Echoes of *Brown*

The Faultlines of Racial Justice and Public Education

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Fifty years after the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*, U.S. society still finds itself struggling over the meaning and fulfillment of that landmark decision.

Recently, the national discussion about educational equity has focused narrowly on the "achievement gap" between racial/ethnic groups. In 2001, a group of school districts in New York and New Jersey formed the Regional Minority Achievement Network to study this "gap." At their invitation, we created a multigenerational, multi-site team of researchers—adult and youth, suburban and urban—to research broadly how urban and suburban teens perceive the processes and consequences of the gap. In January of 2002, the Opportunity Gap Project was born.

Students from urban and suburban high schools in New York and New Jersey joined researchers from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York to form a participatory action-research team. Over the course of 18 months, more than 100 high-school students participated in a series of research "camps" in which they were immersed in methods training, learning about interviews, focus groups, survey design and participant observation. We taught social theory, educated them in contemporary studies of educational policies and practices, and trained them in a series of research methodologies. We jointly crafted a survey that was distributed to more than 10,000 students from 15 urban and suburban districts, focusing on questions of distributive and procedural (in)justice in the nation and its schools. We conducted focus groups, individual interviews, interviews with elders and participated in a number of cross-school visits[1]. We worked together to document student perspectives on educational-opportunity gaps across urban/suburban lines, and within racially desegregated suburban high schools. Forty-two of these high-school students ultimately earned college credit for their involvement in the research.

Our goal was to produce a regional analysis of youth perspectives on secondary schooling and racial justice in the New York City metropolitan area. The result is a statistical and qualitative mapping of contemporary urban and suburban youth perspectives, drawn from diverse racial and ethnic groups, collectively rich in shared aspirations for higher education and civic engagement, even as some begin to confront specific and real obstacles to opportunity and the advancement of their goals.

Research Design/Methodology

We began by conducting a series of "research camps" for high-school students from the New York metropolitan area. At the first camp, 25 students from six high schools participated in a two-day session at St. Peter's College in Jersey City, New Jersey. Through intensive work on participatory methods and theory, students learned about quantitative and qualitative research design, interviews, focus groups, observation and surveys, and they studied educational and critical race theory and history. The students

and our team from the Graduate Center, CUNY decided to design a survey instrument, to be administered broadly, to gain a more precise understanding of how youth view the processes that produce the gap and the perceived consequences.

The youth researchers played a vital role in determining the research questions, methods, interpretations and products of our work. For example, they insisted that the survey not look like a test. Thus the final edition of the survey included photos and cartoons for respondents to interpret, a chart illustrating the achievement gap in college graduation rates by race/ethnicity, and open-ended questions such as, "What is the most powerful thing a teacher has ever said to you?" Completed by more than 9,000 ninth and 12th graders from a range of schools and school districts, the survey was made available in English, French-Creole, Spanish, Braille and on tape to accommodate recent immigrants and students with disabilities. The survey sample spanned youth from 11 suburban schools from Delaware, New Jersey and New York, one urban school district in New Jersey (with three high schools) and three high schools in New York City. These schools and their students represent a range of ethnic, racial and economic backgrounds.

Beyond the survey, we engaged in participant observations within four suburban and two urban schools, conducted four cross-school visitations where teams of young people visited each other's schools. We facilitated 24 focus-group interview sessions in seven schools and one community based organization and 32 individual interviews with high-achieving, mid-achieving and not-yet achieving high-school students across these same sites. We also interviewed 12 elders involved in the history of *Brown*. In addition, seven student teams pursued their own questions about the achievement gap, or what we came to call the "opportunity gap."

The Children of *Brown:* A Generation of High Aspirations, Civic Engagement and Support for Desegregation

DRAWING PRIMARILY from the New York/New Jersey metropolitan database of students attending racially integrated high schools (*N*=4,474, with 340 identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 623 African-American, 1,825 white American, 360 Afro-Caribbean and 707 Latino students), we found that across racial and ethnic lines:

- **Young people who attend racially integrated schools are highly motivated to earn good grades and to attend college.**
- **They feel that it is important to attend school with a diverse student body.**
- **These students were, however, quite concerned that despite desegregated schools, their classrooms remain largely segregated (e.g., "in my school, classes are not as mixed as they should be"). This is a particular concern for high-achieving African-American and Latino students.**
- **Evidence from the surveys, focus groups and individual interviews confirm that African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino youth were significantly more concerned about inequities between schools and within schools than were white American youth.**

The data we present below draw some general conclusions about the generation of youth, and then some comparisons by race/ethnic identifications. We recognize that these racial and ethnic classifications are imprecise and indeed problematic ways of viewing student identities, and that many students fall into more than one racial/ethnic group. Nevertheless, the often stark differences in social perceptions that appear between groups force us to rethink how schools and educational policies affect distinct groups of students. While students of this generation share much in terms of aspirations, civic engagement and belief in integration, they depart sharply by race/ethnicity in terms of their perceptions of opportunities, experiences of respect and security about their American dreams. We discuss specific findings below.

Academic Aspirations for College

STUDENTS WHO ATTEND racially integrated high schools, across racial/ethnic lines, report high academic aspirations.

Ninety percent of the student respondents from all groups indicated, "I care a lot about my grades" and "college is important to my future."

"I care a lot about my grades":
91.4 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
89.8 percent of white American
94 percent of African-American, and
79 percent of Latino students.

"Going to college is personally important to me":
88 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
93 percent of white American
87 percent of African-American and Afro-Caribbean, and
82 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

However, African-American and Latino students, particularly those *not* in Advanced Placement (AP) or honors-level courses, express substantial concern

that inadequate preparation, lack of PSAT/SAT preparation, high-stakes testing and financial issues could interfere with their academic aspirations.

"Money might be a problem that keeps me from going to college":
41.7 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
32.0 percent of white American
46.8 percent of African-American and Afro-Caribbean, and
57.4 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

"I worry that standardized tests can prevent me from graduating":
33 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
28 percent of white American
44 percent of African-American
42 percent of Afro-Caribbean, and
47 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

"My school has prepared me for college as well as any other student in the United States":
72 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
73 percent of white American
59 percent of African-American, and
65 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

Ironically, across school districts, we found that the very students who most need academic supports for college, such as PSAT/SAT preparatory and tutors, are least likely to enjoy such access:

"Have you participated in PSAT/SAT prep courses?"
61 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
66 percent of white American
47 percent of African-American
45 percent of Afro-Caribbean, and
46 percent of Latino seniors report having had PSAT/SAT preparatory.

More dramatically, 73 percent of high-track white and Asian/Pacific Islander American seniors compared to 39 percent of low-track African-American/Afro-Caribbean and Latino seniors have participated in PSAT/SAT prep courses.

Civic Engagement

We measured young people's commitment to social issues and the public good by designing a *Civic Engagement* scale (e.g., the following values are rated as important to the respondent: **"helping people less fortunate than I am," "working to improve my community," "keeping the environment clean," "ending racism"**). Students from racially integrated high schools showed high levels of civic commitment.

Over 40 percent of the respondents indicated commitments to social issues and civic engagement as important to their future. More than 60 percent of all students, with little variation, strongly agreed, **"It is very important to *help* my country."** Yet, in response to the item, **"We need to create *change* in the nation,"** significant ethnic and racial differences emerged.

Sixty-one percent of African-American students and 60 percent of Afro-Caribbean students agreed with this statement compared to 52 percent of Latino, 43 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander, and 32 percent of white American students. That is, black students (African-American and Afro-Caribbean) are almost twice as likely as white American students to believe we need change in the country.

When asked how important is **"ending racism"** to future well-being, similar discrepancies emerged: more than half of African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino students, and 47 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students selected "very important" compared to a third of white American students (small *N* for Asian/Pacific Islanders on this item). When asked about whether or not they **"speak up"** against racial injustice, students parted ways again along race/ethnicity:

"If I hear something that is racist or offensive to a group of people, I usually speak up about it":
55 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
42 percent of white American
67 percent of African-American
62 percent of Afro-Caribbean, and
58 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

Thus, we see a strong generational endorsement of civic commitments and concerns about racial justice. However, African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino students (and on some items Asian/Pacific Islander students) believe that the nation must make significant changes to be true to its democratic principles and to racial justice.

Support for Integration in Schools and Classrooms

THE LEVEL OF SUPPORT for school desegregation was measured with the *Attitudes Toward School Desegregation Measure* (combining views on the importance of school desegregation and the experience of classroom and school integration). A large majority of young people (over 75 percent) who attend desegregated schools, across racial and ethnic lines are strong advocates for integration.

"Attending a racially integrated school is very important to me":
79 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
74 percent of white American
78 percent of Afro-Caribbean
77 percent of African-American students, and
75 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

These same students are, however, extremely concerned about the relative absence of integration in their classrooms. African-American and Afro-Caribbean students are twice as likely as white American students to register concern about the imbalances they witness and experience in their classrooms.

"My school is not as good as it should be in providing equal opportunity for students of color":
18.9 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
17.7 percent of white American
40.9 percent of African-American
41.4 percent of Afro-Caribbean, and
35.6 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

Access to Rigor and Respect in Schools

WHILE STUDENTS APPRECIATE attending desegregated schools, they nevertheless recognize that throughout their schools access to *academic rigor* is unevenly distributed by race, ethnicity and class. Many, including those who report being in honors tracks, say they are extremely concerned about what they see as unequal access to rigorous classes and opportunities, and to respect.

Students expressed substantial concern about policies and practices that sustain persistent inequities:

Almost 60 percent agree that there is an "achievement gap":
61 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
60 percent of white American
70 percent of African-American
72 percent of Afro-Caribbean, and
59 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

Over 50 percent agree, "Classes are not as mixed as the school":
50 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
47 percent of white American
70 percent of African-American
73 percent of Afro-Caribbean, and
49 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

In response to the item, "My culture is respected in school":
12 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
11 percent of African-American
12 percent of Afro-Caribbean
13 percent of Latino, and
24 percent of white American students strongly agree.

In response to the item, "Everyone in my school has an equal chance of getting into the hardest classes," similar racial/ethnic differences emerge:
67.5 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
63.6 percent of white American
39.2 percent of African-American
45.6 percent of Afro-Caribbean, and
58.1 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

Although all students are concerned about the imbalances, African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino students are significantly more likely to rate their schools critically on these measures of perceived racial justice in schools than are white American students.

On the Other Side of the Tracks Within Desegregated Schools

ON THE CROSS-SCHOOL VISITS to the suburbs, urban youth researchers who attend untracked schools were surprised to find classes of in-school segregation. They noticed classes within these schools largely segregated by race, ethnicity and social class, justified by policies and practices of tracking. Their casual observations were confirmed in our survey data, documenting sharp ethnic and racial disparities in the number of students participating in AP and honors courses.

In our surveys, and then our analyses of senior transcripts from four suburban high schools, we found that African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino students enjoy substantially diminished access to rigorous curriculum compared to their Asian/Pacific Islander and white American counterparts *even when they have college-educated parents.*

The race/ethnic and class based imbalance in access to rigor is particularly troubling given that our survey results reveal that students in AP/honors classes report the most responsive relations with faculty, feel best prepared for college, most challenged by the curriculum and most likely to get a "second chance" if they mess up. More specifically:

- **Students in AP and honors courses are significantly more likely than their peers to report feeling challenged academically,**
- **They experience educators as being more responsive,**
- **They are more likely to feel that they are known and understood by educators,**
- **They are more likely to report getting a "second chance" from their teachers, and**
- **They are more confident that they are academically well prepared for college.**

The advantages of AP/honors placement are also significant with respect to the kinds of academic supports that accompany such placement. When we analyzed which students have access to PSAT/SAT preparation courses, we found that white and Asian/Pacific Islander students were far more likely to enjoy such supplemental test preparation than African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino students. Further, white American and Asian/Pacific Islander students *not* in AP/honors were as likely as African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino students in AP/honors to be enrolled in PSAT/SAT preparation courses, as evidenced below.

African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino students have significantly less access to rigorous courses than white and Asian American students – even when parents are well educated. And further, these same students have significantly less access to supplemental test preparation — even when they enroll in AP/honors classes.

To assess students' relations with educators, the *Positive Influence of Educators* scale was created. This scale measures how students perceive their teachers

Participation in AP/honors courses by students' race/ethnicity and parental education (percent)

	Asian/PI	White American	African-American	Afro-Caribbean	Latino
9th to GED	31	29	14	36	16
High School graduate	23	28	17	20	15
Some college	39	36	31	31	29
College graduate or beyond	72	64	45	46	46

in terms of understanding, caring and believing in the students, and exhibiting fair and impartial treatment. We present race/ethnic distributions for individual items to reveal the patterns. Across items, African-American students are least likely to think that teachers believe in them, and most likely to believe that the race/ethnicity of a student influences teacher behavior:

"My teachers think I should be in honors classes":
68 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
67 percent of white American
42 percent of African-American
40 percent of Afro-Caribbean, and
53 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

"Teachers care about students like me":
46 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
60 percent of white American
44 percent of African-American, and
45 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

"A student's race/ethnicity affects how some teachers treat them":
32 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
34 percent of white American
48 percent of African-American, and
33 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

"If I mess up, educators in my school give me a second chance":
53 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
51 percent of white American
38 percent of African-American
39 percent of Afro-Caribbean, and
48 percent of Latino students agree or strongly agree.

Although track is a strong predictor of academic challenge, teacher responsiveness and perception of preparation for college, the differences by track are far more acute for white and Asian/Pacific Islander students than for African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino. White and Asian-American students in top-track classes view educators as significantly more responsive than do similar students in lower tracks. Yet African-American, Afro-

Student Involvement in PSAT/SAT Preparation Courses by Race/Ethnicity and AP/honors Track

White/Asian/PI		Af-Am/Afro-Car/Latino	
AP/honors	Not AP/honors	AP/honors	Not AP/honors
73%	56%	56%	39%

Caribbean and Latino students are consistently less likely to perceive teachers as responsive—whether they are enrolled in top, middle or bottom tracks. In fact, top-track African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino students report the *least* positive relations with educators.

Positive Influence of Educators:
50 percent of white American and Asian/Pacific Islander students in AP/honors classes
47 percent of white and Asian/Pacific Islander students in regular and remedial classes
31 percent of African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino students enrolled in AP and honors classes, and
37 percent of African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino students in regular and remedial classes agree or strongly agree.

Further, African-American and Latino youth express the most consistent fear that standardized tests could prevent them from graduation. When asked to assess the statement, "Standardized tests can prevent me from graduation," almost half of the Latino and African-American students, one-third of the Asian/Pacific Islander and just over a quarter of white American respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed.

"I worry that standardized tests can prevent me from graduating":
33 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander
28 percent of white American
44 percent of African-American, and
47 percent Latino students agree or strongly agree.

Consistently across indicators, African-American students (and for most items, Latino students) report the least access to qualified educators, trusting relationships with educators, academic rigor,

supplemental support and experiences of respect compared to their peers. Further, they report the most concern about the adverse consequences of high stakes testing, disproportionate rates of disciplinary suspensions and the most anxiety about the financial burden of higher education.

When we started this work, we were not aware of the depth of in-school segregation and experiences of inequality. And yet in each quantitative analysis, and with every focus group and interview we conducted, we learned of the significant impact of "track" and race/ethnicity on student engagement, motivation, confidence, identity, peer relations and achievement. Given that student engagement and achievement are highly related for low-income students and students of color (and far less related for wealthier and/or white American students), it is of great and troubling significance that African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino students in the higher tracks reported the most intense alienation and despair over in-school segregation.

To understand these dynamics more fully, we conducted a focus group among youth researchers who attended racially integrated suburban schools. Here are some excerpts from these focus groups:

> **CHUCK:** My thoughts? When we just had [one group in a class]…you really don't get the full perspective of everything. You know what I mean? If they were in tracked classes, they wouldn't get to interact. And like…when you're in class with like all white people, because I know the same thing happens at [my school] like sometimes I'm the only black male in class, and you do feel sort of inferior, or you do like sort of draw back a little bit because you have nobody else to relate with. If it's more integrated, you feel more comfortable and the learning environment is better…you just get more sides of it because, I don't know, it's hard to even with math, everybody learns the same thing in math, but if it's all white people, you know what I mean? They're going to learn it somewhat different. It's not that they don't get the same education, but they're going to miss that one little thing that a Latino person or a black person could add to the class.

> **JACK:** [I don't think we should do away with tracks entirely], maybe not in like all classes, maybe if they just had all freshman classes like that, you know, it would help out a lot…[to change it all]…you know, the kids that might not have achieved so much in the past could see like, "I do have a chance." And you know, "I don't…I just don't have to stop. I can keep going and keep learning more stuff." So, I don't know, maybe not like every class should be tracked, but they should definitely be exposed.

> **TARIK:** It starts from when you graduate eighth grade. In eighth grade they ask you, "Would you want to be in [top track]? It depends on your grades. If your grades are good enough to be in top, then you can, but if not, you have to choose the [regular] level.

> **JANE:** Because, like you know, some people even say that, the smart kids should be in a class by themselves because it's more conducive to their learning. But then the other people would say like well the special-education kids, they need to be with their kind so they'll learn better.

What we, the senior researchers noticed, was how the conversation quickly veered away from issues of race and privilege.

Marah and Elinor (both biracial, high-achieving students) then entered the conversation.

> **MARAH:** Like tracking has been in the whole school system that I've been going to like from beginning, and if you grow up in a tracking system, that's all you can know. So if you grow up and the whole time I've been in honors classes, and a lot of the time, and I'm mixed so a lot of the time when, if you want to hang out with different people and you're forced, and the other students in your classes and you're kind of forced

to hang out with some people that you don't normally, wouldn't normally like hang around with. And at the same time, it's like a lot of emphasis is put on by the parents and teacher, I remember a lot of the time, like "You're a good"…like teachers would tell me, "You're a good student but you need to watch out who you hang out with, because they're going to have a bad influence on you." They didn't see me doing anything. I was just walking down the hallway talking to somebody. It wasn't like, you know, we were out doing whatever. But a lot of times it is the teachers' and the parents' first impressions of their ideas that come off…

ELINOR: But I want to say like…Marah and I are a lot alike because we're both interracial and we were both in like honors classes. But with her, a lot of her friends are black and with me a lot of my friends are white. And I get really tired of being the only one of the very few people in my class to actually speak up if I see something that's like?…or if I hear something…that bothers me. And then I feel like I'm all of a sudden the black voice, you know. Like I'm all black people. And it's not true at all. I…lots of people have different kinds of opinions and I want to hear them. It's just that I think a lot of the time, like Chuck was saying, when you're the only person in the class, you do get intimidated. And voices aren't heard anymore then because of everyone else overpowering.

African-American, biracial and Latino students—like Chuck, Marah and Elinor— traverse and negotiate social policies and practices of symbolic and material violence as they survive a torrent of everyday representations within their desegregated schools. Some do beautifully; others—not represented in this group—fail. To this task they apply Du Bois's "double consciousness"—watching through a veil.

The veil connects and separates, and doubles as a shield of protection that "keeps [the self] from being torn asunder," and as a moat of alienation. Through the veil, youth of color see, hear and witness. As Chuck admits, he may "draw back a little." Some narrate pain, some pleasure, and a significant group claims they do not allow the words to penetrate. African-American students were the only group on the survey in which significant numbers responded to the question, "What is the most powerful thing a teacher has ever said to you?" with, "No effect!" "Can't remember a thing," "Nothing they say has affected me," "Not one thing."

Investigating School Finance Inequities

> New York City schools are deficient in instrumentalities of learning…There are certainly city schools where the inadequacy is not "gross and glaring." Some of these schools may even be excellent. But tens of thousands of students are placed in overcrowded classrooms, taught by unqualified teachers, and provided with inadequate facilities and equipment. The number of children in these straits is large enough to represent a systemic failure.
>
> *—Excerpt from the June 26, 2003, 4-1 ruling in which the Court of Appeals found that New York City's school system is providing an inadequate education to students. Judge Judith Kaye for the majority.*

At the first research camp, we examined evidence of financial inequities, distributions of "qualified educators," differences in suspension rates, and dropout rates across large school/small schools, between racial and ethnic groups, and over time. A number of the student research teams from the schools generated related research questions to pursue over the subsequent months.

To illustrate: Surprised to learn about glaring finance inequities across urban-suburban lines, the students from one of the urban small schools, the East Side Community High School, decided to study the causes, justifications and consequences of finance inequities in New York state. Other school teams decided to take up research questions of particular import to their settings (e.g., tracking in their school; students' relations with faculty; a graduate follow-up of seniors in college; the history of racial

equity; suspension policies and practices for African-American, white and Latino youth; how students get help when they are in academic need).

A small group of students convened weekly to study original documents and collect original research and information about the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit against the State of New York. Having already studied the *Brown* decision, the students expressed surprise at how public education resources are allocated in New York State.

They gathered legal documents, interviewed activists, scholars, students, organizers, lawyers and educators about the case. They read Justice Leland DeGrasse's 2001 decision in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity Case, which included this excerpt:

> This court holds that the education provided New York City students is so deficient that it falls below the constitutional floor set by the Education Article of the New York State Constitution. The court also finds that the state's actions are a substantial cause of this constitutional violation.
> —*CFE v. State of New York, 2001*

They studied the next development in the suit, the 4-1 appellate court ruling that reversed Justice DeGrasse's decision. The majority opinion, written by Justice Alfred D. Lerner, included the following:

> A "sound basic education" should consist of the skills necessary to obtain employment, and to competently discharge one's civil responsibility. The state submitted evidence that jury charges are generally at a grade level of 8.3, and newspaper articles on campaign and ballot issues range from grade level 6.5 to 11.7…the evidence at the trial established that the skills required to enable a person to obtain employment, vote, and serve on a jury, are imparted between grades 8 and 9.
> —*Supreme Court Appellate Division, June 2002*

The youth researchers were dismayed by this reversal, and they decided to investigate the impact of the inequity on students from well-funded and poorly funded schools. They decided to visit each other's schools—in New York City and wealthy Westchester County. They toured schools that receive approximately $7,000 per child, and schools where spending was more than $15,000 per child.

What they discovered was a dramatic difference in access to computers, books, libraries, AP classes and honors classes. (The students from the city also noted, "there's like no minorities in those top classes.")

The visit to the affluent suburban school proved emotionally as well as intellectually disorienting for the urban students; most of them had not had the chance to see how students of privilege are educated. They were shocked by what privilege looked like up close. The student-researchers were plainly stunned not only by the material resources and facilities at the suburban school but also by the intellectual skills of the students there:

> "Did you see the auditorium? Okay, our auditorium looks like…[crap] compared to that one," said one student.
>
> "Because they have money, they could actually have a darkroom that they can do photography in," said another.
>
> "They have a lot of books!" said one. "It's like a regular library."
>
> "I went to [a science class where] a girl gave a presentation about abortion," said one student. "She had slides to show everyone [on a slide projector and a computer]…When we had that in our school we just did a poster."

Several students commented on the "real" science laboratories they had encountered, labs with equipment, sinks and an abundance of materials for experiments.

As seniors, this group visited another Westchester County high school. Now adrenalin-filled with the prospect of their own college-application processes, these young people toured the building with a sense of awe, confusion and depression.

> "This school is college," Nikaury mumbled.
>
> "They already take psychology and advanced math and English," said Jose.
>
> "We're going to compete with these students when we get to college?" asked Emily.

The young researchers were not naive about the presence of racial and economic inequities. Nevertheless, these visits shattered their idealistic view of education as an equal-opportunity tool for social mobility. Many of the youth researchers concluded that they had been failed by the state and by their school system. They gained a new appreciation for the plaintiffs in the *Brown* case and the supporters of the CFE lawsuit. Their encounter with privilege—their research, their participation, their observation—led them to question how serious our country was in granting them full rights, indeed full citizenship.

Conclusions

ACROSS DATA SETS and zip codes, across racial, ethnic and social class lines, students in our surveys and ethnographic research show high levels of motivation, strong aspirations for college, commitments to civic engagement and support for racial integration of schools. Most students also experience discomfort, however, with finance inequities and tracking that prevent deep integration. We found evidence of this discomfort even in youth who benefit from existing arrangements. Today's young people see that history, politics, state policy and local practices shape their opportunities, locking some doors and opening others. They feel encouraged, betrayed and bewildered by the lofty promise of integration and the more disappointing reality of segregation within and across schools. We hear the price—paid most dearly by urban youth of color, but also by suburban youths—of inequitable state policies, tracking systems and high-stakes testing for underprepared students. These youth, across their differences, are prepared to do something to rectify contemporary inequities.

And yet, we have discovered too that the gap is neither inevitable nor universal. Schools do not necessarily reproduce social inequities. Despite the stresses of urban life and inadequate financing, the small, performance-based urban schools included in our study, like the *Brown* decision, effectively resist and narrow the gaps imported from the broader culture. In these schools, neither family wealth nor parental education neatly predicts student achievement.

Small, Performance-Based Urban Schools—A Funny Thing Happened to *Brown* on the Way to the 21st Century

IT WOULD BE EASY to conclude from the above data, surveys, interviews, observations and graduate follow-ups, that race, ethnicity and social-class differences in achievement are enduring across contexts. We hear often, in whispers, "Is it true that even in suburban schools there's an achievement gap?" Has *Brown* failed?

The answer is complex: *Brown v. Board of Education* sparked a revolution in social consciousness, and important shifts in education legislation, social policy and school-based practice followed (Kluger, 1977). As a nation, however, we have failed, some would argue refused, to dismantle the structures and guarantees of race and class privilege. A gap—which youth call an *opportunity* gap, not an *achievement* gap—is sewn into the seams of our national educational fabric.

And yet tucked away in the recesses of a massive database lie a set of schools that reveal "what could be" if public schools were dedicated to the rigorous education of all, including poor and working-class youth. Surviving on inadequate fiscal resources but enlivened by the spirits and dedication of educators committed to changing the odds, the small schools movement in New York City the nation flourishes—despite finance inequities, the pressures of high-stakes standardized testing and bureaucratic indifference. Many of these small schools—now well

over a decade old—are designed to educate America's poor and immigrant youth to be scholars, critics, activists, to see critically what is, and to imagine and enact the possibilities of what could be. There is substantial literature on the effectiveness of the small schools movement in general and in New York City in particular (see Ancess and Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ancess and Wichterle, 2001; Darling-Hammond, Ancess and Ort, 2002; Lee and Smith, 1999; Raywid, 1995; Wasley, Fine, Gladden, Holland, King, Mosak and Powell, 2000).

The small urban schools, committed to rigor and performance assessments, reflect the spirit of *Brown* that demanded a radical possibility for the education of African-American, Latino, immigrant, working-class and poor students—students not privileged by birth to wealth. Some of these schools are racially mixed. Most aren't. These schools receive just over half of what their sister institutions receive in the suburbs and yet they educate students whose parents are significantly less well-educated than students in the suburbs.

We included four such schools in our research — three in the survey. All of these schools are designed without academic tracks so that all students receive a college-bound education. Students are assessed through student inquiry projects and externally validated performance assessments. Educators in these schools, as noted by Ancess and Darling-Hammond (2003) have committed to beating the odds. With a small number but remarkable consistency, on every measure: student engagement, relations with faculty, graduation rates and college aspirations, students in the small urban schools had higher than average rates of civic engagement, academic engagement and teacher responsiveness—especially for African-American and Latino students—than the larger schools in the suburbs. These findings extend what others have demonstrated. Students in small, urban, performance assessment schools significantly out perform their peers in large urban schools in terms of academic engagement, achievement, persistence, graduation and college attendance. We now have evidence that these schools academically engage students at extremely high rates, across lines of race/ethnicity and class.

On Civic Engagement: Students in these small urban schools were significantly more likely to "agree/strongly agree" on the importance of items on the *Civic Engagement* scale (involvement in community, race relations, helping the nation, helping those less fortunate, environmental issues) than students in large schools. Compared to their peers in large suburban schools, students in these small schools are more likely to agree that:

- **Acts of civic responsibility are very important,**
- **They should work to end racism and to protect the environment,**
- **They should help those less fortunate, and**
- **They should work to improve the local community.**

As other studies have demonstrated, small urban schools encourage their students to see themselves as critical and responsible agents in school and in their communities.

On Perceived Responsiveness of Educators (e.g., my teachers know and understand me, give me a second chance, offer challenging curriculum): Students in these small urban schools were consistently more likely to report that:

- **Teachers are academically responsive,**
- **The curriculum is challenging, and**
- **Educators are fair to students of color and poor students.**

Most students in small schools (52 percent) agreed strongly that, "In my school, all students can achieve if they try," while few agreed that, "There is an

	Large Suburban School	Small Urban School
Teachers are responsive to students like me	62%	80%
Teachers know and understand me	35%	60%
Teachers give me a second chance	46%	72%
I feel academically challenged	63%	76%
Number of students	3,362	392

achievement gap in my school". They expressed academic ambitions equivalent to those expressed by students in the suburbs, and substantially higher than those expressed by low-track African-American and Latino students in the suburbs.

While these small schools clearly help poor and working class youth beat the odds, the question remains: to what extent are aspirations, engagement, motivation and achievement primarily a function of supports/resources in the home?

To investigate this question, we correlated parental levels of education with indicators of youth engagement with educators, academic challenge and aspirations for college. For the suburban database, we found that maternal and paternal education levels are highly correlated with student engagement, challenge and aspirations. In the suburban schools, 69 percent of youth had parents with some years in college (or more). Suburban students whose parents were better educated were more engaged academically with faculty and school curriculum. They held higher aspirations for college and felt better prepared for college than youth with less well-educated parents.

In contrast, in the small urban schools, parental education was *not* correlated with student level of engagement or aspirations for college. In these schools, on average, 32 percent of the students had parents with less than high school diplomas, and 32 percent had parents with some college. Across these schools, however, students report extremely high levels of academic engagement, whether they were from families with little parental education, or some college education.[2] This is a most significant finding. Researchers have found student engagement to be highly correlated with achievement for poor and working class youth, but less so for middle and upper middle class students. In other words, while middle and upper middle class students can achieve at relatively high levels even if they are not very engaged in school, poor and working class students must be engaged if they are to achieve[3]. Confirming the substantial literature on the academic power of small, rigorous schools, the small, inquiry based urban schools included in this sample have decoupled the long-standing and stubborn correlation of parental education with student engagement and achievement. While these schools have their struggles, they are graduating and sending poor and working class youth off to college equipped to succeed, with strong intellectual and civic commitments.

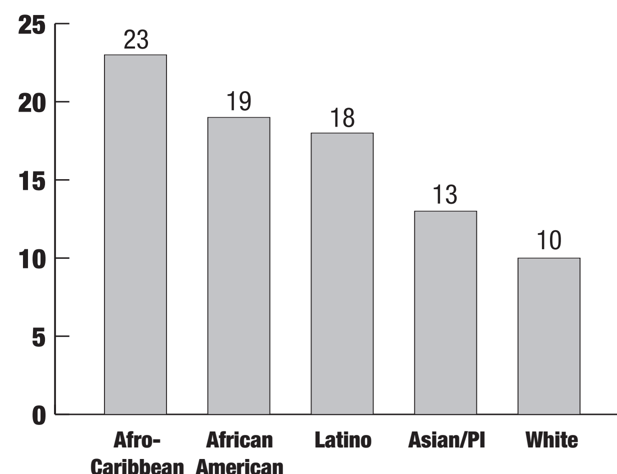
Youth Researchers: Seeding a Movement for Youth Research and Educational Justice

By developing the skills of critical researchers, earning either high-school or college credit for their work, and by engaging with other youth—across lines of class, race, ethnicity and geography—the youth researchers developed a critical eye and an increased sense of confidence, both academic and personal.

For example, Nozier, one of the student-researchers, explained to the almost all white teacher group that he, as an African-American male, spends "lots of time in the suspension room…and you notice it's mostly black, right?"

"Well, no, actually in June it gets whiter when the kids who haven't shown up for detention have to come in," came one response from a school official.

Have you been suspended?



"Sometimes there are white students, maybe when you're not there," said another.

But Nozier persisted, determined to confidently report his findings about inequity within his school. In our research camps, we had rehearsed the school presentations with the expectation that students might encounter some resistance and hesitance when they presented criticisms and findings to school officials.

Despite the resistance he encountered, Nozier continued, "I don't speak just for me. I'm speaking for 1,179 other black and Latino students who completed the survey and report high rates of suspensions."

He was able to link the personal with the social, the individual and the institution.

His experience was similar to that of Jeneusse, a student-researcher from the South Bronx. Jeneusse spoke at a gathering at Columbia University.

She was asked, "Do you think it's fair to teach students of color about racism and critical consciousness and involve them in this work? Doesn't it depress you?"

Jeneusse responded, "We've long known about racism; that's not news. What I know now, though, is that I can study it, speak about it, and we need to do something to change it."

Nikaury, a youth researcher from the Lower East Side of Manhattan, stunned an audience at Teachers College Columbia University with her astute reflection on participatory action research, and its benefits: "I used to see *flat*. No more…now I know things are much deeper than they appear. And it's my job to find out what's behind the so-called facts. I don't see *flat* anymore."

In many ways the experiences of these youth researchers who have learned tools of social theory and inquiry, surveying, in-depth interviewing, interpretation, creation of products and most recently performance of "public scholarship," are as much the legacies of *Brown* as the inequities that they have studied. In their determination, these young women and men believe themselves to be sparking a multigenerational movement for educational justice, in a vibrant 50-year echo of the case decided long ago, a case that still resonates across the nation's education landscape.

Reflections

WHILE IT IS TRUE that there is much to honor 50 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the evidence here confirms that the educational experiences offered by our nation's schools remain profoundly separate and unequal. The legacy of *Brown* must be assessed not simply in terms of the degree to which bodies of different colors mingle in the same building, but, more boldly, by the extent to which the larger goal of racial justice in education has been realized. The struggle for integration was never merely a fight for access. *Brown* was also a struggle for citizenship, democracy and collective social justice. In that spirit, the continued and relentless segregation of resources, opportunities and respect assures a denial of equal access, undermines meaningful claims to full citizenship and threatens the fabric of our diverse democracy.

Our research, conducted across some of the wealthiest and poorest schools in the nation, confirms what others have found: a series of well-established policies and practices assure and deepen the gap. The more separate America's schools are racially and economically, the more stratified they become in achievement.

Whether we consider urban/suburban finance inequity, the systematic dismantling of desegregation, the racially coded academic tracking that organizes most desegregated schools, or students' different experiences of respect and supports in schools, the class, race and ethnicity-based consequences of high-stakes testing, or the remarkably disparate patterns of

suspensions and disciplinary actions, we witness today the structuring and cementing of social inequity across schools and within them. These policies and practices, documented consistently across county lines, affect the perceptions and concerns of youth as they confront the denial of educational opportunity. The youth involved in this research are willing to take responsibility for altering the course of the next 50 years. And with this work, they invite the adults of our nation to join them.

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NOTES

[1]The Opportunity Gap Research Project draws on contemporary youth surveys as well as interviews with 'elders' active in movements for educational opportunity and racial justice in the 1940s/1950s and today.

Surveys, focus groups and elder interviews were administered between May 2002 and August 2003. Surveys were administered during the Spring of 2003; focus group interviews conducted during Fall 2002 and Spring 2003, and elders were interviewed during the Summer of 2003.

The elders interviewed include former President of Bronx Community College Roscoe Brown Jr.; Professor Emeritus of Social Psychology Morton Deutsch; New York University Professor of History Adam Green; former Deputy Director for the New York State Department of Aging and prison reform advocate Thea Jackson; former engineer on the Hubble Telescope and prison reform advocate Bailey Jackson; Professor Emeritus of Law and co-founder of the Center for Constitutional Rights Arthur Kinoy (1920–2003); former Director of Jersey City Child Development Centers Esther Lee; the internationally acclaimed poet and English professor Sonia Sanchez; educator and children's book author Bernice Davison Schwebel; former Professor of Education, Milton Schwebel and the Honorable Judge Jack Weinstein. Each was interviewed at home or at work, by a youth researcher, who asked the elders about the "project" of Brown, the vision, the history and the legacy.

The schools involved in the surveys, focus groups, individual interviews and participant observations were drawn from the Regional Minority Network Consortium districts which include Mamaroneck, New York; Ramapo/Spring Valley, New York; Bedford, New York; White Plains, New York; New Rochelle, New York; Montclair, New Jersey; Cherry Hill, New Jersey; Summit, New Jersey; Maplewood/South Orange, New Jersey; South Brunswick, New Jersey. Additional schools/students were drawn from the Performance Based Assessment Consortium of small schools in New York City and the high schools in Paterson, New Jersey.

While we were surveying youth broadly across schools and districts, seven school/community youth-research teams undertook original research for academic year 2002–2003, on topics including: finance inequities; history of racial equity in the town; student relations with faculty within a small academy; how students receive help when they are in academic need; race, ethnicity and suspension policies; oral histories of local educational activists, and a follow up study of high school graduates now in college. These projects grew out of three small urban schools, a large urban school, two suburban high schools and an activist community based organization.

After an early article appeared in *Education Week* on the Opportunity Gap project, a number of additional districts and schools contacted the project, and asked to be included in the survey research. Over 5,000 additional surveys were distributed to a number of urban and suburban schools outside of the initial Consortium and urban small schools. The data presented here reflect the surveys, focus groups, individual and elder interviews conducted with Regional Minority Network Consortium schools and a set of small urban schools in New York City, as well as research conducted by one of the school research teams.

[2] In the large and small urban high schools, approximately one-third of students report parents with less than high school diplomas and another one-third with some college. In the suburbs, 6 percent of students report parents with less than high school diploma, 20 percent with high school diploma and 69 percent with some college or more.

[3] There is a substantial literature on the power of small schools, particularly with respect to narrowing the achievement gap and widening student engagement, persistence, graduation and college going rates for poor and working class youth. For relevant information on student engagement, see *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn*, Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn, National Research Council, Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2003. For empirical research on small schools and academic achievement, see Ancess, J. and Darling-Hammond, L. *Beating the Odds: High Schools as Communities of Commitment*, New York: Teachers College Press, 2003; Ancess, J. and Wichterle, S., "Making school completion integral to school purpose and design," paper presented at Dropouts in America, The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, 2001; Darling-Hammond, L., Ancess, J. and Ort, S. "Reinventing high school: An analysis of the coalition campus schools project," *American Educational Research Journal*, Fall 2002, 39, 3, 639-673; Gladden, R. The small schools movement: A review of the literature. Fine, M. and Somerville, J., *Small schools, big imaginations.* Chicago: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (1998); Lee, V. and Smith, J. Social support and achievement for young adolescents in Chicago. *American Educational Research Journal*, 26, 4, 907-946, Winter, 1999; Wasley, P, Fine, M., Gladden, M., Holland, N., King, S. Mosak, E. and Powell, L. *Small Schools, Great Strides: The Bank Street College Study of Small Schools in Chicago*. New York: Bank Street College, 2002.