Dear Zora:

A letter to Zora Neale Hurston

Fifty years after Brown

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Dear Zora:

Sorry that it has taken so long to respond. Actually it’s been 48 years. For the benefit of readers, we’ll reprint your prophetic letter to the editor of the Sentinel Orlando and offer a rather lengthy response:

Editor: I promised God and some other responsible characters, including a bench of bishops, that I was not going to part my lips concerning the U.S. Supreme Court decision on ending segregation in the public schools of the South. But since a lot of time has passed and no one seems to touch on what to me appears to be the most important point in the hassle, I break my silence just this once. Consider me as just thinking out loud....

I regard the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court as insulting rather than honoring my race. Since the days of the never-to-be-sufficiently-deplored Reconstruction, there has been current the belief that there is no greater delight to Negroes than physical association with whites. The doctrine of the white mare. Those familiar with the habits of mules are aware that any mule, if not restrained, will automatically follow a white mare. Dishonest mule traders made money out of this knowledge in the old days.

Lead a white mare along a country road and slyly open the gate and the mules in the lot would run out and follow this mare. This ruling being conceived and brought forth in a sly political medium with eyes on ’56, and brought forth in the same spirit and for the same purpose, it is clear that they have taken the old notion to heart and acted upon it. It is a cunning opening of the barnyard gate with the white mare ambling past. We are expected to hasten pell-mell after her.

It is most astonishing that this should be tried just when the nation is exerting itself to shake off the evils of Communist penetration. It is to be recalled that Moscow, being made aware of this folk belief, made it the main plank in their campaign to win the American Negro from the 190s on. It was the come-on stuff. ...

It is well known that I have no sympathy nor respect for the ‘tragedy of color’ school of thought among us, whose fountain-head is the pressure group concerned with this court ruling. I see no tragedy in being too dark to be invited to a white school social affair. The Supreme Court would have pleased me more if they had concerned themselves about enforcing the compulsory education provisions for Negroes in the South as is done for white children. .. Thems my sentiments and I am sticking by them.
Growth from within. Ethical and cultural desegregation. It is a contradiction in terms to scream race pride and equality while at the same time spurning Negro teachers and self association. That old white mare business can go racking on down the road for all I care. Zora Neale Hurston, Eau Gallie, (August 11, 1955, Sentinel Orlando)

In 1955 you understood what few were willing to acknowledge. More than that, you dared to speak aloud, in unpopular dialect, about the white mare that seduces with promises of equality, freedom and choice as it guarantees continued oppression and betrayal. As you suggest, promises of racial equality in public education in the U.S. have been covert operations that reproduce privilege. Nevertheless, with the wisdom of hindsight, we view Brown with a DuBoisian dual consciousness: as a radical interruption of law and educational practice, subverted almost immediately by the white mare of persistent racism.

The dual legacy of Brown reveals itself in the project of desegregation which has indeed led African American, Asian American, African-Caribbean, Latino, low income White youth, undocumented immigrant students, youth with disabilities, girls, gays and lesbians into institutions, clubs, communities from which their great grandparents, grandparents and their parents may have been barred. In many cases, however, these students – youth of color and those who live in poverty, in particular -- participate within such desegregated settings, from the margins. Academically, they witness excellence, but most sit just a classroom away. More African American and Latino students attend segregated schools than was true just a decade ago (Orfield, ).

And yet, at the same time, in the spirit of Brown (Boykin, 2003) a number of desegregated districts are interrogating questions of the “gap.” Maybe not as deeply as we would wish, as radically as we would hope – but interrogating. And, even more compelling, in urban areas throughout the U.S. there is a proliferation of intellectually exciting, inquiry based, vibrant, bold small schools dedicated to overcoming the odds for youth in poverty, immigrant students and adolescents of color (Ancess, 2003; Meier, 2001). And community based organizations, youth activists and parent groups throughout the country are organizing with and for public education as a site of democratic, liberatory possibility (see Sisters and Brothers United, personal communication, Anand, 2003; Mothers on the Move, Guishard, et. al. 2003 ; Applied Research Center, 2001). These schools, districts and neighborhood organizations toil in the legacy of Brown. Refusing the white mare of persistent racism, they understand that with struggle comes resistance. They have dipped in the puddles of rich educational possibilities, slipped in the muddy waters of relentless inequality and currently wade through the waters of despair. We write with a dual purpose: to recognize the power of Brown’s progeny and to reveal where the persistent inequities continue to undermine. We write to honor what has been rich and powerful, to canvass the topography of Brown then and now, to “out” the duplicitous white mares of today and to excavate the puddles of radical possibility that carry a genetic trace to the spirit of the Brown decision. You will be flattered to know that twenty three years after you wrote this letter to the editor, the amazing writer Alice Walker spent much time theorizing your stance in literacy and political history. In 1979 Walker wrote: “Is Hurston the messenger who brings the bad news, or is she the bad news herself? Is Hurston a
reflection of ourselves? And if so, is that not, perhaps, part of our ‘problem’ with
her? (Alice Walker, p. 2, in Hurston, 1979) And twenty five years later, Zora, you are still
on our minds.

**We begin with echoes: hearing voices across 50 years since brown**

“I am no fool; and I know that race prejudice in the United States today is such that
most Negroes cannot receive proper education in white institutions. .. a separate
Negro school, where children are treated like human beings, trained by teachers of
their own race, who know what it means to be black in the year of salvation 1935, is
infinitely better than making our boys and girls doormats to be spit and trampled
upon and lied to by ignorance social cimbers, whose sole claim to superiority is
ability to kick ‘niggers’ when they are down.” (DuBois, “Does the Negro Need
Separate Schools?” 1935)

![Image of handwritten note]

Travis Marquis, age 21, 2002

We write through an echo chamber of historic struggle and resistance, saturated by
the words of DuBois in 1935 and Travis Marquis, age 21, of the South Bronx in 2002.
Surrounded by the vibrant and electric words of civil rights struggles of the past and
the yearning, despair and resistance of youth today, we deepen our critical
understandings of the legacies of Brown. Zora, we work with your analysis acutely in
our consciousness, because we believe that the spirit of Brown, in its fullest sense,
sits at the core of our national democracy. But Brown, of course, has been “hijacked”
as Asa Hilliard III (2002) would tell us – for it was always intended as a strategy
toward justice, equity and intellectual freedom, not a mechanistic formula of body
counts and color codings. We review here the racialized life of public education
today in a Northeastern corner of the U.S., to understand the victories and the
ongoing struggles from the perspective of youth who live in the shadows of Brown,
and who will determine its future.

The evidence we present reveals that the struggle for academic racial justice has,
indeed, been “hijacked,” by the better-funded movement for white and elite privilege
that founded, and currently governs, America. The public sector of public education
has been fiscally hollowed, with the demand for equal resources trivialized into a {denied} quest to sit beside a white child. The fire of Brown for equity, power and justice has been blanketed, watered down. Youth of color today learn about a victory 50 years old, as they daily confront largely segregated, underfunded schools, high stakes tests that terrify and punish, with only some educators credentialed to teach. They are constantly witnessing locks being secured on the doors of Higher Education. A publicly financed welcome mat for African American and Latino youth sits at the barbed-wire rim of America’s prisons and, with college tuition rates rising and financial aid drying up, the promises of military life seduce those most vulnerable (Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, Martinez, Missy, Roberts, Smart, Upegui, 2000). Somewhere in their souls, though the numbers may be unknown, young people in New York know that in 1994, for the first time in history, New York State expended more of the state budget on prisons than on public universities. (Schiraldi, Gangi and Ziedenberg, 1998).

The radical realignment of the public sphere requires serious reflection on Brown and its progeny.

But before we’re through, Zora, we'll also tell you about those spaces in schools and communities throughout the U.S. where youth are learning and teaching, organizing and demanding, laughing and embodying the other legacy of Brown – the legacy of fighting back, never giving up, struggling for racial equality in a sea of greed and neo-liberal individualism. We listen as youth yearn for and demand equity in public education in the United States, at the beginning of the 21st century.

Echoes: The Faultlines of Racial Justice and Public Education

Fifty years after Brown vs. Board of Education, we continue to confront what is called an 'achievement gap' across racial and ethnic groups, and across social class - fractions (Anyon, 1997; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Fine, 1991; Fordham, 1996; Ferguson,
In 2001, a series of school districts within the New York metropolitan area, in suburban New York and New Jersey, joined to form a consortium to address this question of the "gap" and invited us?? to collaborate on research. Drawing on the writings of Ron Hayduk (1999) and Myron Orfield (2001), we conceptualized an ethnographic regional analysis of the political economy of schooling as lived by youth in and around the NYC metropolitan area.

By crossing the lines separating suburbs and urban areas, integrated and segregated schools, deeply tracked and detracked schools, we designed the work to reveal joints across county lines and to identify important contrasts (Orfield, 2002). We sought to document the co-dependent growth of the suburbs and the defunding of urban America, and to reveal the fractures of inequity and the pools of possibility that fill the topography of ‘desegregated’ suburban and urban communities and schools. We hoped, finally, to capture some of the magic of those schools in which rich, engaging education flourishes for youth across lines of race, ethnicity, class, geography and “track.”

We undertook this project committed to a textured, multi-method critical ethnographic analysis of urban and suburban schooling, with youth, designed to speak back to questions of racial, ethnic and class justice in American education. To reach deep into the varied standpoints that constitute these schools, we created a participatory action research design with youth representing the full ensemble of standpoints within these urban and suburban desegregated settings (Anand, Fine, Perkins, Surrey and the class of 2000, Renaissance Middle School, 2002; Fals-Borda, 1979 ; Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, Martinez, Missy, Roberts, Smart, Upegui, 2001 ; Freire, 1982; ).

The design

We have, over the past 18 months, been collaborating with youth from 11 racially integrated suburban school districts, one New Jersey urban district and three New York City high schools, crossing racial, ethnic, class, gender, academic, geographic and sexuality lines. We designed a series of research camps in schools, on college campuses, and in communities ranging from wealthy Westchester suburbs to the South Bronx of New York City.

At the first research camp, a two day overnight at St. Peter’s College, in Jersey City, New Jersey, youth participated in ‘methods training,’ learning about quantitative and qualitative design, critical race theory and a series of methods, including: interview, focus group, observation and survey research (e.g. we read with them Harding 1987; Hill-Collins, 1991). Urban and suburban students and those of us from the Graduate Center crafted a survey of questions, on the “gap”, incorporating some of Tony Bryk’s items on school climate and trust, some of Constance Flanagan’s items on civic engagement. The survey was intended to be distributed across districts, focusing on youth views of distributive (in)justice in the nation and their schools.
The youth insisted that the survey NOT look like a test, and so creatively subverted the representations of "science" by including photos, cartoons for respondents to interpret, a chart of the achievement gap, open ended questions such as “What is the most powerful thing a teacher has ever said to you?” Available in English, French-Creole, Spanish, Braille and on tape – because the inner ring suburbs are far more diverse than most believe (Orfield, 2002) -- the survey was administered to close to 7,000 9th and 12th graders across districts. Within six weeks, we received over 4,000 surveys - brimming with rich qualitative and quantitative data that could be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender and "track." Beyond the surveys, over the past year we have engaged in participant observations within four suburban and two urban schools, arranged four cross school visitations and conducted over 20 focus group interviews. In addition, five school ‘teams’ pursued their own questions crafted under the larger ‘opportunity gap’ umbrella.

The Children of Brown: Civic Engagement and Equity

Although the history of today’s desegregation is a complex montage of victories and disappointments, we have gathered a glistening layer of evidence about how youth in desegregated settings think about education and racial justice. In these data you can find the proud progeny of Brown, and the white mare of betrayal. Consistently and across racial and ethnic lines, young people who attend desegregated schools hold high aspirations for college, and strong values for multi-racial justice and education. They embody a sense of the power and the unfulfilled promise of a multi-racial/ethnic democracy. They appreciate attending desegregated schools, but worry that the nation has walked from the struggle of racial justice and that their classrooms remain, largely, segregated. These young women and men are, indeed, ambassadors for a campaign for racial justice… but are at a loss for how to make it real. Many feel betrayed by a nation that has abandoned multi-racial democracy and the public sphere. And then, within the broad-based cohort support for desegregation, on every measure, we see a marbled race/ethnicity effect: African American, African-Caribbean and Latino youth are significantly more troubled by the ripples of injustice that flow through their schools than are White-American youth.

On academic aspirations As a group, the young women and men we surveyed are dedicated to attending college, with over 90% of the respondents from each racial/ethnic group indicating that “college” is important to my future. However, African American and Latino students, particularly those who are not in AP or "honors" level courses, worry significantly more that high stakes testing and finances could obstruct their academic pursuits.

On civic engagement We created an Civic Engagement Index– which measures students’ desire to help those less fortunate, work against racial injustice and work for change in community and nation –. The results indicated that students from desegregated high schools, overall, endorse high levels of civic commitments. Across all groups, over 40% of the youth indicated that civic engagement was important to their future. Additionally, significant race/ethnicity and gender, differences emerge. On individual items and the Civic Engagement Index, African American and Latina girls scored significantly higher than all other groups ($\chi^2 = 122.71$, df = 9 , $p< .001$ ). When asked
how important is “ending racism” for future well being, over half of African American, African-Caribbean and Latino students, compared to only a third of White Americans students selected “very important.”

In parallel, over 60% of all students indicated strong agreement with “It is very important to help my country,” with little cross-race variation. Yet, in response to the item, “We need to create change in the nation,” White Americans were significantly less likely to agree (32%) than Asian Americans (43%), Latinos (52%), African Caribbeans (60%) and African Americans (61%). Again we see overall endorsement of strong civic commitments, but also a strong belief among students of color (African American, Asian American, African Caribbean and Latino) that the nation has to change to be true to its democratic principles.

**On racial equity in schools.** Turning to our **Attitudes toward School Desegregation measure**, these students, as a cohort, are strong advocates for desegregation. A full 76% of the entire sample agrees/strongly agrees that “Attending a school that is ‘mixed’ or integrated is very important to me” (this high level of support has been replicated in a sample of youth in Delaware attending desegregated middle and high schools, N = 2075). While they appreciate attending desegregated schools, however, students across the board recognize that access to **rigor and academic success** is unevenly distributed throughout their schools. Many register concern – even those who presumably benefit from the skewed distribution of educational resources (see Table 1).

On every item of **Views of Racial Justice in School**, students expressed substantial concern about academic inequities: almost 60% agree that there is an achievement gap; over 50% agree that “classes are not as mixed as the school,” and over 40% believe that “students do not have an equal chance of getting into the hardest classes.” While equity concerns are cross-sectional, African American, African-Caribbean and Latino students are significantly more likely to critically rate their schools than White- American students.

**Table 1: Views of Racial Justice in Schools (% agree/strongly agree)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African-Am</th>
<th>African-Car</th>
<th>Latino</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classes not as mixed as school</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone in my school has an equal chance of getting</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>58.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>into hardest classes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School not good at equal</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is an achievement gap in my school</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
<td>71.6%</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I mess up, educators in my school give me a second chance</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
<td>50.9%</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Equal Chance of getting in: $X^2 = 74.09$, df = 4, $p < .001$; School not good at providing equal opportunities: $X^2 = 119.02$, df = 4, $p < .001$; Classes not as mixed as they should be: $X^2 = 78.11$, df = 4, $p < .001$; Achievement gap: $X^2 = 15.93$, df = 4, $p < .001$; second chance: $X^2 = 23.459$, df = 4, $p = .000$
Confirming the writings of JoMills Braddock, et. al (1995), Robert Crain and Amy Stuart Wells (1997), Jeanne Oakes et. al. (1997), Roz Mickelson ( ), and others there are significant civic, as well as academic consequences to attending desegregated schools. Yet, the struggle for racial justice and equity within public education remains far from over, and different bodies worry differently about the inequities.

We offer here a few slices of our results on how youth theorize and embody racial/ethnic and class injustices that continue to define public education; how they conceptualize the betrayal by the white mare. In so doing, we document how youth positioned within varied and multiple social categories spin identities as students, researchers and activists when they “discover” how deeply woven historic inequities lie in the fabric of U.S. public education. We search to understand how young people who are engaged, aspiring and committed, experience “separate and unequal” across and within schools, today, even though many youth feel just like , James, (9th grade African American youth researcher from the suburbs) when he stated, “Brown v. Board got my back.”

**Through the Windows of Betrayal: Reading/Riding the White Mare**

The empirical material presented has been carved out of the larger project, at twinned fracture points where youth confront structures, policies, practices and relations that organize, naturalize and assure persistent inequity. We enter through these cracks – the enduring blood of Brown -- because we find them to be compelling windows into how privileged and marginalized youth negotiate political and intellectual identities, dreams and imaginations in an educational system in which privilege translates into merit, and being poor and/or of color translates into worth-less. We watch and monitor as youth in urban and suburban schools develop selves of resistance, capitulation and outrage; as youth of color and poverty act on their academic desires through the gauze of alienation.

**Interrogating Educational Finance Inequities** At the first research camp, ‘differences’ of class, geography, race and ethnicity were displayed boldly, and interrogated subtly. Just after the camp, “shocked to hear what school sounds like when the kids from suburbs talk,” the students from the East Side Community High School decided to document the causes, justifications and consequences of finance inequities in New York State. Working in an intensive high school elective on Youth Research, with Lori Chajet and Janice Bloom, they met weekly to study original documents, and collect original information about the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit in New York City. Knowing much about the Brown decision, they couldn’t quite believe that “separate and unequal” was the standard, accepted financing practice in New York State (so successfully challenged in New Jersey).
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:

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)

And then they learned that just seventeen months later, based on an appeal filed by Governor George Pataki, Justice Lerner of the Appellate Division, overturned the DeGrasse decision:

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)

Dismayed by this reversal, the youth researchers set out to document the consequences of finance inequity on students and graduates of high and low resource schools. They decided to visit each others’ schools – in New York City and wealthy Westchester suburbs – districts that receive approximately $7,000 per child, and districts that receive over $15,000, respectively**.

Well rehearsed in their “researcher identities,” they planned to visit schools just 20 miles North that receive almost double their per capita State revenues. As juniors, they traveled to several wealthy Westchester communities and documented differential access to computers, books, libraries, AP classes, etc. although they were disturbed that “there’s like no minorities in those top classes.” Seeing privilege up close, however, was not merely an academic exercise. All too familiar with racist representations of “them,” on the visits they confronted what they couldn’t know--the striking material and intellectual capital accumulated through privilege.

Sitting on green grass waiting for their train back to the city, students expressed amazement at the differences between their own school and the large suburban complex they had spent the day visiting. “Did you see the auditorium? Okay, our auditorium looks like…[crap] compared to that one”...“Because they have money, they could actually have a darkroom that they can do photography in,” another exclaimed. Others focused on the library, “They have a lot of books!” “It’s like a regular library.” “The computers!” One student highlighted the difference in access to technology within the classroom and its effect on student learning: “I went to [a science class where] a girl gave a presentation about abortion. 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, having also
visited science classes, followed-up with remarks on the “real” science laboratories: the lab equipment, the sinks in the rooms, the materials for experiments.

As seniors, this same group visited another Westchester high school. Now adrenalin-filled with the terror and excitement of their own college application processes, these young people toured the building with a sense of awe, depression and disgust. Nikaury mumbled, “This school is college.” Jose continued the conversation, “They already take psychology and advanced math and English.” Emily, perfectly assessing the gravity and reality of the situation, stated, “We’re going to compete with these students when we get to college?” A confrontation with profoundly unjust social arrangements provoked a psychological glide between outrage to shame; a rainbow of emotions spilled onto the sidewalks, and consumed the air on the train ride back home.

These students know the contours of racism and global capitalism intimately. In the name of neighborhood gentrification of the Lower East Side, the pair corrode and devour the schools, neighborhoods and dreams. They also know well the strength, resilience and endurance of culture, community and family. But with these visits, their fantasy of education as the relatively uncontaminated space for mobility was shattered. They were shocked by what privilege looked like up close. Traveling across county lines, they walked into a mirror that marked them as worth-less. About to confront a series of high stakes exit exams at the outer rim of their senior year, they bumped into the recognition that they were being failed by a state and set up by a school system both of which have slipped surreptitiously off the hook of “accountability.” In their work as critical youth researchers they came to appreciate the courage of Brown, and the CFE lawsuits. At the same time, they came to recognize the depth of our national refusal to grant them deep, full citizenship in the moral community called America.

On the other side of the tracks within desegregated schools

African Americans wanted …their fair share of the resources for education in order to have a curriculum that was legitimate and culturally salient… The evil system of segregation had to be destroyed…. [but] The demands of the American community were hijacked in the court system. (Hilliard, 2002, x)

Beyond the rim of the city we visited and worked with 11 desegregated suburban schools. We couldn’t help but notice that although diverse bodies pass through the integrated school doors, most funnel into classes largely segregated by race, ethnicity and social class. Within these buildings, race, ethnicity and class graft starkly onto academic tracks, over-determining who has access to academic rigor, and who doesn’t.

Drawing from our survey data, we were able to document the sharp edges of stratified life on the other side of the schoolhouse door: the extent to which students from distinct race/ethnic groups participate in AP/Honors courses. As table two reveals, the patterns replicate racial stratification in the nation at large.
### Participation in AP/honors by Race/Ethnicity and Parental Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Asian/PI</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African-American</th>
<th>African-Caribbean</th>
<th>Latino</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Sample:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percent in AP/honors</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students with college educated parents:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percent in AP/Honors</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \chi^2 = 387.43 \ , \ df = 4 \ , \ p < .001 \ \text{for total sample}; \ \chi^2 = 87.85 \ , \ df = 4 \ , \ p < .001 \ \text{for students with college educated parents}. \]

For the full sample of suburban youth, race and ethnicity over-determine who participates in AP/honors courses while in high school.

We pulled out those suburban students with college educated parents, however, the patterns were distressingly parallel. We constructed ‘segregation indices’ for each participating suburban school: on average, that 60% – 70% of Whites and Asians were enrolled in AP and Honors classes, in stark contrast to the 20% - 40% of African American, African Caribbean and Latino students.

This racialized bifurcation of “desegregated” schools was disturbing for the full school sample and ever more so for the middle class subset, particularly because of the significantly more positive academic outcomes accrued by students in AP/honors courses. Students in AP and Honors courses are significantly more likely than their peers to report: feeling challenged academically (\( F = 28.72, \ df=1, \ 2690, \ p < .001 \)); they experience educators as being more responsive (\( F=29.340, \ df=1,12827, \ p < .001 \)); they are more likely to feel that they are known and understood by educators (\( F=81.775, \ df=3,3052, \ p < .001 \), and they are more confident that they are being academically well prepared for college (\( F=35.538, \ df=3,3020, \ p < .001 \)). Based on student’s responses about educators, the **Positive Influence of Educators**, scale was created. This scale assesses how students perceive their teachers in terms of being understanding, caring, believing in the students, and exhibiting fair and impartial treatment, regardless of race/ethnicity or socio-economics. Fifty percent of White and Asian students in AP/honors classes, 47% of White and Asian students in ‘regular’ and ‘remedial’ classes, 37% African American, Afro Caribbean-American and Latino students in ‘regular’ and ‘remedial’ classes and then 31% of AP/honors African American, Afro Caribbean American and Latino students offer strong positive ratings of their educators.

Given the differential access to rigor, it came as no surprise that students of color, and students in lower tracks were extremely worried about high stakes testing. Across schools and communities, African American, African Caribbean and Latino youth – especially those in low tracks -- expressed the most consistent fear that standardized tests could prevent them from graduation – a poll tax of sorts for the 21st century. When asked...
to assess the statement, “Standardized tests can prevent me from graduation” almost half of the African-Caribbean, Latino, and African American students, one third of the Asian Americans and just over a quarter of White Americans indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: \( F=100.677, \text{df}=3,3022, p < .001 \); students in AP/honors are significantly less anxious that standardized tests could prevent their graduation.

When we started this work, we had little idea how profoundly and consistently, across communities, academic ‘tracks’ organize and racialize suburban schooling. And yet in each quantitative analysis, and with every focus group and interview we conducted, we learned of the significant impact of ‘track’ on student engagement, motivation, confidence, identity, peer relations and achievement. Indeed, a CHAID (chi-square automatic interaction detection) analysis of race/ethnicity, gender, parents' education and track as predictors of various items of academic engagement, motivation, confidence and achievement demonstrates that on many outcomes track is a stronger predictor than race/ethnicity, e.g. on Importance of education to me: \( F = 30.09, \text{df} (3,3966), p<.001 \); Importance of civic engagement to me: \( F = 11.73, \text{df} (1,2199), p<.001 \); School has prepared me as well as any other student for college \( F = 38.32, \text{df} (3,3867), p<.001 \), and Cantril’s ladder measure of satisfaction with where you stand, now, compared to other students \( F = 26.21, \text{df} (3,3531), p<.001 \).

Being placed in high track classes bears obvious positive consequence for academic and civic well being. It is thus doubly troubling that most students of color (African American, African-Caribbean and Latino) are placed in regular or remedial classes, and further, that those in the highest tracks who benefit in significant ways also consistently report the highest level of critique of their schooling. High track African American, African-Caribbean and Latino students report intense alienation from and experience of racialized bias in their school experiences compared to White students in top classes.

To understand these dynamics more fully – the alienation of the middle class, top tier student of color -- we turn to a focus group among varied youth who have come together to discuss academic tracking within their schools. These students attend desegregated schools in which almost 70% of Whites and Asians are in AP and/or honors classes, while approximately 35% of African American and Latino students are. We listen now as students, 49 years post-Brown, justify and challenge the bouillon cube of America in which they are being educated; the space of the racial dream of integration, about which they know far too much.

Charles: 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, you know. If it’s more integrated, like, you know, 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 detrack entirely], maybe not in like all classes, but that really like what they, like 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, you know, 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 eighteen 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, you know, the smart kids should be in a class by themselves because it’s more conductive 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.

Charles (African American, high and medium track classes) volunteered to speak in the focus group first, and he chose to open the conversation by revealing his discomfort with racial stratifications in his school. He critically challenged the racial layering of the school (anger and a bit of shame), and he proudly smuggled in the possibility that African American or Latino students may have “one little thing” to contribute. Jack (white, high achieving student) follows, detouring the group’s focus onto the [low track? Black?] students’ (lack of) motivation. Tarik, who sits at the top of an under-resourced school comprised entirely of students of color, lengthens Jack’s line of analysis, foregrounding individual motivation and “choice.” Jane, a White girl in top tracks, returns the conversation to school structure, but now – given that low motivation and bad grades are ‘in the room’ – she justifies tracks as responsive to, or “needed” by students at the top and the bottom.

In under two minutes, race was evacuated from the conversation, replaced by the tropes of “smart” and “special education.” Black and Latino students were demoted from potential contributors to needy. Tracks were resuscitated from racist to responsive. Sounding like contemporary embodiments of what Curtis and Curtis describe as the “unusual Negro” of the early 1900s, Melanie and Emily (both biracial, high achieving students) then entered the conversation, challenging how they have been turned into the “unusual Negroes” in their schools (Curtis and Curtis, 2002; deLeuze, 1990):

**Melanie:** 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 …

Emily: But I want to say like…Melanie 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’s not.. 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 Charles was saying, when you’re the only person in the class, you do get intimidated. And voices aren’t heard any more then because of everyone else overpowering.

Across this focus group, as in their academic lives, youth carve identities individually and privately in relation to state and school practices that stratify “race.” (see Cross, 1997). Today, at the moment of contact – the visits or the perched view from the top track in a desegregated school – African American, African Caribbean and Latino youth voice a bold and cutting critique of a system of racialized segregation. They sculpt themselves in a nation, community and in localized buildings in which racialized signifiers have come to be the organizational mortar with which intellectual hierarchies are built and sustained. A few challenge the seeming meritocracy, even as they trespass with ambivalence across the rungs of a color-coded ladder of opportunity. All witness the unchallenged hierarchy, many through the gauze of alienation. Emily, one of the youth researchers, sketched a portrait of the lone student of color in the AP course, entitled, “Hunting Bison.”
African American, biracial and Latino students -- like Charles, Emily and Melanie -- 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 -- fall. To this task they import DuBois’ ‘double consciousness,’ watching through a veil.

“The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

W.E.B. DuBois, Souls of black folks, 1990, 9

The veil connects and separates. The veil doubles as a shield of protection that “keeps [the self] from being torn asunder,” and as a mote of alienation. Through the veil, youth of color see, hear and witness. As Charles 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.”

While we do not believe that youth fully internalize the blaring messages, neither do we believe that they are fully inoculated by the wisdom of their critical analysis. The living structures, relations and practices of power– inequitable State financing, school organization, school size, classed and racialized access to rigor, as well as deep pocket private supports that privileged students enjoy – undoubtedly penetrate. These structures, relations and practices, enter the "bodies" accumulating consistently differential outcomes within and across schools mistakenly viewed as race-derived rather than institutionally and historically produced. (Gramsci, 1971)

All lives are formed in unequal power arrangements, historic and contemporary, global and local. Our evidence suggests that most youth read this through the vantage of their daily life positionings. Youth of privilege typically represent themselves, discursively, “as if” untouched by and immune from these structural forces. They explain, largely, that they succeed on the basis of merit, hard work, good luck, committed parenting. In contrast, most youth of color and/or poverty more finely season their explanations with critique, outrage and the twinned attributions of structural and personal responsibility. They know that history, politics, the contours of oppression and the power of culture shape their opportunities and their desires. And, they, like you, Zora, dare to narrate it for us all. These youth feel seduced and betrayed, bewildered and a bit silenced, by the white mare
that promised integration and delivered segregation within. They bear witness to the race/ethnicity “gap” that swells through the most penetrating fissures that form America. They recognize that urban/suburban finance inequities live and assure the gap, and, that in suburban schools, academic tracks vivify and produce an embodiment of the ‘gap.’

And yet, just as Brown interrupted a century of fortified racism, we have discovered again, that, the ‘gap’ is neither inevitable nor natural. Schools do not have to reproduce social formations. Many of the small, detracked urban schools in our study, as you will see below, were designed, like the Brown decision, to resist.

**Small, detracked urban schools: a funny thing happened to Brown on the way to the 21st century**

Zora, you must be feeling vindicated at this point. It would be easy to conclude from these data, the surveys, interviews, observations and graduate follow ups, that race and ethnicity differences in achievement are, indeed, embodied in the youth and enduring across contexts. Has Brown failed? We hear often, in whispers, “Is it true that even in suburban schools there’s an achievement gap?”

The story is complex: Brown v. Board of Education sparked a revolution in social consciousness, important shifts in educational legislation, social policy and school-based practice followed (Kluger, 1977). And yet as a nation we forgot, or we refused, to dismantle the structures and guarantees of race and class privilege. Therein lies the dialectical swagger of the white mare – the seduction and the betrayal. The persistence of a gap – which the youth call an Opportunity gap, not an Achievement Gap – is sewn in the seams of our national 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, African American, African Caribbean, Latino, White and Asian American. 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 and nationally flourishes – despite finance inequities, the assault of high stakes standardized testing, a bureaucracy that refuses to grant intellectual and political space to schools organized for “what must be.” Living the visions of Brown***, these small schools 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 must be.

These schools breathe the spirit of Brown; the spirit that demanded a radical possibility for the education of African American and (since then) Latino youth, poor youth, youth not privileged by birth to wealth. Some are desegregated, meaning that White students attend. Most aren’t. These schools receive just over half of what their sister institutions receive in the suburbs, with students whose parents are significantly less well educated. And they deliver. These schools educate each child as if s/he is going to
college; the educators take it as their responsibility to help young people reach heights they never thought they could.

We included four such schools in our survey. It was stunning to notice that on every measure of student engagement, comfort, dropping out, graduation, aspirations for college, sense of being known, engaged by curriculum, connected to educators, students in the small schools surpassed their peers in the suburbs, looking more like the White students in the suburban tracked schools than the African American and Latino students.

**On Civic Engagement.** On every item of civic engagement we find that students in small schools are significantly more likely to “strongly agree” than students in large schools. On the overall Civic Engagement-Social Consciousness Scale, 51% of students in large schools compared to 62% of students in small schools consider acts of civic responsibility to be very important. More specifically, students in small schools are more likely to strongly agree that they should work to end racism (56% small vs. 43% large), protect the environment (30% small vs. 24% large), help those less fortunate (33% small vs. 26% large), change how the country is run (29% small vs. 14% large) and work to improve the local community (38% small vs. 25% large).

As other studies have demonstrated (Wasley, et al 2000), small schools develop in students the social capital by which they come to see themselves as critical and responsible agents in school and in their communities. We can see from these data that the sense of personal agency extends so that students in small schools also take up a responsibility to work for change in the nation.

**On Perceived Responsiveness of Educators.** Students in small schools were significantly more likely to report that teachers are academically responsive ($\chi^2 = 33.46, df=1, p < .001$); the curriculum is challenging ($\chi^2 = 5.58, df = 1, p < .01$) and educators treat students fairly across lines of race and poverty (89% “strongly agree”, compared to 78% in large schools). Students in small schools are significantly more likely to “strongly agree” that “In my school, all students can achieve if they try, (52% of small school students “strongly agree” vs. 35% of large school students) and significantly less likely to indicate, “There is an achievement gap in my school” (17% of large school students “strongly agree" compared to 3% of small school students).

Students in small urban schools rated educators as significantly more responsive than did any of their suburban peers (89% of all small school students “agree or strongly agree”, 72% of high track Whites, 67% of low track Whites, 63% high track African American/African Caribbean/Latino, 59% of low track African American/African Caribbean/Latino, and 55% of students in large urban high school. On the items “Teachers know and understand me” 6.3% of suburban students “strongly agreed”, compared to 30.3% of small school students; on “Teachers care about students like me” 11.5% of suburban students compared to 45.7% of small school urban students “strongly agreed”; and for the item “Teachers give me a Second Chance” (6.2% of suburban students vs. 23.3% of small urban students strongly agreed; for strongly agree/agree these numbers swell to 76% small school, 54% high track White, 40% low track African American/African Caribbean and Latino). To the more critical item, “Teachers treat students differently based on race/ethnicity of students” 81% of suburban students...
agreed compared to 44% of small school urban students; for “Teachers believe all students can achieve at high levels” these percentages flip, with 36% of the suburban students agreeing, compared to 70% of the small school urban students.

Turning from “sense of belonging” to sense of Academic Press (Bryk, 2000; Lee, Smith, Perry and Smylie, 1999) and preparedness for college, we find similar patterns in the data. Students from the small detracked urban schools were significantly more likely to say “I feel challenged” by my coursework, than all students in the suburban sample (76% of small detracked students, 66% of high track Whites, 58% of high track African American/African Caribbean/Latino; 63% of low track Whites, 54% of low track African American/Afro Caribbean/Latino). They reported feeling significantly more “prepared for college” (17% of suburban students strongly agree compared to 25% of small school urban students) than low track African American/African Caribbean and Latinos, as well prepared as low track Whites, and high track African Americans/African Caribbeans/Latinos in the suburbs, and significantly less prepared than high track Whites in the suburbs. Finally, students in the small detracked urban schools hold academic aspirations as ambitious as the aggregated students in the suburbs, but significantly more ambitious than low track African American and Latino students in the suburbs (90% expect to earn a Bachelor’s degree compared to 85% of low track African American/African Caribbean/Latino students in the suburbs).

While these rigorous, detracked 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 cultural capital in the home? To this question we found very intriguing responses. As predicted, when we ran correlations between levels of parental education and youth engagement with educators and curriculum, and aspirations for college, we found maternal education and paternal education to be correlated with student engagement, motivation and aspirations in the large suburban schools (r = .087, p < .001 in suburbs; in urban areas, not significant.) Students whose parents were better educated were more engaged with faculty and curriculum, held higher aspirations for college and felt better prepared for college than youth with relatively under-educated parents. In significant contrast, however, in the small urban schools, parental education was not correlated with student level of engagement or aspirations for college.

These small detracked schools recognize and resist the extent to which parental education over-predicts academic performance in the United States; interrupting the well-established but conceptually (and methodologically) problematic correlation of family educational status and student aspirations, engagement, motivation and achievement. Typically poor children get crappy schools – and, as our data suggest, even in quality schools they do not enjoy the same educational opportunities. Thus the relation of family background is always empirically mediated by quality of education. Educators in these small detracked schools, in contrast and by design, have created contexts in which all students are exposed to academic rigor, and respect. Educators assume it is their responsibility to provide the scaffolding required to master such material. By so doing,
these schools have fundamentally de-coupled the long-standing and stubborn correlation of parental education and students’ achievement.

The challenge posed, then, to the rest of our schools, asks, how do we design the intellectual and emotional souls of our schools, as they touch and are contaminated by the perverse stratifications that constitute America? Should school walls be simply porous to the winds of social inequity that so define our nation? Or should schools be designed to interrogate, challenge and help youth resist what is, imagine and work toward what could be? Is that not the legacy of Brown for the 21st century?

“I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired”
Ella Baker

Across data sets, coasts and zip codes, we witness youth across race/ethnic groups, rich and poor, pleased to be educated in desegregated settings, and yet yearning to be educated with adequate resources, toward rigor, with respect; that is, in schools and societies “not yet” (Greene, 1998). We hear discomfort with the acid rain of finance inequities and tracking from all, including privileged youth who benefit from the stratification (Burns, forthcoming). We hear the dire price, paid most dearly by urban youth of color, but also suburban youths, due to inequitable state policies, tracking systems and racialized (mis)representations. And we see the power of youth standing together – across lines of race, ethnicity, class, geography and ‘academic level’ – to speak back to educators and to America. The struggle for racial justice is far from over; the spirit of Brown lives on in the ‘not yet’ outrage and wisdom of youth, and the everyday erosion of their belief in their America. The white mare now dresses in vouchers, and high stakes testing. The promise of privatization serves as the Trojan horse for continued racialized oppression. Youth are watching for how adults challenge, or collude, with the white mare.

We leave you with a scene from a recent "speak back." Youth researchers in a suburban school were presenting their 'findings' to the faculty. Quite critical of racial and ethnic stratification in his school's academics and disciplinary policies, Nozier 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?" Hesitant nods were rapidly erased by awkward discursive gymnastics, "Well, no, actually in June it gets Whiter when the kids who haven't shown up for detention have to come in," followed by "Sometimes there are white students, maybe when you're not there." But Nozier persists, with the courage of speaking his mind to educators who may or may not listen; standing with peers across racial and ethnic groups and a few adults willing to bear witness as he

Have You Been Suspended?
speaks truth to power.

Nozier is no more optimistic than we that in his school, at this moment, his critique will be heard and will transform local policy. In our research camps, we rehearse the school presentations expecting engagement and resistance. In the folded arms of faculty disbelief, the institution declares, "We are integrated, we are fair, it's not about race". But now, skillfully able to slice the school by analyses of race, ethnicity and track, able to read the tables and the discursive analyses, Nozier knows he stands not alone. He insists, "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." Suddenly his once dismissible, personal 'anecdote' transforms into fact. He stands tall and represents the concerns of hundreds of African American and Latino students in his school, and from over a dozen other schools, who report that suspensions, and access to rigor, are unevenly distributed; opportunities denied or discouraged. Flanked by White, African American and biracial students, allies, together they have a job to do. They are the legacy of Brown. He writes that he will not "walk away, to swagger to the policies of life..." He will, instead, continue to deepen his analysis and outrage, surrounded by allies and representing hundreds, with the critical skills of participatory research toward social justice.

When 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, a youth researcher from the South Bronx assured an audience at Columbia University, "We've long known about racism; that's not news. What I know now, though, is that I can study it, speak about, and we need to do something to change it." Nikaury, a youth researcher from the Lower East Side of Manhattan, stunned an audience 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 can't see flat anymore." These young women and men have, indeed, come to appreciate the complexity of the composition, the shape of the fractures and their own capacity to repaint the canvas of the future. Youth who speak through "Critical analysis of the 'gap," speak back to our nation and ask us to re-view the very fractures of power upon which the country, the economy, our schools and our fragile sense of selves are premised, and to imagine, alternatively, what they could be. They, like their great, great grandparents, who longed for the Brown decision, know that social justice is always just around the corner. And even more then their great grandparents, they can imagine allies of privilege eager to create multi racial schools of and for social justice.

These young women and men are asking for help from adults and from those who look like we have benefited – those of us who own the white mares or have enjoyed their company. The youth plead, in an echo of Fannie Lou Hamer:

"I'd tell the white powers that I ain't trying to take nothing from them. I'm trying to make Mississippi a better place for all of us. And I'd say, "What you don't understand is that as long as you stand with your feet on my neck, you got to stand in a ditch too. But if you move, I'm coming out. I want to get us
both out of the ditch.” Fannie Lou Hamer

Zora, we need now, desperately, a movement of youth, parents, community and educators to make good on the radical vision embodied in Brown. As they flourish in the puddles of educational possibility throughout the nation, they are drowning in severe public sector betrayal. But because of you, they know to beware the white mare.

We’ll write again,

Michelle Fine, Janice Bloom, April Burns, Lori Chajet, Monique Guishard, Tiffany Perkins-Munn and Maria Elena Torre

Footnotes

The authors thank William Cross, Jr. for his enormously helpful feedback.


** The youth researchers attend East Side Community High School, a small, detracked urban school on the Lower East Side of New York City, where most of the students come from poor and working class families, many are recent immigrants from Central and South America; resources are low and academic expectations high. They are, indeed, neighborhood kids who were lucky enough to find an ‘alternative’ school committed to rigorous education for all.

***Deborah Meier ( ), Robert Moses ( ), Luis Garden Acosta and Frances Lucerna ( ), Ann Cook ( ), Olivia Lynch, Eric Nadelstern ( ), Peter Steinberg ( ) and hundreds of other dedicated educators.

references


