated by drawing from several diverse attendance areas; in the 1970s, it was desegregated via mandatory busing. Its racial makeup during the 1970s was 50% African American, 11% Hispanic, 34% White, and 5% Asian/Pacific Islander.
- *Shaker Heights High School, Shaker Heights, Ohio (Shaker Heights City School District)*: Shaker Heights was desegregated as the only high school in a district experiencing an influx of African American students from Cleveland. Efforts were made to integrate neighborhoods, and student reassignment began at the elementary level. The school's racial makeup during the 1970s was 39% "minority" (mostly African American) and 61% White.
- *Topeka High School, Topeka, Kansas (501 School District)*: This school was desegregated via assigned attendance areas; student reassignment began at the elementary and junior high levels. Its racial makeup during the 1970s was 20% African American, 8% Hispanic, 69% White, 1.4% American Indian, and 1.4% Asian.
- *West Charlotte High School, Charlotte, North Carolina (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools)*: This historically black school was desegregated via a court order reassigning students from White high schools. Its racial makeup during the 1970s was 50% African American and 50% White.

Interestingly enough, both John Muir High School and Dwight Morrow High School had enrollments that were less than 50% White by the late 1970s. Both of these schools, along with West Charlotte High School, have experienced massive White flight since the class of 1980 graduated and are now predominantly African American and Latino. Meanwhile, Austin High School, Shaker Heights High School, and Topeka High School have managed to remain relatively more stable, with a shrinking but still significant White population. Yet, as we note later, both Austin and Shaker Heights are quite possibly on the verge of losing the majority of their White students. This leaves Topeka High School as the only one of the six that promises to maintain some White-Black-Latino diversity for the next several years.

Tier 2: Interviews With Graduates

The second tier of data collection consisted of semistructured, in-depth, and open-ended interviews with a sample of 40 to 50 students who graduated in 1980 from each of the six high schools. We chose to study the class of 1980 because these students entered kindergarten in the fall of 1967, when Lyndon B. Johnson occupied the White House and Martin Luther King Jr. was still alive. Thus, these students entered public schools across the country full of hope and promise regarding civil rights, and they traveled through the educational system at a time of tremendous change. On their first day of school, the federal government was poised to finally force hundreds of school districts to implement the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Thirteen years later, they would graduate from public schools that were, on average, far more desegregated than those they had entered.

Thus, we chose this class because its members experienced many of the peak years in American school desegregation. By 1988, efforts by the Reagan and Bush administrations to dismantle school desegregation policies had begun to pay off, and resegregation was on the rise. National data show that members of the class of 1980 were therefore more likely, on average, to have classmates of other races than were students in any class before them or in classes of the past 15 years.

Our research suggests that the late 1970s was a particularly pivotal moment in the history of school desegregation policy across the country. By this time in many towns, the initial protests and racial conflict that occurred when students were first reassigned to desegregated schools in the early 1970s had subsided to some degree. According to many people we interviewed, the late-1970s era was a relatively sedate time when strong and vocal opposition to desegregation had died down. The promise of a new, more racially integrated society was still alive, at least in school districts that had not already lost most of their White students.⁴

At the same time, this was a transitional period, following Watergate and the Vietnam War. A conservative political movement would soon change the policy agenda in education and other public policy arenas. By the time the class of 1980 graduated from high school, in the midst of the Iranian hostage crisis, a major recession, and a severe oil shortage, Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign was already fueling a powerful backlash against the Great Society policies of the 1960s and 1970s (Edsall, 1991).

Thus, the class of 1980 was born at the tail end of the baby boom and during the civil rights movement but came of age during the Reagan years. Over the nearly 25 years following their high school graduation, many in this cohort sought jobs and a college education, married, bought homes, had children, met new friends, and joined new organizations. Meanwhile, the public schools gradually became more racially segregated, and little progress was made in reducing the level of segregation in other realms of society.

Given their historical context, we thought that the members of the class of 1980 had an important story to tell. We sampled the graduates from each school purposively to reflect the range of diversity of the students in their class, particularly in terms of race,

ethnicity, social class, residential neighborhood, academic success, and level of school involvement. We also made a concerted effort to interview graduates who had moved away from their hometowns, either by phone or by traveling to nearby towns. In addition, we interviewed small numbers of nongraduates—those who had either dropped out or transferred out of the schools before graduating. Numbers of graduate interviews conducted, by race, were as follows: White, 136; African American, 79; Latino, 21; Asian, 2; and mixed race, 4. In addition, 26 “portrait interviews were conducted.

Our interviews with the graduates elicited, as only qualitative research can, their understandings of how their lives were affected by their experiences in racially diverse high schools. In particular, we asked the graduates about their educational opportunities, friendships, and networks while attending their racially diverse high schools.

Tier 3: Portraits of Graduates

The third and final tier of data collection for this study involved a much more detailed and in-depth examination of the lives of 4 to 6 graduates from each site. Once we had learned about the history and politics of the context of the high school and interviewed a broad range of students from the class of 1980, we selected between 4 and 6 of these graduates who embodied the major themes emerging from each site. They also reflected the racial diversity of the class of 1980 at their particular school. Each of the 26 graduates we interviewed a second time provided us with ample information to construct a “portrait” of their experiences at their high schools (see Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Overview of Data

A total of 540 interviews were conducted, among them 268 interviews of graduates (242 initial interviews and 26 portrait interviews). Our open-ended interviews with policymakers, activists, school officials, lawyers, educators, and graduates focused, for the most part, on the effects of school desegregation on their communities, schools, and lives. We also collected yearbooks, newspaper clips, district documents, and historical documents in libraries and schools from each of the sites.

Data Analysis

As we conducted interviews with approximately 80 people at each site (for a total of 540 interviews) and collected file cabinets full of historical documents, we began data analysis through analytical memos and many pages of field notes. We also wrote case reports about each site for our advisory board meetings. Each interview was fully transcribed and coded according to both within- and cross-case themes that emerged over the course of the study. These themes and subthemes were challenged, merged, and rewritten throughout the course of our data coding process. Our ongoing analysis of these coded data, along with our review of historical documents, portrait transcripts, and field notes, allowed us to develop outlines and a framework for our main findings. The quotations presented here were taken from the corresponding sections

of the coded data documents. Thus, each theme or subtheme represented a large body of data, primarily concurring or dissenting quotations derived from hundreds of interviews. The quotations presented, therefore, portray a sentiment or understanding far greater than each utterance.

The findings described here were drawn from our larger analysis, which included five major themes. The two themes discussed subsequently speak most directly to the relationship between schools and their contexts and thus allow us to contemplate the ways in which schools do and do not matter.

FINDINGS FROM A STUDY OF SCHOOLS WITHIN THEIR CONTEXT: WHY SCHOOLS COULD NOT, ON THEIR OWN, FULFILL THE PROMISE OF *BROWN*

Hochschild and Scovronick (2003) argued that school desegregation was, in many ways, a successful public policy as measured by various outcomes, including African American achievement and cross-racial relations, but that politically it was a failure. Whites never strongly supported public policies that took away their freedom to choose where and with whom their children attended school. Meanwhile, many African Americans and Latinos have grown weary of the various ways in which White resistance to desegregation manifests itself inside desegregated schools and districts, often making the goal of equal educational opportunity an elusive one.

Key findings from our study help explain how the context influenced the school community. The stories of the schools we studied and their graduates exemplify the challenges public schools faced as educators tried to facilitate racial integration amid a highly segregated and unequal society. Indeed, our argument, based on these hundreds of interviews and extensive document collection, is that while the racially mixed public schools of the late 1970s were doing more than other institutions in our society to bring people of different racial/ethnic backgrounds together and foster equal opportunity, they did not come close to fulfilling the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Rather, our in-depth study shows that these schools and the districts in which they were located reflected the racial inequality of their local communities and the larger society even as some educators struggled to alter that inequality through equity-minded policies.

Important answers to the *why* questions that emanate from this central argument are grounded in the local contexts of these six high schools. Clearly, we have learned—as no other study on school desegregation has shown in a systematic manner—that the specific context and demographics mattered in the daily experiences of educators and students in racially diverse schools.

Thus, the high schools located in more politically liberal communities and those with larger Black populations were more likely to offer a small number of courses in African American history or Swahili than other high schools. Also, we found more cross-racial friendships in high schools with larger middle-class Black student populations and more interracial dating in the three schools located in more socially liberal

communities. Context and demographics also influenced the schools' reputations, the degree of White flight and racial tension, and the commitment of educators.

Yet, while these local distinctions are important, the fact that there are differences across these contexts makes the common, cross-site themes even more powerful because, at each of the sites, policymakers and educators did as little as was legally possible to upset the status quo. This resistance to change was manifest in similar practices across the six districts: forcing Black students to bear most of the burden of desegregating, providing significant incentives to Whites who agreed to participate, and segregating students within racially mixed schools through tracking practices and unequal information and access regarding the most challenging classes.

Through the experiences of educators and students in racially diverse schools in the 1970s, we can help readers understand the many ways in which the promise of *Brown* remained unfulfilled as White privilege was upheld—sometimes in a very de facto manner—within the context of these schools and communities. Such an analysis creates a context for the experiences of the graduates; this is why desegregation had a profound impact on the students and educators, but also why the society as a whole limited the impact that desegregation could have on the students.

Our study, because it looked at several schools within their particular contexts, illustrates how difficult it was for the people in these schools to live up to the goals of school desegregation given the larger societal forces, including housing segregation, economic inequality, and racial politics, working against them. In this way, we can better understand the political failure of school desegregation policy—a policy that accomplished enough to earn the animosity of most White Americans and, as a result, faced too much resistance and White flight for African Americans and Latinos to continue to fight for it.

At the same time, in other publications from this study, we have documented how deeply committed some of these actors—both educators and students—were to trying to bring about change. We captured their memories of many “integrated moments” (connections and experiences) in which they crossed the color line, moments that would not have occurred if not for school desegregation. Furthermore, we learned that despite the social forces working against school desegregation, virtually all of the graduates we interviewed said that desegregation was “worth it” and that they would do it again if they had the chance. And yet, their current lives are far more segregated than their high schools were (see Holme, Wells, & Revilla, 2004; Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2004a, 2004b, in press).

Thus, we argue that the school desegregation policies and efforts that existed in these schools were better than nothing but simply not enough to change the larger society single-handedly. In this way, our study speaks to larger lessons about the role of schools in society and the futile but worthwhile efforts of lawyers and judges to use schools as a tool for social change. The social and economic inequalities across color lines that had accumulated in the United States by the late 1970s—inequalities that are still severe today—reproduced themselves within these racially diverse schools, leaving some students with far fewer opportunities. The boundaries between

the schools and their social and political context proved to be as porous as the will to change society through the schools.

Efforts to dismiss school desegregation as a “failed policy”—or, worse yet, a “failed social experiment”—are highly misleading. Indeed, in many contexts, even getting Black, White, and Latino students and educators into the same building was a major feat. And the fact that most of these students said, more than 20 years later, that they valued the experience and would do it again speaks to the importance of the struggle in which these schools were engaged. Indeed, despite the degree of resegregation that occurred, many African American and Latino students said that their schools did matter in their lives—that they benefited from their association with more prestigious and well-resourced schools. Far from being a failure, therefore, school desegregation was never fully implemented, and thus racial integration was never achieved. Thus, our study advances an important point made by John Hope Franklin: “The real tragedy of contemporary race relations . . . is not that integration failed but that it was barely tried” (cited in Applebome, 1995, p. 34).

In the following two sections of this chapter, we highlight two of the most powerful themes (and several subthemes) to emerge from our data that illustrate the powerful connections between these schools and their local communities—and society in general. More detailed discussions of these themes, as well as additional themes, can be found in Wells et al. (in press).

The Power of White Privilege in Racially Mixed Schools and Districts: The Broader Social Context of Desegregation

The theme of the power of White privilege and how it undermined school desegregation policies and practices in these six communities illustrates the distance between the intent behind school desegregation policies—to vindicate 14th Amendment rights of African Americans and Latinos—and the actual results these policies achieved. In all of the six school districts we studied, powerful Whites were able to maintain their privileged status even in the context of an equity-minded reform movement such as school desegregation.

In each of these communities and schools, policymakers and educators tried to make desegregation as palatable as possible for middle-class White parents and students. On a political level, this made perfect sense. The idea was to stave off White and middle-class flight, which would leave the public schools politically and economically vulnerable. However, in concentrating on appeasing White parents, school districts often disregarded the needs of both students of color and poor students (see Wells et al., 2004).

Across the school districts studied, therefore, we saw the disillusionment of African American and Latino advocates, educators, parents, and students as they began to give up on a “remedy” they once thought would solve many educational problems for students of color. While they acknowledged many gains that resulted from efforts to desegregate public schools and create more diversity within these

educational institutions, they voiced clear disappointment about how little progress had been made overall and the price that communities of color had to pay to accommodate the demands and threats of Whites. In the end, in each of these communities, the tide of racial inequality and segregation was more powerful than the efforts to reverse it.

We broke down this broad theme of White power and privilege into two subthemes that help illustrate the larger point: (a) White resistance and threat of flight led to Black school closings and the burden of busing being placed on Blacks and (b) “green”—meaning resources and opportunities—follows “white.” In the following, we describe each of these subthemes briefly (for more detail, see Wells et al., 2004).

White Resistance and Threat of Flight

Other writings on school desegregation have demonstrated that African American—and, to a lesser extent, Latino—students have almost always borne most of the burden of busing when students are reassigned to achieve racial balance (Adair, 1984; Bell, 1987, 2004; Shujaa, 1996). We also know that far more Black schools were closed down and Black teachers were fired, all in the name of school desegregation that would take place almost exclusively on “White turf.” What we learned from our qualitative study is more of the story of *how* this happens: how Whites resisted desegregation plans that looked any different, plans that would have equalized school closings or student travel across racial lines.

There are many quotations in our data on White resistance to school desegregation and how politically effective that resistance was. For instance, a former school board member in Austin, Texas, noted, when asked about the perspective of White parents on the school desegregation process:

Look, we weren't here when the Civil War was fought, we had nothing to do with that. This is 1970, and we're 35 years old and have a child 10 years old or 5 years old going to school, and that's all we want, is our kid to go to school, and we didn't fight the war between the states and we had nothing to do with discrimination against anybody. We just live in a particular neighborhood. A school is right down the road. We want to go to that school right down the road.

Thus, one of the ways in which White privilege manifested itself in these local contexts was through a sense of entitlement about neighborhood schools and a denial that anything was wrong with the highly segregated system in which students attended schools “right down the road.” Of course, there was no simultaneous effort, except in Shaker Heights, to address the extreme housing segregation and inequality that left most of the neighborhood schools single-race schools.

In some of the settings we studied, there was almost a sense of self-righteousness in the way Whites made sense of their opposition to desegregation—that they did not deserve to be treated in this way and that it was their obligation to fight integration. For instance, in Pasadena, desegregation sparked a conservative backlash on the part of many Whites in the district, who in turn elected a radically conservative

school board. What is notable about these board candidates is that they were successful in large part because they blamed desegregation for the more liberal social climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s. They also crusaded against the “looser morals” and liberalization of the curriculum in the schools. By turning their opposition to desegregation into a crusade for values and a moral order, they appealed to many White conservative voters (many of whom did not have children) who voted for these anti-busing candidates. These far-right candidates (some were rumored to be associated with the John Birch Society) promised not only to end desegregation but to restore “discipline” and a fundamental curriculum in the district.

Once elected, these board members not only actively fought the desegregation order, they embarked on a book banning campaign and established several back-to-basics “fundamental” schools of choice in the district. All of this made the possibility of meaningful school desegregation within Muir High School difficult at best. With a school board that was not supportive of integration, racially mixed schools—their educators, parents, and students—were left to sink or swim on their own.

To make matters worse, Pasadena and Englewood experienced dramatic White flight from the public schools during the era we studied. In Pasadena in particular, new private schools cropped up and White enrollment in the district—especially at Muir High School—plummeted. As a Muir math teacher who had been there for many years explained, “Pasadena is a mecca for private schools. I don’t know whether you know that or not. They’re all over the place and . . . White flight. That’s what it was called, White flight. It was just . . . yeah, there you go. That’s what happened. . . . I mean, that was in the newspaper every other day, White flight.”

This resistance to school desegregation—whether it was school board elections or White flight or protesting—gave White parents and community members greater leverage in terms of what school desegregation would look like and who would bear the burden of the disruption that would come with it. According to one of the lawyers for the Black plaintiffs in the Charlotte school desegregation case:

The big problem I had with all of them was that we kept compromising and placing a greater burden on Black parents than we did on others . . . the court purposely decided to take away Grades 1, 2, 3, or K through 3 from the inner city and put them all out in the suburbs, so that White kids wouldn’t have to go to school in the inner city and that supposedly made it easier for White parents to send their kids to school.

In Pasadena, the burden of desegregation was placed largely on young Black children. The plan paired Black and White elementary schools in different parts of town, and children would be slated to attend Grades K–3 in one part of town and then Grades 4–6 in the other; the idea was that students would be able to attend their neighborhood school for half of their elementary career. Not coincidentally, the K–3 centers were always in the White areas, so not only did the youngest kids of color have to travel farthest in the early years, by 4th grade many White parents had pulled their kids out of school before they could go to schools located in the minority areas of town.

In Austin, where several different school desegregation plans were drawn up before one was adopted, White students simply did not show up when they were reassigned to a historically Black high school. As a former Austin school board member explained, “We tried in Austin, as a result of the court extending the order, to say that all the kids had to get on the bus, not just the minority kids—all the kids get on the bus. Well, of course as soon as the buses started running the other way, the big push was to dismantle the program of desegregation.”

When busing White students to the Black and Latino side of town did not work, the district tried using voluntary measures to desegregate the schools—more specifically “majority to minority” transfer plans. But once again, the movement of students was unidirectional, as another former Austin school board member noted: “The majority to minority transfer rule did not meet the test of integration, because all the burden for moving was on the minorities. No White guy would say ‘I want to go into a minority school.’”

Of course, these practices had major implications for what happened once students got to their desegregated schools—who was on whose turf and which parents were already connected and in control—in ways that affected the students’ daily experiences and the African American and Latino communities’ perception of the benefit of the plan (see Wells et al., in press). If we had simply studied these six high schools without a better sense of their contexts and the political struggles swirling around them, we might have come to different conclusions about what was happening inside them and why.

“Green” Follows “White”

The political leverage and clout that White parents brought to the table in school district struggles over how to desegregate schools carried over once students were reassigned to racially diverse schools and decisions were made about how resources and opportunities were to be distributed across and within schools. For instance, at West Charlotte High School, the only high school in Charlotte that had been a Black school before desegregation and was not shut down when the buses rolled, things changed when the White students arrived. Several teachers and administrators we interviewed attested to the new equipment and renovations suddenly bestowed upon the school once White students—notably, affluent White students—were assigned there. But the changes within West Charlotte High School went beyond bricks and mortar. As one Black graduate noted:

By the time that I got there and then we started going to school with the White kids, it [West Charlotte] changed. It became a place where everybody wanted to be. They started upgrading it and things like that and to me I felt like they catered more to the White kids and parents. . . . Maybe it was in an effort to make them a part of everything. It just seemed like they were just taking over everything. They were the head of the student council and all of that kind of stuff.

Such evidence that “green follows white” was positive for African American students, who suddenly had greater access to resources by virtue of being in schools with

White students, but it was also a reminder that the political system was driven by White privilege and the demands more powerful families made on the system.

Yet, even more problematic were instances in which there were huge *within-school* inequalities in desegregated schools as students of different racial backgrounds had unequal access to the most challenging curricula. In fact, we learned that one of the most common practices in desegregated schools was the creation of high-track or gifted classes. These tracks were promoted simply as the classes in which the most advanced students could be challenged academically. But the racial overtones and implications cannot be ignored, as in school after school these top-level classes were almost entirely White.⁵

We recognize that many factors affected the resegregation of students within desegregated schools, such as the unequal schooling that Black and Latino students had received prior to desegregation and the higher poverty rates of their families. But our data also suggest that White students were given more information about and easier access to honors, advanced placement, and other advanced classes.

Some practices labeled students as “gifted” as early as kindergarten and then channeled them through the grade levels in the “appropriate” classes. More subtle forms of sorting students entailed teacher recommendations and support to get into the best classes. Whatever the method, all six of the schools and districts managed to create incredible and consistent levels of within-school segregation.

A White 1980 graduate of Shaker Heights High School who was in all high-level classes said that “this [advanced placement] thing . . . was actually also like a school within a school.” This graduate noted that, while it was not always exactly the same 20 students in every class, “it would be very unusual to see somebody, like a new face, in one class that you didn’t see in any other class” (cited in Wells et al., 2004).

At Dwight Morrow High School, which was only 36% White by the time the class of 1980 arrived, the more “academically stringent” the class, the lower the number of Black students enrolled, according to a White graduate who had been in all high-level classes. He noted that in his advanced placement biology class there were one or two Black students, and in calculus there was only one—in a school that was almost 60% Black. He recalled that there were “two societies going on at the academic level.”

At Dwight Morrow, even when African Americans did well in regular-level classes, teachers and counselors were sometimes reluctant to promote them to the high-track classes. According to one such African American graduate, “Dwight Morrow, in terms of academics, it was integrated, but it was segregated. And what happened was, once you got labeled that was pretty much it.”

An African American parent and teacher at Dwight Morrow High School noted that back in the 1970s, Black parents had to “fight real hard” to get their children into the National Honor Society, even when Black students had higher grades than White students. She recalled one Black mother in particular who had a high-achieving daughter:

Even though she knew that her child had the highest grade level . . . they didn’t accept her child. And she went all the way to the state, and she had threatened that if she had to go to the federal government about it, she would because she thought it was unfair.

In Pasadena at Muir High School, the tracking system resegregated the school's classrooms. According to graduates and educators, classes at Muir were very divided along the lines of race—advanced placement or honors classes were mostly White and higher income (with a few Asian students), while the regular track was racially mixed. Graduates noted that tracking seemed even more severe in the math department: While the English classes had a few students of color, the upper-track math classes were almost all White, with a few Asian students. As reported by one teacher, this tracking started early on in the district. In elementary and especially middle schools, students were tested into a “gifted and talented program” (or the MGM program—“mentally gifted minors”) that was predominantly White, and by high school students of color were so far behind that they were locked out of the upper-track classes. According to this teacher:

Because segregation existed in the middle school, the students of color had not had an opportunity before that court order to participate at the middle school in honors programs in large numbers. So it followed that they would not be in the high school program for 5 years because you have to bring them up, you know, through the rest of the levels of honors, so they're prepared to do honors.

Possibly the most revealing memory of tracking and race came from a former English teacher at West Charlotte High School. This now-retired instructor told us about her first year at West Charlotte, when it was still an all-Black school. She recalled that the students in the all-Black honors classes were some of the brightest students she had ever taught. She did not think at the time the school desegregated that the Black students who came in and quickly filled most of the seats in those classes. She said that today she often wonders “What did happen to [those high-achieving Black students] when the school became integrated and the high-level classes [became] predominantly White?” (Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2004a). Interestingly enough, a reform movement to “detrack” schools and create more access to high-level curricula came along in the 1990s, well after the class of 1980 had graduated and after the schools in this country were already becoming more racially segregated (see Oakes et al., 1996).

Effects of Segregation in the Larger Society on Meaningful Integration Within Schools

The second major theme from our findings that speaks to the powerful relationship between schools and their context is one that explains how the racial segregation and inequality in the local communities perpetuated segregation friendships and social networks within the schools. Thus, we argue that there are several ways to interpret lunchroom segregation within desegregated schools (see Tatum, 1998), and one is to consider who students see and interact with outside of school. In the case of students who live in very segregated neighborhoods and lack access to much mass transportation—circumstances that describe the lives of most teenagers in the United States—it is easier to understand why close friendships within racially diverse schools are more often than not same-race friendships.

For the most part, the graduates of the six schools we studied talked about having friends or acquaintances of other races, but their very best friends—those they spent the most time with outside of school—were primarily of the same race. As one Shaker Heights graduate noted, “Even though it was an integrated area, I noticed that most of the Whites hung with the Whites and most of the Blacks hung with the Blacks. But we still had friends within them and you would still talk and be nice to people.”

Furthermore, in the predominantly White schools in which Black or Latino students were being bused “in” from elsewhere, the popular White students—usually the more affluent White students—“ruled” the school social realm. As one affluent White graduate of Austin High told us: “We ruled the school. We were *the* group. We were it. We just were all very involved in school. We all loved going to school, it was a great place to be, that’s why.” In describing her clique of girlfriends from the affluent west side of town, this same graduate noted: “What did we call ourselves? I know some schools, they call them the ‘socios,’ but we weren’t ‘socios.’ I don’t remember what we called ourselves—‘West Austin rich bitches,’ that’s what some people called us.”

Thus, not only did the social stratification from the community and larger context filter into the schools—as it does in single-race schools as well—but the racial dimension and the segregated neighborhoods added another layer of complexity. According to an African American graduate of Topeka High School who was popular and was a star athlete at the school, the White and Black students stuck to themselves outside of school:

You know, pretty much during that time period, you know, that’s probably . . . you didn’t really go over to the White kids’ house. I mean, it wouldn’t have been a problem I don’t think, but you know, just transportation-wise and just being able to get there sometimes and you know, just all the things that maybe go with being a mom or a dad and trying to learn those people’s families, or not knowing those families you usually didn’t go over there really.

The vast majority of graduates we interviewed hung out with other students from their neighborhoods outside of school. As an African American graduate of West Charlotte High school noted:

I just felt more . . . comfortable being with my own . . . I should say [pause] I can get comfortable around anyone basically. I know after school there were two guys that I saw because we were all in the same neighborhood. I didn’t drive over to the east side of town to hang out. I hung out with the people in my neighborhood.

Particularly among the White graduates, there was often a “fear” of the unknown Black neighborhoods. A White West Charlotte graduate recalled that, outside of school, it was not racially mixed. When asked why, she said that her parents probably would not have allowed her to go to a party in a Black neighborhood. “You know, they just would have said, ‘No, you can’t come.’ And I think, you know, parties at that time pretty much spread by word of mouth and . . . I don’t remember . . . seeing Black friends from school at parties that were in this neighborhood.”

Thus, for the most part, the students in these desegregated schools stepped over color lines only when they were inside the schools, if they did it there; outside of school, these color lines continued to divide them. They often found that their interracial friendships in school went only “so far”—in many instances, they did not feel welcome or comfortable in the homes of students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. One White Austin High graduate recalled the first time she invited a Latina friend home with her after school:

I can remember bringing her to my house and asking her to stand outside for just a few minutes, and I went in and called my mother and asked if I could have a friend come in. . . . She said yes, and I said, “Well, she’s Mexican. Would that still be okay?” My mother said, “Rita only.” I mean . . . it wasn’t an open door policy.

Furthermore, this translated into a post–high school life of increased racial segregation. When asked why he was not in contact with any of his Black friends from high school, a White alumnus of Dwight Morrow said, “I think I went off with my White world, and . . . people live lives for the most part along color [lines].” Sitting on his back porch in a mostly White upper-middle-class suburb, he grew more frustrated as he compared his current life to the days when he was close to many of his Black classmates:

We went to school with each other . . . we got along nice, we all threw our hats up together, and then we don’t talk [to] or see each other anymore, so I think we failed. . . . We didn’t make the world an integrated place, it’s just not. They forced people to go to school together, but they don’t force you to live together, so other than that—the races, where do they commingle? Tell me.

Such testimonies lead us to wonder how much blame we can place on the public schools for “failing” in regard to school desegregation when, indeed, they were often one of the only institutions—or *the* only institution—in their communities struggling with these deep-seated issues and inequalities. This larger context of the struggle to desegregate schools and students was best captured by a study that examined racially mixed schools within their local context and thus documented the porous boundaries between schools and society.

CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The central point of this literature review and the excerpts from our findings regarding desegregated schools is to help fellow educational researchers reconsider how to frame their research in a way that does justice to the impact of the local context on within-school practices. Similarly, we call on those who study local policy and political contexts to connect to the lived experiences of educators and students within schools. And we call on those who study schools and their “outputs,” cultures, or relations to question how their findings are shaped by the larger context of schools in the 21st century.

Only by looking at educational policy and practice from both sides of the looking glass will we see clearly how profoundly schools *matter*—and that how they matter

most is through their struggles against and their reinforcement of inequality in the larger society. Yet, this kind of research requires us to rethink our methodology, to consider moving beyond the quantitative-qualitative dichotomy and conducting more mixed-method research that would speak to school “outcomes” as well as the broader contexts of schools (see Chatterji, 2004).

Such studies could be designed as historical or sociological case studies of particular places at a particular time. But multiple sources of data—demographics and other statistics, test scores, surveys, in-depth interviews, observations, documents, and so forth—would provide a more holistic picture of what is taking place within schools and why. This comprehensive research is expensive and labor intensive but extremely valuable. It has the potential to answer important questions about how much educational policy and practice can accomplish, especially when policies or practices go against the grain of U.S. society—when, for instance, they challenge long-held assumptions about race, class, or student ability or present a cooperative as opposed to a competitive paradigm. When educational policies and practices do not have the intended effects we had hoped for, we must ask how these policies stand vis-à-vis other social forces and consider the tide they are swimming against before weighing their success or failure.

More specifically, at this half-century mark since the *Brown* ruling, we must once again consider the extent to which the public schools failed to successfully desegregate versus the extent to which our society failed to support desegregation in these schools. At the same time, we must celebrate the successes along the way: the improved achievement of African Americans during the peak years of integration and the more positive racial attitudes of graduates of racially diverse schools and the country as a whole. Also, we must celebrate the accomplishments of individual educators and students within a context that pushed against the success of their lived experiences and constantly tried to dismantle what they had done.

This never-ending struggle against larger social forces that work against school desegregation and racial equality and integration more broadly must be acknowledged as an important act of human agency amid imposing social structures of inequality and oppression. In reality, White and Black students were never supposed to sit next to each other in schools or learn from each other. The history of our country has and continues to work against such experiences, and yet there are spaces where this occurs and where meaningful experiences transform people’s lives. But the struggle is never over, and these experiences *and* their larger contexts are what educational researchers must capture.

We close with a quotation from an administrator in Charlotte who served as the principal of West Charlotte High School in the late 1970s, when it was racially balanced—about 50% African American and 50% White. Today, West Charlotte High School is less than 5% White. According to this administrator:

I think the biggest lesson that I learned from it was that it was never over, that there was never a point when we achieved it [integration]. . . . And it is never truly achieved; it is something you have to constantly work at, because there are so many outside influences and so many background influences that put us back to where we were.

NOTES

¹ While both the *Brown* decision and the Coleman report discounted the effect of “tangible factors,” including school buildings and resources, on the educational opportunities of children and justified school desegregation as a solution to broader social ills, their conclusions were grounded in distinct arguments about the impact of schools—versus other social forces—on the lives of children.

² The *Brown* ruling also addressed the social psychological effect of segregation on “hearts and minds” and the importance of an African American student’s ability “to study, to engage in discussions and exchange views with other students.” This freedom to associate with other students seemed to matter to the Warren court, however, because it takes place within an institution so critical to children’s life chances.

³ By “racially mixed,” we mean between 40% and 75% of any one race and no more than 25% off the racial balance of the city or town for any one race.

⁴ We realize that after 1974, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Milliken v. Bradley* that court-ordered urban-suburban school desegregation was possible only when plaintiffs could prove that suburban districts helped to create racial segregation in cities, the possible impact of school desegregation on poor urban school districts was highly limited. But for the students who were “living” school desegregation during this later era at the end of the 1970s, things were better, more hopeful, and certainly calmer in their communities than they had been before.

⁵ For prior research on the role of tracking in racially mixed schools, see Oakes et al. (1996).

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