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SCHOOLTALK

RETHINKING WHAT WE
SAY ABOUT—AND TO—
STUDENTS EVERY DAY

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I'm going to talk through the frame using national facts that I think every educator and young person should know for thorough Inequality Talk, plus some facts specific to the state I live in now. Remember that each of these facts is an *average fact* from research: you may feel it doesn't quite describe your specific opportunity story or your family's. Just think about how the frame can help you talk more thoroughly about how opportunity contexts affected you and affect the young people you know now. Keep thinking:

THINK / DISCUSS

What other facts do you need to collect to see opportunity contexts where you live with cleaner lenses, so you can have a more effective discussion of opportunity and outcome in the schools you know?

THINK / DISCUSS

How does this presentation of information make you *feel*? Can you take any hints from those feelings, to learn how to talk to people about responding to the types of facts presented?

1. Inequality of opportunity accumulates across generations

You might hear national facts like these stated in discussions of schools: circa 2010, according to the Children's Defense Fund, more than one-fifth of all U.S. children under eighteen lived in poverty. (Sixty-five percent of poor families with children under eighteen had at least one member who was employed, indicating the critical role of living wage jobs.¹⁶) In 2010, 14.6 percent of white (not Hispanic) children under the age of five lived in poverty, as did 45.5 percent of African American children under the age of five, 37.6 percent of Latino children and 15.6 percent of Asian American children.¹⁷ That's a lot of poverty. In fact, recent studies have noted that *51 percent* of public school children in the United States are now eligible for free and reduced lunch, a school-based measure of family poverty.¹⁸

As we'll discuss, "living in poverty," just like living in a wealthy household, is part of an *opportunity context* a child is handed when he or she is born. For now, let's ask a bigger question about that statistic that many of us struggle to discuss. How is it that white children are *less likely* to be born into poverty than children of color are?

As usual, thorough schooltalk requires some history.

For me, learning history makes opportunity facts bigger than any individual; they become personal but somehow not so personal. No baby asks for the context they're handed; I can't control what earlier generations did. But understanding how our opportunity contexts were shaped by prior people's opportunities over time is a key aspect of seeing others and ourselves through cleaner lenses—or of considering how to support each of us in our current situation.

As researchers have shown, being labeled "white" in early North America—as an immigrant or, later, a "native-born" person—enabled you to get paid for your labor, potentially accumulate wealth, and pursue your interests through the political system. Early indentured servants included both Africans and Europeans. As a race-based system of slavery grew, indentured servants labeled "whites" through law could get paid for their work, while workers labeled "black" could be enslaved and forced to work without pay.¹⁹ Similarly, people who were classified as "free white" people, allowed or encouraged to immigrate, and offered the full benefits of citizenship (e.g., under the Naturalization Act of 1790 and later laws and policies), could more easily accumulate various forms of property and wealth while voting for people who would protect their economic interests.²⁰ Laws and customs originally restricted the right to vote to "white" propertied males, while long providing only "whites" access to higher-paying jobs and more lucrative property.²¹

These generations of wages and property accumulation caused cumulative economic advantage for many "free white people," as parents gained wealth to pass to the next generation. Many white children are still born poor today and some children of color are born extremely wealthy, but on average today, economists show, even Americans of color who take home salaries equivalent to white Americans do not on average have similarly accumulated intergenerational wealth—accumulated property and savings that shape what we can invest in, where we can live, and how we can weather economic troubles, like losing a job. Researchers suggest that it is this variation in the ability to weather economic troubles that in fact divides "the classes."²²

The expansion of public schooling also shaped cumulative aggregated wealth in the nation's families today; it's another set of facts we need for fully informed Inequality Talk. In the decades before the Civil War, for example, reformers started expanding free publicly funded education in the United States; it long reached "white" children predominantly. Public school budgets in communities across the nation denied resources to many black students, Native American students, and the children of Asian immigrants. Strict anti-literacy laws denied enslaved African-descended children in the South the right to learn openly to read. Laws like the 1830 Indian Removal Act forcibly removed many Native Americans from economically sustainable ancestral lands, and for generations into the twentieth century, many were pressured and forced to attend white-run schools designed to erase cultural practices that had once undergirded Native livelihoods. Nationwide, free black children were still denied entrance to many publicly funded schools through the 1800s, and families often had to find money for their own schools (as did Chinese people living in California before and then despite the Chinese Exclusion Act). When offered slices of public school budgets, Mexican American, African American, and many Asian American children were typically segregated into separate and under-resourced classrooms or schools.²³ All of this sounds long ago, but by 1900, James Anderson notes, black people were still arguing for the extension of public school in the South (after a very brief, post-Civil War window of political power and school expansion), and by 1910 only one in every twelve black youth of high school age in the South was enrolled in school at all.²⁴ Historians Rubén Donato and Gilbert González help clean our lenses on another fact: in 1930, 85 percent of Mexican American children in the Southwest went to school in purposefully segregated, overcrowded, inferior-resourced environments, were tracked into vocational education, and were encouraged to drop out after elementary school in order to work in manual jobs and fields.²⁵

Thinking cumulatively about such experiences in opportunity contexts over time, we can see how, over generations, education opportunity restrictions would contribute to lower wages for many families, while getting free and better-resourced public education (and then, better-paying employment opportunities) would contribute to more years of education, better jobs, and more money that could be handed down to children. (As Oliver and Shapiro put it of "white" wealth accumulation before and after the Civil War, for example, "White families who were able to secure title to land in

the nineteenth century were much more likely to finance education for their children, provide resources for their own or their children's self-employment, or secure their political rights through political lobbies and the electoral process."²⁶) We can also see how racial restrictions on wages, schools, property, and jobs restricted access to money. While U.S. folks often debate whether U.S. inequality is "about race" or "about class," historian Manning Marable called this a "false debate"—because inventing race hinged on distributing economic opportunity.²⁷

All this wasn't that long ago. As Ta-Nehisi Coates notes, even the "period between now and slavery" is just "two old ladies back to back."²⁸ And in each of these generations, some kids were made more successful economically than others as tiny babies, before *they* did any work. It's not the "fault" of the baby; it's just a set of opportunity facts shaping each kid's life.

Here's a personal example of "cumulative advantage" over several more recent generations in my own family, making it so I and my own kids were *not* born into poverty. Christine Sleeter would call this kind of information "critical family history," gained through interviews with family or review of secondary sources.²⁹ Mara Tieken suggests that educators and students also can investigate the opportunity history of their school's local community, to clean their lenses on past generations in the place they live and work.³⁰

I tell this story about my own family to my students, to illustrate how race and class got intertwined in my own opportunity context in ways aligned with average patterns.

My grandfather was born in Liverpool en route from Lithuania to the United States around 1910, then moved to a low-income Cleveland neighborhood where many Jews from Eastern Europe had gathered. Grandpa quit school in the ninth grade to support the family during the Depression. He delivered ice for a living, then helped the family junk business. Then, after serving in World War II, he went into distributing those goods. By the time I knew Grandpa and Grandma, they lived in a nice house in the suburbs of Cleveland.

Some unexpected advantages accumulated over those years from the war until I knew them.

Once vilified in American society (and restricted from entrance to various universities and neighborhoods), Jews increasingly were treated as "white" in U.S. life after World War II.³¹ Our family remembers that Grandpa, who had no family wealth to buy a home and little high school education, benefited from the GI Bill. At the time, the GI Bill extended affordable home

loans, employment training and benefits, and educational subsidies disproportionately to white veterans, particularly because white-run banks and loan programs disproportionately made it “very difficult, often impossible, for blacks to qualify for mortgages”³² and local officials blocked access to other benefits (as did employers and segregated colleges).³³ Many Latino and Filipino veterans experienced similar barriers.³⁴ Broader loan practices restricted non-white families from buying more lucrative property in segregated white neighborhoods. As a result, white people could disproportionately invest in houses and accrue wealth. Because of how the GI Bill and related policies played out in segregated America, scholars have called such policies a massive “affirmative action” program for white people.³⁵ Beyond veterans, analysts note, policies blocking loans to non-white Americans in the post-World War II housing boom locked many people “out of the greatest mass-based opportunity for wealth accumulation in American history.”³⁶

Grandpa and Grandma used his VA credit to buy their first house in an all-white Cleveland neighborhood and soon sold it at a profit, moving to a bigger house in Shaker Heights, Ohio—in a neighborhood that before the war had typically excluded Jews like them.

That housing purchase also contributed to a tax base that supported well-equipped public schools in their Shaker Heights neighborhood. U.S. public schools are supported primarily by local property taxes and by the state, and finally by the federal government. Communities with more money often have the ability to tax themselves to spend far more per pupil for their schools, and to fundraise above that—and, as researcher Gary Orfield noted to me, to keep property tax revenues high by refusing affordable housing.³⁷

My father went to these schools, along with mostly white kids and a few black kids (African American families would not become more substantively integrated into Shaker neighborhoods until the 1970s and 1980s).³⁸ That solid K–12 education helped my father get into college in the late 1960s, and then into grad school. And when my father got his first university job in the mid-1970s, Grandma and Grandpa helped him put the down payment on a house, using some of the wealth they’d accumulated through their own housing investments.

Growing up in a neighborhood of owned homes in a university town (Iowa City, Iowa), I too attended sufficiently resourced public schools with a similarly adequate tax base. I never imagined not attending college. I went to college on a scholarship paid by my father’s next university. My Cleveland grandmother, Elsie, helped pay for my university housing and fees, using

extra cash stemming from two generations of accumulated housing and employment wealth. So I graduated from college without debt—and when I was ready to buy a house at the age of thirty, I had my down payment ready. It included not just my own personal savings from nearly fifteen years of working (including federally subsidized college work study and grad school financial aid) and my husband’s personal savings, but also money saved from additional gifts from the grandparent generation. My job, the result of my education, then supported my mortgage payments on that house, subsidized the health care I bought for my children, and enabled me to pay for a childcare center that helped prepare my kids for kindergarten.

Many “whites” today remain poor or are experiencing downward economic mobility as jobs evaporate; wages and benefits are now insufficient for many U.S. families across race lines.³⁹ In fact, because white people are still the majority overall in the United States, “at least one-third of the 13 million children living in poverty are white,”⁴⁰ and by sheer numbers, “whites comprise the largest share of all low-income children.”⁴¹ But in the *aggregate*, economic benefits undergirding things like housing and schooling (and employment) accumulated to mean more houses, more college, and more money for “whites” over generations. Thorough Inequality Talk seeks to understand this cumulative history and its opportunity consequences for young people. Zoom out from my story to an aggregated statistic: owing in part to policies creating racial disparities in home ownership, “the wealth of white households was 13 times the median wealth of black households in 2013,” and “more than 10 times the wealth of Hispanic households.”⁴² As Oliver and Shapiro sum up of black families specifically on average, “blocked from low-interest government-backed loans, redlined out by financial institutions, or barred from home ownership by banks, black families have been denied the benefits of housing inflation and the subsequent vast increase in home equity assets.”⁴³

These facts about the growth of dollars in my own family shape how I think about my own wealth today. As Peggy McIntosh’s famous essay notes, the “white privilege” that started accruing centuries ago takes lots of other deeply consequential forms today, including in schools.⁴⁴ As we’ll explore, people are less likely to question the intelligence or competence of white youth or adults; people often consider behaviors associated with “whites” the appropriate norm. But privilege is also about intergenerational dollars that shape young people’s lives from birth. Many social scientists want us thinking about those.

Some claims about average opportunity and outcome can feel like misrepresentations when applied personally. To know me better, for example, you would need to know about the other side of my family—that my mother was born in a displaced persons camp in Germany after the Holocaust destroyed my extended family, and that she arrived in the United States with her penniless (though partially college-educated) parents in 1950 as a refugee from Eastern Europe. I'd want you to know that those grandparents, Eliot and Sabina Milman, also contributed to my parents' first mortgage payments; they used money made working long days running three nursing homes they owned, after managing to buy a house themselves in a mostly white neighborhood and then send my mother to college too. I also would want you to know that my Cleveland grandfather, Al Pollock, worked long hours every day, literally until the day he died; that my grandmother, Elsie Pollock, enabled his work by raising the kids; and that my dad still works more than he sleeps, in a job he got to choose because of the education opportunity he got to receive. To protect them all and maybe even myself, I might get snippy if you suggested that I had my job and house and daycare for my kids *only* because my family experienced a handout of privilege.

But I *also* got those things because of the schools I went to, because of the house we lived in, because of my dad's (and mom's) sufficiently funded schooling, because of my grandparents' housing investments, in part because of some help from the GI Bill and broader racialized housing policies. Families *not* treated as “white” worked as hard over those same generations; but our whole family, and many others, really did benefit cumulatively from some opportunities doled out disproportionately along racial lines. It's just the facts.

THINK / DISCUSS

How are you feeling?

This is an important moment to do a self check—to pause and think about the politics and emotions of Inequality Talk. For example, researchers have shown that how we frame “advantage” and “disadvantage” in our narratives either gets people fired up or turns them off. Sometimes our group experience relates to how we hear history.

For example, Brian Lowery and Daryl Wout found in experiments that white university students stopped fully engaging when a reading passage

explained inequality in terms of unearned advantages for white people. But white students stayed engaged when the inequality story was framed as unfair disadvantage to people of color. Listeners of color had exactly the opposite reaction, turning off more to stories that emphasized their disadvantages and engaging more when stories emphasized white advantage.⁴⁵

So as we describe any set of facts, we might note how it's natural to bristle when we feel oversimplified or misunderstood, or critiqued, pitied, or judged—or when we don't feel we fit the average pattern being described. We can also notice that we tend to bristle more when people claim average patterns about us than when those claims are about other people. We can even invite people to consider their reactions to facts as understandable and common—and then return together to thorough consideration of those facts, to consider necessary supports for today's children.

THINK / DISCUSS

Have you had any of these reactions already, in hearing these initial facts or frames about “cumulative advantage and disadvantage over generations”? Do you feel turned off? Fired up? Which facts triggered your reaction?

What do you make of your reaction? Does your own reaction start to clue you in to ways to support other people to talk through facts like these?

And did you feel your family story still wasn't mentioned here at all? It's crucial to note when our Inequality Talk names some patterns but not others.

Global patterns of who came to the United States when—or came as a refugee or migrant worker versus as an invited professional, or with no prior education versus some college education—also play a role in our intergenerational snowballs. Europeans who came first without limit (even those who came without education) obviously had longer to accumulate wealth than did those whose U.S. immigration was restricted or curtailed. Some people who accrue wealth in their home countries bring it here; other highly educated immigrants are forced to take lower-wage jobs. Some people come having experienced schooling opportunity, others don't. Today, nearly one in four schoolchildren is an immigrant or an immigrant's child, and when immigrants arrive, only some experience the opportunity to go to well-

resourced schools. Immigrants plug in to neighborhoods and schools with existing patterns of economic advantage or disadvantage, with effects for their kids.⁴⁶ Kevin Kumashiro and John Lee ask students to investigate their own family experiences of immigration to consider factors *pushing* migrants out of home countries and *pulling* them into the United States, and then factors providing advantage or disadvantage once in the U.S. context.⁴⁷ Again, the goal is to clean our lenses on how we got where we are—to understand ourselves as well as others as people shaped by opportunity context.

Are you thinking now about the opportunity situations your family members experienced, and the consequences for your generation or others? Let's discuss a second form of "cumulative advantage and disadvantage"—that which accumulates *across opportunity domains*, like housing, health care, and schooling.

Take note of your reactions to this next part of the frame and the facts I present, so you can consider how to discuss such facts with others when analyzing how to improve on young people's opportunities and outcomes.

2. Inequality of opportunity and outcome accumulates across domains

Let's go back to that starting fact. Today, as we noted, African American and Hispanic students are more likely than white students to be born into poverty. In 2010, "almost one in two young Black children and more than one in three young Hispanic children [were] living in poverty," compared to 14.6 percent of white children.⁴⁸ (Remember, circa 2010, according to the Children's Defense Fund, 65 percent of the U.S. families with children in poverty had at least one member who was employed at a job that could not support the family.)

And then they *also* tend to have less access to adequate health care and to affordable housing in economically stable neighborhoods, and they are more likely to attend schools that concentrate poor students—with inadequate physical facilities, fewer highly qualified and trained teachers, and fewer overall opportunities to learn.⁴⁹ As Linda Darling-Hammond sums up, "on every tangible measure—from qualified teachers and class sizes to textbooks, computers, facilities, and curriculum offerings—schools serving large numbers of students of color have significantly fewer resources than schools serving more affluent, White students."⁵⁰ In fact, white

students often don't attend schools with lots of students of color at all, because in the United States we tend to allow school enrollment that concentrates students with peers who share their race as well as their income situation. Then we allow schools serving poor kids to offer *fewer* quality opportunities to learn than schools serving wealthier kids, rather than more to compensate for higher need. That is, our schools fail to counteract the wealth disparities kids come in with. Schools actually exacerbate them instead.

As the Civil Rights Project and NAACP report, for example, “The typical White public school student” attends a school that is nearly 75% white, while black and Latino students on average attend schools where just a quarter of students are white.⁵¹ And since race correlates on average with family wealth in the United States, U.S. kids tend to go to school with kids who share their financial situation, too. As the Civil Rights Project puts it, racial segregation creates “a racial chasm in students’ exposure to poverty.” Southern California—where I live now—is one egregious example of national trends:

- * “Keeping in mind that 56% of Southern Californian schoolchildren qualified for free or reduced priced lunches [FRL], the average white student in the region attended a school where FRL students made up just a third of the population. Contrast that figure to the school of the average black or Latino student, where more than half—63% and 69%, respectively—were FRL eligible students.”⁵²
- * “Though poverty has dramatically increased in the region [“the West”] since 1991, students of different racial backgrounds are not exposed equally to existing poverty. The typical Latino student, followed by black student, goes to a school with much higher concentrations of poor students than the typical white or Asian student.”⁵³
- * “Across nearly all of the highest-enrolling metropolitan areas in the region, Latino students experience the highest levels of exposure to poverty. In the Los Angeles metropolitan area, the average Latino student attends a school where nearly 75% of students are poor, while the average white student attends a school where only about a fourth are poor.”⁵⁴ Black students in California tend to attend Latino-concentrated, high-poverty schools.⁵⁵ (Nationally, according

to the Civil Rights Project, in 2013 the average black student and Latino student attended a school where almost 70 percent of their peers were low income, while the average white student and Asian student attended a school where roughly 40 percent of their peers were low income.⁵⁶ Further, while “about half of all Black and Latino students attend schools in which three-quarters or more students are poor,” “only 5% of white students attend such schools. In schools of extreme poverty [where poor students constitute 90–100% of the population], 80% of the students are Black and Latino.”⁵⁷)

- * In 2008, “just 5% of Southern California’s Asian students attended intensely segregated minority schools, and 2% of the region’s white students did the same.” (Instead, Asian and white students were more often in higher-income schools together.⁵⁸)

An article exploring the Bay Area’s version of such race-class segregation concluded bluntly that “overwhelmingly, low-income students are concentrated in schools with black and Latino students.”⁵⁹ Gary Orfield and colleagues call this “double segregation.”⁶⁰

The economic situation in students’ homes affects who eats what before school, who ends up moving schools because they can’t afford stable housing, who has parents with insurance to afford glasses or asthma medicine, and who can access extracurricular opportunities that cost money, like music or science camp. Low-income children often get low-quality preschool or no preschool, while wealthier children’s parents can pay for high-quality preschool (like I did) that immerses children in stimulating activities preparing them for kindergarten. A school filled with lower-income students thus aggregates many additional human needs, including kids experiencing untreated health issues, overcrowded housing, isolation as English learners, and parents with unreliable or exploitative employment.

This is the point researchers make about advantage and disadvantage accumulating across domains. As Richard Rothstein points out in his book *Class and Schools*,⁶¹ schooling is affected by other “domains” of opportunity: if a child has no health care, and thus no glasses, she can’t see the board and might fail the test. If she hasn’t eaten a substantial breakfast because her parents can’t routinely provide one (or because local supermarkets make less nutritious food available), she may have trouble concentrating on the work. If she is constantly moving between neighborhoods due to a lack of affordable

housing, she may struggle to keep supportive relationships with her teachers or peers. If she lives near an environmental hazard (most often placed in poor neighborhoods), she may develop increased asthma or other health problems that keep her home from school. If she is staying up late caring for a sibling while a parent travels a long distance to an inflexible night shift he can't afford to lose, she likely has more trouble staying awake in class.⁶² Conversely, more well-off families also can pay, overall, for stuff outside of school that affects school—glasses and health care, cars and gas, breakfast, stable housing, day care and preschool, tutors, extracurriculars, private counselors, and other socio-emotional counseling as needed. Schools that cluster middle- or high-income kids cluster kids with these advantages and also cluster connections to employment and college-educated professionals. And even as they have fewer crisis-level health, socio-emotional, and academic needs to take care of with their dollars, researchers note, wealthy districts can and do spend far more dollars on enriched supports to kids.⁶³ While schools serving poor students spend down their dollars on basics, parent fundraising in wealthier schools increases school resource disparities. In California circa 2012, “more affluent high schools were able to raise \$20 for every \$1 raised in high-poverty high schools.”⁶⁴

And to further exacerbate disparity, a concentration of poverty in a school has typically meant exposure to far *fewer* core academic opportunities via that school, rather than more.

In Southern California, for example:

- * “Across Southern California counties, intensely segregated and segregated schools of color experienced a greater shortage of A-G courses [classes deemed college-prep by the University of California] and college preparatory teachers than majority white and Asian schools.”
- * “In 2008, students in intensely segregated schools were close to three times as likely to have a teacher lacking full qualifications than students attending majority white and Asian schools.”
- * “Over twice as many intensely segregated secondary schools were identified by the state as critically overcrowded compared to predominately white and Asian schools (those enrolling 0–10% underrepresented minority students).”

- * “The higher the underrepresented [black and Latino] concentration of students in a Southern California high school, the less likely a rigorous mathematical curriculum was offered to its students.”⁶⁵
- * In 2000, a state-level legal case, *Eliezer Williams, et al. v. State of California, et al.* argued that low-income students across the state lacked basic resources like safe facilities, books, qualified teachers, and even sufficient days of school.⁶⁶ The case led to a settlement, more funding, and ongoing requirements to report school resource conditions,⁶⁷ but as the stats above start to indicate, substantive inadequacies and disparities still persist today, and new funding formulae are just starting to address them.

Schools serving higher-income families also tend to have more district clout, meaning districts respond more quickly to school needs or listen to parents who insist on hiring highly successful staff. Such schools also typically offer more college prep or enrichment classes, specialists, libraries and tech resources, and more and better physical infrastructure. (Only such wealthier communities have been able to counteract, through self-taxation or fundraising, the years of budget cuts that have given California the worst student-staff ratios in the country.⁶⁸) And on average in the United States, the most credentialed, degreed, trained, and experienced teachers—the holy grail of education opportunity—also teach disproportionately at higher-income students’ schools, recruited by higher salaries and more-resourced working conditions. (To be clear, many new, energetic teachers in high-poverty schools are well-trained and fantastic student supporters—and not all teachers with long “experience” are. But research does show that students benefit more overall when teachers are highly trained and experienced, and that more such teachers teach in more-affluent schools.⁶⁹) In 2016, the Office for Civil Rights found that nationally, black, Latino, and Native American students disproportionately attended schools “where more than 20 percent of teachers hadn’t met state licensure requirements” and where “more than 20 percent of teachers are in their first year of teaching”—and where schools spent dollars on school police rather than counselors. On average, high-poverty schools also have few teachers trained to support the many students learning English, and more overall teacher turnover—often even leaving students in the hands even of untrained substitutes.⁷⁰

THINK / DISCUSS

Did you go to a school that aligned with these segregation facts? Or does a school you work at, or send children to, align with these facts? If not, does that make you suspect the facts presented are incomplete or that your situation is atypical?

I tend not to use the word “disadvantaged” to describe a child, but instead to describe an opportunity context as advantaging or disadvantaging. Kids who lack certain opportunities are just kids who lack certain opportunities, and kids with particular resources are just kids with particular resources. It’s also not helpful to sum up any context as completely devoid of opportunity or saturated by privilege along every dimension: there are some very depressed wealthy kids and some poor kids with emotional resources money can’t buy. Parents’ own provision of opportunity is also a complex phenomenon: a poor parent might insist that her child access every free opportunity in the city, while a wealthy parent might destroy a family environment through alcoholism. Parents of any income level can offer young people valuable opportunities to learn of infinite kinds. Luis Moll has suggested the ironic label “LTEP,” or “limited to English proficiency,” to describe children who have *not* had the opportunity to become multilingual like many low-income children of color have.⁷¹

But how could basic disparities in health care, housing, employment stability, and school opportunity contexts not shape students’ lives?

The role of my own school opportunity context struck me at my high school reunion, when I stood again on the stage in my sufficiently funded public high school in the stable-employment university town of Iowa City, Iowa. This auditorium enabled me to perform music and theater, fundamentally shaping my life experiences and my college application. The school system paid for lessons on free instruments. We had a hundred-piece orchestra, choirs, and a newspaper. These free opportunities were brought alive by trained teachers who chose to teach me and my friends. I was named a valedictorian on this stage.

The auditorium in the California public high school where I taught in the mid-1990s was dripping and crumbling; we had no orchestra, no choir, and no newspaper I recall. We served low-income students of color almost exclusively. When my aunt picked me up at the front door on a visit from

Massachusetts and saw the kids streaming out after school, her comment was, “So much for *Brown v. Board*.”

Linda Darling-Hammond argues that we got closer to equalizing public education opportunities in the late 1960s and early 1970s, through public investments in desegregation, employment, school resources, and programs reducing family poverty. Low-income students and students of color then experienced large gains in academic performance by the early 1980s, she argues. Rollback of such programs during the 1980s then led to a spike in child poverty, homelessness, and inadequate access to health care, and to grossly under-resourced schools (again) for poor children and children of color. Indeed, she argues, “since the 1980s, national investments have tipped heavily toward incarceration rather [than] education,” with “states that would not spend \$10,000 a year to ensure adequate education for young children of color spend[ing] over \$30,000 a year to keep them in jail.”⁷²

Analysts say the most important steps to take to counteract disparities and inadequacies in baseline opportunity across domains would be to invest simultaneously in living-wage jobs for parents (many call this action the key),⁷³ preschool and other health supports for children,⁷⁴ and high-quality professional supports for more teachers, while ensuring that schools concentrating low-income students get more resources and highly trained staff to handle the need. Others argue that breaking up concentrations of students by race and wealth through school enrollment policies and even housing desegregation is the real key to counteracting opportunity disparities in today’s schools. But as it stands, we do surprisingly little to remedy opportunity gaps between schools. For decades, courts have gradually restricted active efforts to address segregation of districts by race, and active efforts to integrate by income are the exception rather than the rule. Instead, our housing patterns exacerbate and reinforce the segregation of schools. Affordable housing units have long been built more often in high-poverty areas, not in high-income areas, again concentrating poverty with poverty; lenders continue to favor white applicants for solid and reasonable-rate mortgages.⁷⁵ Research shows that realtors also still routinely show white people more homes and units in whiter areas, and that property owners often don’t offer units to poor people or people of color; such actions exacerbate simultaneous dynamics of “choice,” where people who can afford it often choose to live near more people who look like them and to send kids to more-resourced schools. Nationally, low-income white people still live closer to wealthier

white people than low-income or even middle-income people of color do, and so they are more likely to experience higher-income schools and local amenities. (Research shows that middle-income black and Latino families tend to live in lower-wealth neighborhoods than do low-income white families, due in part to disparities in intergenerational wealth accumulation.⁷⁶) Sometimes schools try to attract diverse populations across geographic regions, through “magnet” schools or charter schools with enticing foci. But often, families have to afford transportation to get to these schools. And state funding lawsuits have only partially addressed vast resource inadequacies. Today, where you go to school—and what basic opportunities you enjoy there—is predominantly a question of where you live and how much money your family has, plus how much investment officials decide to make in you and your teachers.⁷⁷

Let’s talk with nuance: not all poor students are black and Latino (many white and Asian students are poor), not all black and Latino students are poor, not all poor students go to school with other poor students, and not all white students attend more-resourced schools. (And this chapter hasn’t even explored private versus public school resourcing.) Today, many Americans are struggling financially, across race lines—increasing the share of poor students in many schools⁷⁸ and leading many to argue that the real culprit is a business sector that underpays workers.⁷⁹ Many researchers argue crucially that the entire United States underinvests in child development, family well-being, and teacher development in comparison to other similarly wealthy nations, leaving many families of all groups trying to support children without a sufficient safety net.⁸⁰ Seeing specific schools and the opportunities they actually provide is also a critical part of cleaning our lenses: realtors and friends who steer white homebuyers away from even decently resourced and successful schools predominantly serving black and brown children inaccurately convey that all schools clustering these students of color are “lacking.” Circularly, this reinforces segregation and all the resource disparities mentioned earlier.

But across the United States, internal disparities remain and require our attention in thorough Inequality Talk and public policy effort, as we seek to understand and address the opportunities students have and need. Low-income students are regularly concentrated in schools together, black and Latino students disproportionately attend such schools (while white students disproportionately don’t), and these schools typically provide fewer baseline opportunities to learn than schools serving higher-income students.⁸¹ Every

such school I've ever known is full of amazing young people with talents of all kinds, but those young people rarely get to enjoy the same full set of baseline opportunities to learn that higher-income students do.

Note too that the aggregated facts above also mention “Asians” as disproportionately attending more-resourced schools alongside white students, specifically in California. As we'll discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 4, Asian immigrant families, often excluded from the United States before the 1960s, have migrated in greater numbers since the 1960s due to immigration policies that also favored professional skill sets. Simultaneously, various Asian national-origin groups have migrated disproportionately poor, often as war refugees, and have higher-than-average rates of poverty: in 2008, for example, the poverty rate among Hmong Americans was roughly 38 percent, among Cambodian Americans 29 percent, among Laotian Americans nearly 19 percent, and among Vietnamese Americans nearly 17 percent, and in 2006, the high school drop-out rates for Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian American populations were respectively 40, 35, and 38 percent.⁸² Many poor Asian immigrants attend under-resourced schools in low-income neighborhoods, and many struggle academically in them too. Research just suggests that Asian students *in the aggregate* are less segregated in high-poverty areas and more integrated in schools with white students than black or Latino students are—and that many Asian immigrants (who come disproportionately professionally skilled on average, and with more schooling) leverage their community information networks to attend more-resourced schools.⁸³ We'll “peel the onion” on that story in Chapter 4, as flipping distorting scripts about “Asian” achievement is critically needed schooltalk in the United States. It's still about how basic opportunity contexts shape children's achievement.

Do you feel like your family story wasn't mentioned here? Discussions of exceptions to average patterns are essential in Inequality Talk. For example, some students I've taught at the university level have pointed out crucially that as the child of poor Asian immigrants or middle-class Latinos in Southern California, their personal stories defy some of the average facts above on opportunity contexts. Yet many then note that their families found their way to the more-resourced, more-white contexts mentioned—or that *inside* their schools, the average dynamics of race-class segregation persisted. Some were the few low-income or non-white students in a high-opportunity school. Some accessed rare or restricted opportunities like the few AP, IB, or honors classes inside a mostly under-resourced, low-opportunity school.

So, the quest to describe opportunity and outcome patterns *precisely*—inside schools as well as between them—must be ongoing in any localized context if we’re to help students receive necessary supports.

Let’s work briefly on that key skill set for describing opportunity patterns *inside* a school opportunity context. At times, I’ve called this the struggle to figure out who is disadvantaged along which dimensions in comparison to whom—or more precisely, who needs which opportunities to support their school success.

An InequalityTalk skill set: Getting more precise about who needs which opportunities in specific places

Here’s a key issue you may have encountered in Inequality Talk: educators trying to handle complex opportunity contexts by talking about how “all students” need help and support.

This is true, of course. All students need to be supported in schools.

But if any subgroup of young people experience particular aspects of an opportunity context, we need to discuss those experiences precisely in order to support them. As we’ll see, inside many schools, some students are offered rigorous learning opportunities more than others; some are suspended more egregiously than others. Inside a school, some families might live in a neighborhood with particularly bad bus service that keeps failing to get kids to school on time. Some students might have to work after school to support their families; some might experience inconsistent housing rather than life in stably rented houses. Girls or boys, or LGBT students, may have particular experiences needing attention in a school community. When I taught high school, talk of “all students” masked subgroup experiences inside the school—like black students who were disproportionately suspended and placed in Special Education; Latino, Samoan, and African American students who disproportionately vanished from the graduation stage; and Filipino, Chinese, and Latino students’ wide variety of needs as students learning English.

Some claims about subgroups’ needs will need to be broken down even more. As Martha Gimenez notes, for example, Puerto Ricans or third-generation Mexican Americans may have very different experiences than “recent immigrants from Cuba, Central America, and South America,” even as all may at times be called “Latinos.”⁸⁴ Talk of “Asian immigrants” might