

Principals and the Path to Equity in Racially Diverse Schools:  
Sensemaking of Race, Reputation and Policy

Jill Bloomberg

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## **Abstract**

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The federal government has largely abandoned the crucial top-down role it played in mid-20th century K12 school desegregation policies, making racial isolation in many urban and suburban districts a federal policy non-issue and, thus, completely up to the state or local policymakers to address. At the same time, more school districts around the country are both experiencing an increase in racial diversity and creating student assignment policies designed to create more racially diverse schools within those districts. Furthermore, the professional knowledge of teaching, learning, and race has grown out of a critique from many scholars of color in particular about what was *not* addressed during the 20th-century era of school desegregation—namely an effort to diversify the curriculum and pedagogy beyond the experiences and contributions of White Americans and to rethink the role of culture in how children learn as well as the role of schools in preparing students to live in a multiracial democracy. Amid this devolution of desegregation’s hope and possibility and the newly evolving knowledge of teaching and learning stand the school principals—the people most in the position to make school-level integration and equity a reality.

This embedded case study of 16 middle school principals caught between the racialized construction of school quality that still permeates our society and their understanding of what constitutes good education to prepare students for a multiracial democracy fills the gap in our understanding of the interaction between student assignment policies and the practice of school leadership in racially diverse schools and districts.

Specifically, I found that principals share a common professional vision of school quality for all children that is rooted in the vision common among Black principals in segregated Black spaces that focuses on student-centered, culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy in a climate of support and belonging. However, in a context of market competition and racialized reputations, principals adopted practices—like test prep and between-school tracking—that contradicted their own professionally constructed vision of school quality. It was only when student assignment policies changed to distribute more evenly high-status students among all the schools in the district, in addition to providing access to high-status schools to more Black and Latino students, that principals embraced the opportunity to pursue their professional construction of school quality rather than the racialized social construction of the marketplace.

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# **Chapter 1: Principals and the Path to Equity in Racially Diverse Schools: Sensemaking of Race, Reputation, and Policy**

*Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 landmark case that declared state-sanctioned racial segregation in schools unconstitutional, continues to be celebrated as one of the most significant Supreme Court decisions in the history of the United States. But by the late 20th century, the federal government had largely abandoned the crucial top-down role it played in mid-20th century K-12 school desegregation policies, making increasing racial isolation in many urban and suburban districts a federal policy non-issue and, thus, completely up to the state or local policymakers to address (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Yettick, 2014).

At the same time that the federal government abandoned its efforts to desegregate public schools, a new school movement emerged that championed free-market principles in the form of deregulated choice, competition, and punitive, outcome-based accountability systems that relied on standardized tests as the only indicator of school quality. Since the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, which codified these new accountability measures and mandated that schools use them while supporting the proliferation of deregulated school choice policies, we have witnessed an increase in racial and social-class student segregation across schools and districts, an increase in inequalities between schools and districts, and a sharp decline in confidence in public education (García, 2020; Reardon et al., 2019).

We find ourselves in 2023 at the precipice of losing our public education system. Indeed, in states such as North Carolina and Florida, the public schools are barely surviving the political

backlash against educators' effort to create a more inclusive curriculum when it comes to issues of race and gender identity (Mervosh, 2023; Moore, 2023). Perhaps in response to this challenge to a thriving diverse and equitable public educational system, in recent years, we have witnessed two important countertrends emerge: (a) a new wave of more grassroots, bottom-up school desegregation efforts, and (b) a growth in the professional knowledge about teaching and learning and the centrality of race, culture, and community context in engaging students and helping them succeed.

The first of these countertrends—the new, bottom-up desegregation plans—are being initiated by local school districts, often in response to parent and community demand. These plans include a variety of strategies to change how students are assigned to particular schools as a way of addressing racial segregation, including changing district and/or school attendance zones, inter-district magnet schools, student inter-district transfer policies, charter schools with weighted lotteries, and district-wide controlled choice policies (Potter & Burris, 2020). Though many are school choice plans, the degree to which the policy details constrain the choices available to parents varies. The development and implementation of these plans have not yet been well researched, but whether residents of these racially diverse areas believe the public schools can meet their needs is important for the future stability of these urban and suburban communities.

The second trend—the increase in the professional knowledge of teaching, learning, and race—grew out of the powerful critiques from many scholars of color in particular about what was *not* addressed during the 20th century era of school desegregation—namely an effort to diversify the curriculum and pedagogy beyond the experiences and contributions of White Americans and to rethink the role of culture in how children learn as well as the role of schools

in preparing students to live in a multiracial democracy. From that critique grew a body of literature that includes Ladson Billings (1995) on culturally responsive pedagogy, Love (2019) on abolitionist teaching, Douglass (2019) on the possibilities of democratic teaching, Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz (2021) on racial literacies, Emdin (2016) on reality pedagogies, and Muhammad (2018) on identity and criticality in literacy pedagogy. This work has, in recent years, moved into the mainstream of how educators think about teaching and learning and how they can carry forward an antiracist educational agenda to meet the needs of all children.

Amid this devolution of desegregation's hope and possibility and the newly evolving knowledge of teaching and learning stand the school principals, the people most in the position to make school-level integration and equity a reality. School principals, I argue, are the most understudied characters in the national effort to achieve meaningful and sustainable racial integration of our public schools—something that most Americans say they want but struggle to support (Torres & Weissbourd, 2020). Yet, as more districts around the country implement integration plans to create more racially diverse schools (Potter & Burris, 2020) and strive to adapt their curriculum and pedagogy to serve a more diverse student population, principals' roles in pursuing both excellence *and* equity—often in the face of countervailing demands from more politically powerful and affluent White parents—have not been fully explored in the research on school desegregation or school leadership. This gap in the literature is particularly problematic, given the role that principals play in making decisions about the in-school practices that impact students' experiences in school.

This dissertation fills that gap in our knowledge through my embedded case studies of 16 middle school principals caught between the racialized construction of school quality that still permeates our society and their understanding of what constitutes good education to prepare



students for a multiracial democracy. The findings I present in the subsequent chapters help us understand why leaning into the two bottom-up countervailing reform efforts noted above—namely, meaningful grassroots student assignment policies to achieve integration and the pedagogical strategies to support integrated schools—will vastly improve the educational opportunities of all students in the United States and demonstrate the multiple reasons why the dominant policy discourse of the last 30 years pushing for more free-market school choice and testing needs to end. The free market will not lift all boats; it will not improve the quality of the educational system, but it will definitely foster greater inequality and segregation. Just ask the principals.

### **Principals Matter Now More Than Ever**

The reason why I set out to study school principals working in the context of school district integration efforts is because we know from research and history that their role has always been important; today, however, it is even more so. As noted above, absent federal involvement in 21st century school desegregation, some local districts across the country are revising student assignment policies (SAPs) to intentionally create more racially diverse schools. In this context, school principals, more than the federal courts and legislators, have greater agency to make their desegregated schools truly integrated. Unfortunately, the research from the prior, federally mandated, top-down era of school desegregation largely ignored the role that school principals played in desegregation. This inattention leaves a gap in our understanding of the potential role that principals can play now to assure (or not) that the problems of the prior era of school desegregation—especially the issues of re-segregation across classrooms—do not reoccur in the current, more local efforts to integrate schools. In fact, in most districts where

SAPs are changing to create intentionally diverse schools, it is the principal who plays the leading role in decisions about school practices once students enroll.

But those practices that principals have the agency to implement, or not, within their racially diverse schools may also be influenced by the SAP itself. The current SAP reforms are designed to modify, but not eliminate, market-based SAPs that in districts, like New York City, eliminated school attendance zones in favor of school choice plans that grant students/parents the ability to apply to any school within their Community School District. In this school choice context where schools compete to attract families in a market-driven system, a school's—and its principal's—survival often depends heavily on its ranking and reputation.

Research on the sociology of reputation confirms that as the proportion of White students in a school increases, so does its reputation as a good school (Cordova-Cobo, 2022; Wells, 2018). Research also predicts that principals in racially diverse schools will prioritize meeting the demands of White families over the needs and demands of Black or Latino families who have fewer exit options and whose presence confers less status on the school. Indeed, racial diversity in schools has proven to be very unstable and difficult to sustain (Cucchiara, 2008; Oakes et al., 1997; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Stillman, 2012; Wells et al., 2017), but research has not sufficiently explored the role of the school principal in this process. Furthermore, no research has explored how districts' SAPs—those that foster (or not) racial diversity—intersect with the principals' sensemaking of that racial diversity and the decisions about school-level practices it engenders.

Though scholars of education policy implementation and policy effectiveness recognize the essential role that policy implementers, like principals, play in the development and evolution of policy plans and practice (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Lipsky, 1971; Spillane et al., 2006; Stone,

1980), we have not applied this understanding to principals and school desegregation either in the decades following *Brown* or in more recent efforts. Far more attention has been paid to the impact, influence, and agency of parents, particularly White parents, whose acquiescence to mid-20th century desegregation was often secured at the expense of Black students (Mickelson, 2001; Minow, 2012; Woodward, 2011). Current research on market-based SAP reform and the school-level racial diversity caused by metro migrations similarly focuses on parents, particularly White and middle-class parents, but not on principals.

Through my analysis of these principals working within a complex interplay of race, class, and public policy, I learned not only how principals understand the SAP goals, the policy requirements, and the social context within which they are operating, but also how they understand their role, the professional knowledge they draw on in understanding their role, and the limits and latitude of their agency to make decisions about school-level practices that either foster equity or maintain racial privilege and the extent to which the district-level SAPs shape their views. Thus, this dissertation revealed how principals in racially diverse school districts make sense of student assignment policies—those that foster integration and those that maintain segregation—and also how these principals make sense of the relationship between school racial demographics and their schools’ reputations and popularity. Their reflections on these issues show us the power of public policy to buffer professional educators to do what is best for students by minimizing the impact of status and racial hierarchies in defining good schools, thereby allowing principals’ professional knowledge to enhance the educational opportunities for all students.

## **Second-Generation Segregation Amid Racially “Diverse” Schools**

Much of the original research on school desegregation focused narrowly on the short-term, input-output data of student test scores without any examination of the desegregation process (Wells, 1995). Though a second wave of research began to uncover the within-school, second-generation segregation that characterized so many desegregated schools (Mickelson, 2001; Oakes, 2005), the research so far has not clearly examined how key actors, like school principals, were making sense of the political and policy context within which they were functioning. What we do know from the school desegregation research is that too often at the school and classroom level, the goal of integration is subverted, and White privilege is maintained (Oakes, 2005; Welner, 1999). These critical school-level issues that emerge once student assignment plans created more racial and ethnic student diversity within each school were ubiquitous and documented in studies of school desegregation across the country (Cuban, 1975; England & Meier, 1985). These “second-generation segregation” issues resulted in a re-segregation of students between separate and unequal classrooms, with White students generally found in more advanced classes than their Black classmates. Even in the most statistically desegregated schools, students were assigned to classrooms based on spurious judgments of academic ability that tended to correlate with race (Brooks et al., 2013; Cooper, 1996; Mickelson, 2015; Oakes et al., 1997; Wells et al., 2009).

This consistent research finding leads us to wonder what responsibility school principals shouldered in this execution of desegregation. In other words, we know “what” happened but not enough about “how” or “why” or what role the school leadership was playing.

Thus, although there has been relatively little research on school principals in desegregated schools per se, we do know that still today, Black students are regularly assigned to

classrooms with less rigorous curricula, fewer and substandard resources, and newer, less effective teachers (Carter et al., 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Wells et al., 2015); they are subjected to disparate applications of discipline (Anderson & Ritter, 2016; Martin et al., 2016; Rumberger & Losen, 2016), and rarely have Black teachers or principals read Black authors or learned about the contributions of Black people to the development of history, science, and humanity (Carter, 2012; Hammond & Jackson, 2015; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Until this study, our lack of research on how school principals understand their role in shaping students' experiences and in fostering or fighting these second-generation segregation practices in schools has been a handicap in the movement for more school-level integration in cities such as New York. Scholars have described the qualities of antiracist school leadership, primarily in schools serving predominantly Black and Latino students (G. L. Anderson, 2009; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016; Parker & Villalpando, 2007), and have documented the undue influence that White parents can have over school leaders in racially diverse schools (Cucchiara, 2013; Diamond & Lewis, 2015; Kimelberg, 2014; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Roda, 2015), but we have not studied, until now, what role SAPs play in shaping how principals make sense of their agency in leading racially diverse schools that are both excellent and equitable.

### **A Model of Antiracist Leadership by Black Principals in Segregated Black Schools**

As a scholar of school leadership, I definitely stand on the shoulders of (mainly) Black historians who have shared with us the experiences of Black principals in segregated Black schools as they sought to challenge racism and educate their students to their "highest potential" (Walker, 1996) amid Jim Crow segregation (J. D. Anderson, 1988; Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Savage, 2001; Tillman, 2004a; Walker, 1996, 2018) as well as in segregated Black spaces in the

North (Johnson, 2004; Perlstein, 2019). This work establishes the importance of sensemaking and the principals' vision of what it means to create a good school. Indeed, principals of Black versus White schools in the first half of the 20th century were charged with different goals and thus played different roles in supporting their students and communities (J. D. Anderson, 1988; Rousmaniere, 2013; Tyack, 1974). Many Black principals in segregated schools in both the North and South developed strategies and tactics for subverting the demands and expectations of the dominant White society while quietly playing a leading role in community organization and advocacy for Black children (J. D. Anderson, 1988; Johnson, 2004; Perlstein, 2019; Rousmaniere, 2013; Savage, 2001; Tillman, 2004a; Walker, 2018). For instance, in spite of the Progressive Era emphasis on social efficiency and stratification, including second-class citizenship for Black students, as the primary goals of education, many Black principals in segregated Black schools established their own goal of racial uplift that emphasized the whole child and each child's pursuit of their "highest potential" (Walker, 1996).

This antiracist principal agency, forged and nurtured in Black schools, not only provides an alternate narrative to the principal as a bureaucratic manager of efficiency; it has also become part of a legacy carried into the post-*Brown* era that continues to influence the theory and practice of contemporary educational leadership and is strongly informed by the counternarrative of a strong focus on teaching, learning, and leading for a racial justice discussed above (Tillman, 2004a). It is important to understand how the history of Black principals' knowledge and practice is reflected not only in the most current research on teaching and learning in a multiracial society today but also in the knowledge and practice of 21st century school leaders. Thus, it is important to both recognize that the growth in the professional knowledge about teaching and learning traces its roots to the work of Black principals and understand how

difficult it was for Black principals to pursue their vision of a good school within a policy context that opposed it.

### **Mostly White Principals Ill-Equipped for the Demands of Desegregation**

To their own misfortune and to the detriment of the profession and the children it served, a number of Black principals, many of whom had been instrumental for decades in organizing the fight against Jim Crow segregation (Walker, 2018), lost their jobs and their schools as a consequence of desegregation (Karpinski, 2006). As a result, a cadre of mostly White principals were thrust into the leadership of desegregation—a role they were either unwilling or unable to embrace (Turnage, 1971). We know that school desegregation did succeed in breaking down many barriers to education for Black students that resulted in very real gains in educational attainment, test scores, and socioeconomic advancement (Wells et al., 2009). But, in the long process of implementation, the social and political goals of the 20th century movement for desegregation were subsumed and reduced to providing more Black children access to White schools while maintaining White privilege within those schools. The little research that exists on principals charged with mid-20th century desegregation establishes that they often ended up sacrificing the interests of Black students in order to minimize conflict with White students and their families (Egerton, 1977; Forehand & Ragosta, 1976; Metz, 1980; Oakes, 2005; Turnage, 1972; Wey & Corey, 1959).

Once districts were forced by the federal courts effectively to desegregate, principals adopted a narrow and technical approach to desegregation, and the task of desegregating schools became for many an exercise in merely shifting the locus of exclusion from the schoolhouse door to the classroom door rather than in eliminating it (Forehand & Ragosta, 1976; Metz, 1980; Turnage, 1972). The larger political goal of equity, so prominent in the activism leading up to

*Brown*, faded as most of the Black educators were eliminated and their voices silenced in discussions about implementing school desegregation. This shift was also strongly influenced by the political power of affluent White parents and the policymakers and educators who aimed to please them (Cuban, 1975; Mickelson, 2001).

### **Replacing Integration with Colorblind Pursuit of Excellence**

After the White powerbrokers' succeeded in implementing desegregation with minimal input from Black educators and repeatedly acquiesced to the demands of White parents, the courts retreated from involvement in desegregation policy. Accountability superseded equity in the education policy regime (McGuinn, 2006) and seemingly colorblind testing and accountability measures, combined with market-based school choice policies, were presented as the best way to address racial disparities in educational outcomes (Wells, 2014). The goal of these market-based reforms was not to end integration but to increase competition among schools. In theory, only schools that raised test scores or appealed to enough consumers in the marketplace would be able to stay open. However, far from guaranteeing good schools for all children, marketplace reforms fostered more segregation and inequality (Bifulco et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2015; Henig et al., 2003; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007).

This shift from inputs to outcomes as the metrics for school quality and equality further characterized schooling as a primarily technical, colorblind process. But emphasis on external accountability and student test scores as the measure of school quality often exacerbated tensions between administration and students, particularly in schools with large percentages of Black and Latino students and predominately White administrators (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). Rather than turning the spotlight on educational inequality as some civil rights advocates had hoped (W. L. Taylor, 2000), accountability in a choice market instead focused principals' attention on



strategies to circumvent competition (Jabbar, 2016) or to manage student selection (Jennings, 2010), leading neither to increased integration nor to improved learning (McEwan, 2000; Reardon et al., 2019).

## **Principals' Professional Vision of Excellence at the Nexus of School Choice Policy, Practice, and Reputation**

After more than three decades of this neoliberal reform agenda in different districts around the country, including in New York City, the goals of school choice SAPs are changing from an emphasis on competition to facilitate school-level racial diversity more explicitly as an expression of the goals of equity and diversity. In this context, it is crucial that we seize the opportunity to explore the interplay between 21st century school leaders' sensemaking about the goals of education and these new experiments in 21st century desegregation. Today, equity as well as excellence are stated goals of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) policy leaders, as they are in many districts around the country. But implementing general goals like equity and excellence or even specific student assignment policy mandates like controlled choice is never a purely technical process. It is a political process that requires school principals to make meaning of a complex technical, political, and normative context—including racism and antiracism—and to frame the decisions they make about school-level practices in relation to that meaning-making (Oakes et al., 1998).

The professional knowledge of principals about teaching and learning, including how it relates to the newer thinking about culturally responsive education, racial literacy, differentiation in heterogeneous classrooms, and social-emotional learning, will certainly impact the decisions they make. But the policy context matters, too. Some policy mandates facilitate more maneuverability to challenge White privilege and the myth of White supremacy than do others.

Some signal caution and maintenance of the status quo, while others encourage bolder and more radical shifts in practice. But as the history of principals before and after *Brown* suggests, the sensemaking and sensegiving of school principals will impact the extent to which 21st century desegregation mirrors or exceeds the limits of 20th century desegregation and are worthy of exploration.

### **New York City: Leading and Lagging**

Wells (2018) argues that a concurrence of shifting demographics, metro migrations, and changing racial attitudes could potentially propel the United States toward less segregation in housing and in schools. She also cites the research that demonstrates that the stability of racially and ethnically diverse communities and schools within those migrations are rare. In places like New York City where civic groups, politicians, and many White families express increasingly explicit support for combatting racism and segregation (Elsen-Rooney, 2022b; Veiga, 2018; Vender, 2021), we might think we have a shot at making integration work here. But, that support is far from uniform among White families and has failed to garner public support from many Black and Latino parents (Shapiro, 2019a). Furthermore, while both excellence and equity are goals espoused by the NYC schools Chancellor and many of his local community school district superintendents, integration is not (Meckler, 2022). Similarly, the political unity necessary for top-down mandates for school-level equity practices like detracking, culturally relevant pedagogy, and restorative practices that would significantly alter the structural inequality of the school system does not exist, even in NYC where basic desegregation of the most segregated system in the nation is still a contested issue (Disare, 2018; Elsen-Rooney, 2020; Shapiro, 2019b).

Within this contradictory political landscape, even in large and complex school systems like NYC, any path from diversity in enrollment to meaningful integration and equity in education must pass through the school principal. Thus, studies such as this one that help us understand the principals' sensemaking about the policies within which they work can help shed light on how policy and practice interact to resolve (or not) these crosscutting currents.

For instance, in one NYC's Community School District (CSD) where the community has accepted a new Diversity Plan instituted by the previous Mayor and his Chancellor but inspired in part by the activism of a small group of middle-class White parents, the DOE changed the SAPs to facilitate the narrowing of demographic differences among the CSD's middle schools. The DOE, however, failed to allow the district to enact other integration-related proposed changes, including more teachers of color, restorative approaches to conflict, inclusive untracked classrooms, and commitment to monitoring the implementation and impact of the plan (WXY Studio, 2018). Thus, in this district, the DOE instituted a policy that only changed student assignments, leaving all other recommendations to be considered at the school level, thereby placing much of the burden of the success of the initiative on the principals.

So, while this district embraced the first of the two recent developments I discuss above, i.e., the implementation of SAPs designed and structured for integration, it left the implementation of the second development—antiracist teaching and learning strategies—to the principals. This district's experiment with SAP reform, as well as the other districts I studied whose SAP reforms were less focused on integration, were beneficial in this embedded case study in helping me to understand the relationship between the policy, the principals' sensemaking, and their ability to pursue an antiracist education agenda. This process of delegating critical details to the principals once new SAPs are established is not new, but, until

this study, it has not been richly explored. In such a policy context, principals' meaning-making and decisions are critical to the goal of achieving equity through desegregation and the implementation of new SAPs.

Throughout NYC, racially diverse districts are grappling with pressure to address segregation. The new SAP discussed above was met with less open resistance from the community district than integration-oriented SAPs in other districts and goes much further in equalizing the school choice process than do proposed plans in other districts in NYC. The goal of this study was to explore how principals in racially diverse school districts with different SAPs make sense of the relationship between their schools' racial demographics, their schools' reputations and popularity within a school choice marketplace, and the choices they make about school-level practices that either foster equity or maintain racial privilege.

The current efforts at bottom-up strategies to address segregation in NYC and elsewhere will be closely watched by advocates of diversity, equity, antiracism, and integration. Researchers will continue to measure and evaluate student demographics, teacher demographics, student test scores, access to learning, and parent satisfaction. But as this study demonstrated, it would be a mistake to overlook the crucial role that school principals play in these outcomes and to take note of the shifting demands this next attempt at integration and equity will bring.

## **Research Questions and Methodology**

Given the current context and the extant research, I set out to conduct this study to answer the following questions:

1. How do middle school principals working in four racially diverse NYC Community School Districts with different student assignment policies (SAPs) make sense of excellence, equity, and diversity as policy goals?

2. How do these middle school principals make sense of the relationship between the racial demographics of students across different schools in their districts and their school's reputation and popularity within these district contexts?
  - a. How does this sensemaking impact the principal's decision-making around in-school practices, including teaching, learning, and school culture and climate?
  - b. How do the restraints on market demand imposed by changes to SAP impact the principals' sense- and decision-making related to in-school practices and their schools' reputations within the school choice context?

To answer these questions, I conducted embedded case studies of 16 middle school principals in four NYC CSDs to explore the meaning principals make of parents as consumers, what it means to be a “good” or popular school, and what role race plays in each of these constructions. Given the recursive link between social structures and cognitive structures (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), these case studies—consisting of analysis of the district policies impacting each principal and in-depth interviews and observations of each principal—were helpful in exposing assumptions informing policy, explaining how injustices are sustained, and suggesting strategies for social transformation (Ozga & Gewirtz, 1994). To examine these principals embedded in different policy contexts, I selected four racially diverse but distinct districts in New York City with four different SAPs, all of which have come under varying degrees of scrutiny or revision due to the levels of racial segregation that result.

*What I learned over the last two and a half years of conducting this research is that SAPs, designed with the goal of integrating all the schools in a district and structured to meet that goal, can restrain the influence of market forces on principals' decision-making and create the conditions principals need to pursue a professional, antiracist vision of school quality rooted*

*in equity and excellence for all students.* Over the next seven chapters of this dissertation, this story of these principals and what they know and what they need to act on what they know will be told. My hope is that we will continue to listen to professional educators as we design policies to enable and validate their efforts to embrace equity and excellence for all our children.

## **Overview of Chapters**

Before returning in Chapter 4 to the methodology and additional specifics on the four districts, I outline the theoretical framework for my study in Chapter 2. This theoretical framework combines theories of policy implementation, critical race, and the sociology of reputation to explain how principals understand and exercise their agency at the nexus between policy and practice to define abstract policy goals like diversity, equity, and excellence, and how that understanding and agency are shaped by the policy context.

To situate this study of the sensemaking and agency of principals in contemporary desegregation experiences, in Chapter 3, I review the literature on the establishment of the principal's office and the role that principals' understanding of good schooling played in the exercise of their agency as policy shapers and implementors. I also review the literature on principals in past school desegregation implementation and current scholarship on school leadership for equity in a school choice market.

Chapter 4 lays out my study design, methodology, and rationale for exploring the sensemaking of middle school principals in the four most racially diverse districts in New York City as well as their student assignment policies that reflect varying commitments to school-level racial diversity.

In Chapters 5 through 7, I describe the three main findings that emerged from interviews and observations of principals. In Chapter 5, I illustrate that in spite of leading schools that, in

the marketplace of school choice, have widely divergent reputations for quality that hew closely to the percentage of White students in the school, the principals in this study all maintain a professional vision for their schools that is remarkably similar. What is more, in spite of the differences among their incoming middle school students in terms of race, class, and past academic performance, the principals all believe that the schools best suited for their students are staffed by warm and caring teachers who design curriculum with their students in mind and who invite students to take an active role in their learning. The principals I studied oppose tracking and punitive discipline and feel responsible for the students' social-emotional development. Much of what they described relates to and connects with the growing body of research on antiracist teaching, learning, and leading mentioned above. In sum, the schools that principals dream of leading are good because they meet the needs of the whole children they serve and because they prepare those children to make meaning of the world.

In Chapter 6, I describe that in spite of their professional vision of a good school, principals, when functioning in a deregulated, competitive marketplace of school choice, ended up adjusting their goals and vision according to the racialized school reputations that drive the market, fueled by the demands of high-status White parents. Contrary to their professional vision of the schools they should be leading, many of them were forced to operate in line with the demands of the market, including allowing tracking and segregation of students across schools, and allowed curriculum and pedagogy designed to raise test scores. Principals who lacked the support of district SAPs to support them to act differently were conscious of the concessions they were making to their own understanding of good schools, but they did not believe that any individual effort on their part to resist or change the system would have any significant impact.

In Chapter 7, I demonstrate the powerful role that integration-driven SAPs can play in supporting principals by reining in the racialized demands of the market. Indeed, when SAPs went so far as to guarantee at least some racial diversity and distribution of high-status students in *every* school in the district, thereby assuring that no school was seen as “the White, high-status school”; they freed principals to pursue their professional vision of a good school. Thus, in this instance, the bottom-up push for a student assignment policy that would lead to meaningful integration—the countervailing trend against the status quo noted above—supported principals in applying their professional knowledge of teaching, learning, and leading for racial justice—the second countervailing trend noted above. In this way, Chapter 7 demonstrates the power of equity-minded student assignment policies to help foster educational excellence.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I summarize these key findings and provide recommendations for research and policy that will position principals, who occupy a unique position at the nexus between policy and practice, to assert their professional vision for schools that provide an excellent, equitable, and diverse public education for all students.



## Chapter 2

### **A Theoretical Framework for Examining Education Policy**

#### **Implementation Through a Critical Race Theory Lens:**

##### **The Context of Race, Reputation, and Privilege**

Implementation is the low visibility interplay between, on the one hand, goals that cannot be achieved in their original wholeness and, on the other hand, competing interests in a conflict that has become too concrete and immediate to be held in check. . . . Bureaucratic behavior is a reflection of its sociopolitical environment. (Stone, 1980)

Education has come to be defined as an arena that simultaneously promotes equality and adapts to inequality. (Labaree, 1997)

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out the theoretical framework I developed for my research on the role of principals in making meaning of diversity, equity, and excellence and in implementing practices designed to achieve them. To do this, I bring the social theory on policy implementation into conversation with critical race theory (CRT) and a related area of sociological theory known as the Sociology of Reputation. Together, these three theoretical frameworks informed my research by emphasizing the political agency that principals have in defining, in practice, value-laden policy goals; the role that principals' knowledge about teaching, learning, and race play in shaping those definitions; and how that agency and racialized sensemaking respond to racialized constructions of school quality.

As I collected and analyzed the data on 16 school principals embedded in four Community School Districts (CSDs) in New York City, I kept this theoretical framework in mind to help me navigate difficult decisions related to sampling, interview questions, emerging themes in the data, and, ultimately, how I wrote up my findings. This framework was extremely helpful to me in navigating the principals' sensemaking as I examined the distance between the

stated policy goals and practice and the incoherence between the two. In New York City, the vision, mission, and policies of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) promise “diversity, equity and excellence” for all students. As districts throughout the city begin to adopt new student assignment policies (SAPs) designed to increase the racial diversity within the city’s middle schools, school principals will navigate and negotiate their own decisions around many school-level practices that reflect their definitions of “equity and excellence” like tracking, discipline, and curricula that further define in practice abstract policies of equity and excellence.

In the following sections, I review the literature on policy implementation as a political process and the role of implementers’ cognition in making sense of specific policy mandates, like new SAPs, in the context of abstract policy goals like “equity,” “excellence,” and “integration” and in negotiating the competing interests that arise in the conversion of those abstract goals into concrete practices. While these theories of policy implementation are helpful and important, they tend to underemphasize the role of race and racism in the formation of these concepts. Employing CRT to the sensemaking of implementing agents like principals makes it possible to more profoundly “make connections between the global and local, between ideology and social practice, and between institutional structures and individual human agency that drive policy implementation” (Dumas & Anyon, 2006, p. 152). The reason why CRT must be brought into conversation with the policy implementation theory is to make visible and recognizable the ways that race and assumptions of White superiority define not only educational structures and school-level practices as well as the ways in which they shape principals’ understandings of those structures, but also the ways that ideas about antiracist education shape current knowledge about teaching and learning in schools.

Integrating CRT into theories of policy implementation situates principals and their sensemaking into an institutional context and helps elucidate how the history of racial segregation and oppression has shaped the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) and defined not only the goals of education and the role that principals play but also distinctions between “good” schools and “bad” schools. To connect theories of policy implementation and CRT to the contemporary pressures of the educational market choice system, I reference a theoretical framework known as the Sociology of Reputation. This framework predicts that the evaluation of an organization is based more on the status of its members than on any evaluation of tangible factors of success (Wells, 2015). It helps elucidate how definitions of excellence in schools simultaneously enforce false notions of White superiority and act as a fetter on the implementation of equity practices.

The intersection of these three theoretical areas—the politics of policy implementation, CRT, and the Sociology of Reputation—created an integrated framework for my study of the role that school principals play in defining district goals of “equity and excellence” and in facilitating or subverting the transition from desegregated schools to integrated, equitable schools. In Chapter 3, I explore the prior research on school desegregation and demonstrate the major gap in this body of literature on the role of the principal. I also review the literature on the history of the establishment of the principal position during the segregated Progressive Era and current scholarship on school leadership in a choice market. Together, these two chapters underscore the significance of my research on the sensemaking of middle school principals about the policies they are directed to implement and the agency they exhibited, when they could, to foster meaningful integration in K-12 public education.

## **Theories of Policy Implementation**

Early theories of policy implementation focused primarily on the impact that policy effectiveness, or the extent to which a policy when implemented accomplishes what it was designed to accomplish, brought to the policy process and sought to discover its origins either at the beginning or the end of the policymaking process. Central to the ideas of both top-down and bottom-up theories of policy effectiveness was a negative and static view of the abilities and intentions of local-level implementers. Top-down theorists of policy effectiveness largely ignored policy implementers as insignificant and argued that the agency and actions of central, top-level officials were most responsible for a policy's successful implementation. Thus, in response to policy ineffectiveness, they advocated interventions designed to guarantee clear and consistent policy goals, minimal actors, and assignment of implementation responsibility only to agencies already in agreement with the policy goals (J. E. Anderson, 2011; Matland, 1995). Bottom-up theorists of policy effectiveness, on the other hand, argued that no matter how clearly and carefully articulated the policy goals and implementation plans, the complexities and variations at the local level guaranteed that "street-level" implementers would adapt them to local conditions. In anticipation of this intervention at the local level, central agencies were encouraged to build flexibility into the policy design that could withstand implementer interference and lack of sophistication (J. E. Anderson, 2011; Lipsky, 1971; Matland, 1995).

These early analyses of policy effectiveness often failed to consider that the social and political complexity of policy contexts frequently required or at least allowed that policy implementers not only managed policy in practice; they often reframed it, reshaped it, and revised it in conscious and unconscious ways. In other words, policy implementers were not passive bureaucrats but active participants in the policymaking process whose sensemaking of

the political and social context influenced the formation of policy goals in practice. Without any acknowledgment of the agency of policy implementers, it was impossible to explore the relationship between, and limits on, that agency and the policy itself. In other words, policy effectiveness did not depend simply on better policy or better implementers, but on the dynamic and complex relationship between the policy, the local-level implementers' sensemaking, and the context in which they interact (Honig & Hatch, 2004). As federal programs expanded in the 1970s, attention to the cognition of local implementers increased as did the understanding among policymakers "that variations among policy, people and places mattered to implementation . . . but [studies] seldom elaborated how they mattered" (Honig, 2006a, p. 7). Though more recent attention to both the particular context of policy implementation and implementers' cognition has enriched the scholarship on policy implementation, it has not been sufficiently applied to student assignment policy, nor has it explored the ways that perceptions of race and racism have shaped that context and cognition. I argue that this inattention to the relationship between policy, practice, racism, and how they shape principals' sensemaking has limited our understanding of the relationship between SAPs and the decisions principals make about teaching and learning.

### ***Policy Implementation as Politics***

Although principals, as school-building leaders, make hundreds of consequential decisions every day, they rarely figure in discussions of education policy at the state or district level. Attention instead is focused on the decisions of policymakers like governors, mayors, school boards, or superintendents and the consequences for schools and students. Principals are viewed primarily as technicians who translate policy into practice with varying degrees of competence and fidelity. But implementation is far from a technical process of aligning actions to goals. Implementation is a political process in which stated goals are often not fully specified

or permanently agreed to (Stone, 1980). As the consequences and impact of policy decisions become more apparent in practice, principals often find themselves having to manage and negotiate competing interests among stakeholders. Such circumstances require that they not only make meaning of policy goals within a macropolitical context that reflects broad power dynamics of resource allocation, but they must also manage the micropolitical context of their individual school communities (Malen, 2006). That policy goals shift and change through the implementation process is widely acknowledged in the literature on policy implementation. However, the agency of principals, conscious or not, in deciding to accept or suppress the conflict that many policy demands create is largely overlooked in the research on school desegregation.

**Goal Setting as Conflict Avoidance.** Stone's (1980) conceptualization of implementation as political is an important contrast to traditional researchers' understanding of policy effectiveness that maintains that implementation failure is either the result of unclear or ambiguous policy messages or "the mismatch between policy and the agendas and interests of local implementers" (Spillane et al., 2006, p. 47). Consistent with the mistaken assumption that principals are primarily technicians, these more traditional explanations often overlook the *intentionality* of policymakers, whose noble-sounding but ambiguous policy messages obscure social conflicts that only become visible when abstract goals are translated into concrete actions. For example, the NYCDOE includes "Algebra For All" as part of its "Equity and Excellence For All" plan in recognition of the disparities that result when some students (overwhelmingly White and Asian) begin the traditional mathematics sequence with Algebra in the eighth grade, while others (overwhelmingly Black and Latino) do not receive Algebra instruction until ninth or tenth grade (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2018). However, "Algebra for All," despite its

seemingly clear and unambiguous title, does not really mean that all eighth grade students study Algebra. It requires only that every school provide every student with “access to Algebra in eighth grade” (NYCDOE, 2020), leaving the decision of which eighth grade students actually take Algebra up to the individual schools. While this policy may increase the number of middle schools offering Algebra and, therefore, the number of eighth graders enrolled, it does not address the disparities, particularly in racially diverse schools, in access to Algebra and is a far cry from Algebra for all.

Stone (1980) argues that highly visible public policymaking figures seek to avoid conflict, particularly around issues for which public opinion is divided or ambiguous, while simultaneously projecting the appearance of significant reform. Instead of articulating substantive and specific plans for social reform like, for example, the detracking and integration of mathematics instruction, public officials commit to broad values like diversity and equity with little guidance on how those goals are to be realized. While the prior NYC Chancellor Carranza went much further than his predecessors in adding to the rhetoric of equity, diversity, and excellence by expressing support for school integration and more equitable SAPs, even under his tenure, actual policy changes were still left to individual CSDs or individual schools. When policymakers shift responsibility to policy implementers, such as middle school principals, who then must resolve the contradictions elided by the high-visibility policymakers, the policymakers succeed in decreasing the scope and visibility of potential conflict, but simultaneously increase the influence and agency of the principals.

**Street-level Policymakers: Implementer Agency.** As Stone (1980) points out, local-level policy implementers must resolve in practice the contradictions and conflict that policymakers in the goal-setting stage can skim over. In moving from the abstract to the concrete

and from the general to the specific, policy implementers often avoid intense public scrutiny, but have no less political a task in managing competing values and interests. Stone's recognition of implementers' agency in the policymaking process guided my interest in studying principals' own values, interests, and political skill as gentrification creates more *de facto* diversity in NYC's public school population and local CSDs begin to address the SAPs that foster between-school segregation.

This shifting of responsibility and conflict from policymakers to policy implementers characterized even the very public and visible struggles over 20th century desegregation and provides some lessons for understanding the more local and less scrutinized efforts at 21st century desegregation. The highly visible role of the Supreme Court in delivering its decision against *de jure* segregation in *Brown*, as well as its reluctance to define implementation, have been richly critiqued (Bell, 2004; Daugherty & Bolton, 2008; Guinier, 2004; Patterson, 2002; Ryan, 2010) and is further addressed below. Notwithstanding the legitimate criticism of the goals of the Court, the role played by local school-level implementers in applying the Court's decision to school-level practices that then fostered second-generation segregation in desegregated schools has not received the same scholarly attention.

Still in NYC, the Mayor, his Chancellor, and central administration have been conspicuously silent on the school-level practices that lead to within-school, second-generation segregation. This silence leaves to school principals the task of negotiating the practice of equity and excellence within the micropolitics of school communities with increasing racial diversity, and within the macropolitics of education policy in a racially diverse city with significant social and economic inequality. In this context where high-status White parents play an outsized role in



defining schools' reputations within a racialized hierarchy of school quality, the role of school principals as policy implementers is intensely political and fraught with both conflict and import.

**Bounded Agency.** Politics is power and reflects the “relative capacity of actors to exert influence on policy developments” (Malen, 2006, p. 87). Stone (1980) argues that, in general, policy implementers are as averse to social conflict as are their more visible goal-setting superiors and posits that they will quickly, under the cover of low-visibility, modify goals, like equity, to conform to the established order. Scholars of educational leadership and social justice hold similarly uninspiring views of the majority of school principals (Capper, 2015; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013; Riehl, 2000; Ryan, 2006). But the politics of implementation that often relegates value-laden social reforms to service sites out of the public view, where they typically reinforce the status quo, also afford an occasional implementer the freedom to exert influence in ways that push reform beyond superficial appearances to substantial implementation. Where theories of policy implementation-as-politics predict that most principals are unlikely to define equity or excellence in ways that disrupt the educational advantages enjoyed by White and middle-class children, it also allows that some principals may possess both the skill and the will to turn abstract support for equity into concrete school-level practices that disrupt second-generation segregation (Malen, 2006; Stone, 1980). Assessing the power or agency of principals to exert influence on policy developments requires examining the assets and liabilities that the principals bring to the process. But, as Malen (2006) points out:

Policies may augment or undermine the power of the actors because they come with certain resources that actors can rely on for support or legitimacy. The material and symbolic currencies accompanying policies (or missing from them) serve as an additional indicator of the actors' relative capacity to influence policy developments.... Thus, the actors' ability and desire to capitalize on policy currencies as well as other power bases may be critical ingredients of policy influence. (p. 88)

In other words, while policymakers often devolve the definition of the policy details to policy implementers, particularly when the policies are fraught with social conflict, that devolution is not absolute. It is bounded by the allocation of currencies both material and symbolic. As I explain below in my discussion of the Sociology of Reputation, White students become a type of currency that different student assignment policies make available to principals, particularly in a school choice marketplace. At the same time, general support offered by broad, political calls for combatting segregation and district statements in favor of diversity and equity provide important symbolic currency. Principals have little control over the value of these currencies, but they do have some agency, dependent on their own skill and will, to capitalize on them, or not.

When I set out to do this study 3 years ago, I knew that some NYC CSDs offered more support than others for racial diversity in the form of more equitable SAPs, but I also knew that it was important to explore how those differences in both material and symbolic currency interact with principals' individual sensemaking to influence their adoption of school-level practices that either enhance equity or sustain inequity. In the political arena of policy implementation, it is the interplay between the demands of policy goals and the individual principal's cognition, sensemaking and sensegiving that will translate into the skill and the will to turn equity policy into equity practice. But the more clearly that SAPs communicate equity as a goal, the more likely principals are to embrace it as the goal in school-level decisions.

### ***Policy Implementation as Cognition***

The discussion above highlights the agency that local-level implementing agents retain in negotiating the expression of value-laden goals in practice. It acknowledges that in deciding whether to enact equity practices in their schools, most principals will prioritize avoiding conflict

over disrupting entrenched practices that impede equity. However deliberate or incidental the passing on of social conflict from policymaker to policy implementer, and no matter the intensity or mildness of the conflict, implementers' understanding and sensemaking of policy demands and the impact those demands have on their organization influence their decisions.

In this section, I examine the literature on the role of individual cognition of policy goals and demands in policy implementation and how it intersects with calls in the field of educational leadership for increased racial literacy or the “ability to understand what race is, why it is, and how it is used to reproduce inequality and oppression” (Horsford, 2011, p. 96) and advocacy among school leaders. The goal is to expand the important conceptualization of individual implementers' sensemaking to include their understanding of race and the role that false notions of White superiority have played and continue to play in education at the same time that I situate individual consciousness in the larger context of student assignment policies and their location at the crossroads of school choice, the racial demographics of a school, and perceptions of school quality.

Implementation-as-cognition theory helps explain the relationship between an individual's prior experiences, education, and sensemaking of policy demands, while CRT reveals how entrenched in systemic racial inequity those individual experiences are. Ultimately, I demonstrate that the interplay among the micro-context of individual implementer consciousness, the macro-context of institutional racism, and the influence of district policies establishes the limits and latitude within which school principals make sense of policy and make decisions about practice.

**Cognition and Mental Models.** Whereas policy implementation-as-politics, as described in the section above, emphasizes the intentional devolution of meaning-making to the level of the

policy implementer as a way to avoid conflict and to dodge turning abstract goals into practice, policy implementation-as-cognition views implementers' sensemaking and modification of policy goals as an inevitable part of the policymaking process that reform-minded policymakers need to take into consideration when predicting, as well as when evaluating, the success or failure of implementation (Honig, 2006a; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Spillane et al., 2006). As districts in NYC and elsewhere consider and implement new SAPs with the explicit intention of increasing diversity and the implicit goal of increasing equity, theories of implementation-as-cognition surface some of the limitations on achieving explicit policy goals when those goals require changes in fundamental school practices.

As noted above, early scholars of policy effectiveness (J. E. Anderson, 2011; Lipsky, 1971; Matland, 1995) have observed that the interactions among policy, people, and places impact policy implementation. But they view these interactions primarily as fetters on the policy process imposed by implementing agents more interested in the preservation of their own local organizations and positions than in delivering necessary social services. More recent scholars take for granted that these interactions among policy, people, and places are a natural part of the policy process and concentrate on examining how and why they impact policy implementation (Honig, 2006a). Spillane et al. (2006) argue that when a policy message requires that educators change long-established practices in classroom instruction, fundamentals of human cognition cause implementers to interpret new ideas as mere variations on old ideas that supplement already established understandings and practices rather than supplanting them. He further contends that the cognition that gets in the way of altering practices in schools is distributive, not simply individual. In other words, the schema or mental models that individual principals have developed around how schools should function result not only from their own individual

experiences but from their experiences in relationship to and interaction with organizational and institutional contexts. Principals develop a professional understanding of excellence and equity based on their own experiences and the collective experiences of the profession. But that professional understanding and principals' ability to be guided by it are also shaped by the broader institutional context.

**Policy Implementation, Sensemaking, and Race.** This acknowledgment in policy implementation research of the role of politics and cognition is helpful in expanding the view of policy implementers beyond that of mere technicians and in amplifying implementers' agency and thus their importance as research subjects. But this emphasis on politics and cognition has been, for the most part, largely colorblind. In recognizing the complex interplay among the policies, people, and places of particular implementation cases, scholars of this new direction in education policy implementation (Honig, 2006b) have often placed more emphasis on the micropolitics and individual cognition of situations and actors with far less attention to the broader macropolitics of racism.

This development in colorblind education policy implementation scholarship is consistent with the development of colorblind education policy. Implementation scholarship emerged in the decade after the *Brown* decision during the Great Society period of the 1960s and 1970s as the federal government first inserted itself in a significant way in education policy with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Though this period has often been referred to as an education equity policy regime in a nod to the significance of the *Brown* decision and the end of formal, state-sponsored segregation (McGuinn, 2006), it more accurately can be described as a compensatory policy regime aimed more at supplementing resources for children disadvantaged by poverty, disability, or minimal English language proficiency than

pursuing integration and antiracism. Thus, in effect, the scholarship on policy implementation focused not on desegregation but on the delivery of social services to poor people who were disproportionately Black.

Lipsky (1971) explored the impact of the delivery of social services to Black people by overwhelmingly White social service agencies and concluded that White racism contributed to policy ineffectiveness when “street-level bureaucrats” employed racist simplification strategies and used perceived racial categories to assign characteristics such as “good” student or “bad” student, according to their decision-making to cope with stressful conditions and lack of resources. To determine who among their overloaded client base was worthy or most deserving of their limited resources, “teachers reduce their own sense of stress by defining some students as uneducable or marginally educable” (Lipsky, 1971, p. 397). Lipsky recognized the racism in the individual implementers and argued that this street-level sensemaking worked its way from the bottom up into institutional practices. “The development of tracking systems in public schools illustrates the development of institutional mechanisms for segmenting the population to be served so as to better ensure teacher success through population reduction” (p. 397).

But, as I establish in Chapter 3, tracking resulted more from conscious top-down decisions by policymakers to subvert desegregation and efforts by principals to appease the interests of White families when policymakers passed down to the schools the social conflicts caused by desegregation. Moreover, in Chapter 6, I describe how the principals in my study faced similar issues as they grappled with demands for advanced courses from high-status parents who saw them as a signal of status in the racialized hierarchy of school choice. Lipsky’s presumption that the policymakers and the policy goals of the period favor equity and address racism, but are hamstrung by the poor education and residual racism of policy implementers, is

consistent with the feature of colorblindness, discussed in more detail below, that sees racism as a remnant of past policies that will dissipate as thinking changes.

In my research on school desegregation and the role of principals in implementing practices that lead either to equity and integration or to within-school segregation and inequity, I need to infuse CRT into implementation theory to uncover and examine the historical and institutional influence of racism in education policy and in education practitioners' cognition. CRT has been instrumental in revealing the broad interest convergences and racial sacrifices that undergirded the Court's decisions and the federal government's policies leading up to and in the decades following *Brown*. It has been similarly clarifying in its critique of seemingly colorblind concepts in education that reinforce racism (Capper, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Leonardo, 2013; E. Taylor, 2009). Employing it here in my exploration of principals' sensemaking of district policies for diversity, equity, and excellence will situate and connect the individual experiences of principals and the micropolitics of particular school communities implementing racial diversity with the broader context of institutional racism.

### **Critical Race Theory**

In my exploration of the role that school principals play in making meaning of policy proclamations in favor of diversity and equity, CRT provided a much-needed framework for the context of this meaning-making by providing a critical lens through which we examine the status quo in education policy. Once we examine this policy context through the lens of CRT, we can more clearly evaluate the extent to which a principal's cognition and mental models will serve to reinforce the status quo in schools, or instead will prepare them "to unmask and expose racism in its various permutations" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 17). In this way, CRT is extremely helpful in challenging the so-called "colorblind" nature of education policies and their implementation

that obscure racism under the guise of fairness and merit. CRT exposes how “the rule of colorblindness disguises (sometimes deliberately) or normalizes (sometimes unwittingly) relationships of privilege and subordination” (Guinier et al., 2009, p. 42). The role of principals in either seeing through this disguise, or not, will influence the extent to which school practices reinforce or challenge these relationships.

CRT grew out of legal studies as a way to reveal the racialized ways in which our ostensibly “colorblind” laws and policies are structured. In other words, policies that formally apply equally to people, regardless of racial classification, are considered fair and nondiscriminatory, despite the very unfair and unequal consequences they create in reality. This argument of formal colorblind equality was used for decades before *Brown* to defend segregation as “separate but equal.” But it is also used to uphold current testing and accountability measures that claim to reward students, teachers, and schools on the basis of “achievement” and “merit,” even though these measures correlate closely to race and class (Leonardo & Grubb, 2018). While many proponents of colorblindness recognize the unfairness of formal, state-sanctioned barriers to education that explain past inequities in educational opportunities, absent those legal obstacles they argue that any inequality today is a function of individual or cultural attitudes and effort.

This feature of “colorblindness” that explains racial inequality as a psychological remnant of past legal inequalities rather than as the perpetuation of seemingly colorblind policies and practices leads to what Guinier and Torres (2003) call “changing people’s thinking approach to racism.” This approach acknowledges that laws and policies in the past discriminated against people based on the color of their skin but maintains that a continual focus on race is what sustains racism, not policy and practice. This approach condemns overtly racist speech and also insists that calling attention to race creates stigma and prohibits equal treatment. This approach is



particularly salient in education where material resources still matter but where psychological resources, like self-esteem, self-efficacy, and teachers' expectations and belief in students, are often cited as mattering more or just as much.

Many scholars have accurately criticized schools for racist views of Black children's capacity to learn (Blanton, 2000; Edmonds, 1979; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Walker, 1996). But CRT pushes us beyond the critique of individual educators' or schools' or even districts' low expectations of Black, Latino, or poor children to critique the privileged position and the assumption of high expectations of White children. There exists in education an expectation—in fact, a requirement—that some students achieve more than others, and, in that hierarchy, White students are expected to outperform Black students. CRT argues that “the assumptions of White superiority are so ingrained in political, legal and educational structures that they are almost unrecognizable” (E. Taylor, 2009, p. 3).

In essence, these assumptions are normal and so embedded in the individual and distributed cognition of educators and education policymakers that simply naming them is an act of criticality and a necessary prerequisite to change (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2019; Horsford, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Leonardo, 2013). Challenging colorblindness in schools requires recognizing that “the school is not a neutral ground for proving talent, as some would have us believe. As the educational system is currently organized, it functions to maintain the advantage of the socially powerful” (Villegas, 1988, p. 260). CRT is crucial in making visible what colorblindness obscures.

### ***Racial Literacy***

From a CRT perspective, the first step to equity in education is racial literacy or the “ability to understand what race is, why it is, and how it is used to reproduce inequality and

oppression” (Horsford, 2011, p. 96). Without a degree of racial literacy, principals lack the necessary skills to understand or define policy goals in the interest of equity.

That race is a social construction without any basis in biology or genetics is a fact long agreed upon by natural and social scientists, but still not widely understood even as it is oft-repeated in popular texts and mass media. While it would probably be very difficult in New York City to find a school principal who would argue in favor of unfashionable racial theories of intelligence, it would probably be just as difficult to find one who could comfortably and confidently discuss how those very theories undergird many educational practices from testing to differentiation to standards and tracking. This statement is not an indictment of school leadership but rather a comment on the durability of racism (Bell, 2004; Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Leonardo, 2013; E. Taylor, 2009) and the deep chasm between theory, research, and practice that reflects the view of principals as mere technicians or bureaucrats in the implementation of education policy (Stone, 1980).

Before turning to the role of SAPs and definitions of educational excellence that obstruct leadership for equity and impede principals’ agency in galvanizing community support for equity, it is important, first, to explore further the importance of racially literate principals in the implementation of equity as well as the limits of relying on changing cognition as the impetus for equity reforms. For instance, we know that racially literate principals must be prepared to stress the enormity and pervasiveness of racism, particularly in the face of attitudes of post-racialism that see racism as a problem from the past with less relevance today. Principals able to acknowledge their own racism, as well as the racism of their schools and districts, will be better prepared to emphasize that no individual or institution is immune from a disease so engrained in all of society that combatting it is a never-ending battle (Capper, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009;

López, 2003; E. Taylor, 2009). Racially literate principals must be willing to develop an individual and school-wide antiracist identity developed through an openness to addressing issues of race and racism with students, staff, and parents and by working to develop that identity in practice (Evans, 2007; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2019; Gooden, 2012; Horsford, 2011; Theoharis, 2007). Finally, racially literate principals who can project hope in spite of the enormity of the challenge will have better success convincing others that “small and simple decisions to resist domination, added and multiplied, can create significant momentum” (E. Taylor, 2009, p. 9). In other words, it is important that principals develop the racial literacy to lead for excellence and equity; however, it is also important to recognize that racial literacy alone is not sufficient to overcome the influence of policies, like many choice SAPs, that reinforce a racial hierarchy.

### ***CRT and Educational Leadership***

As scholars have only recently begun to apply CRT to the study of educational leadership, their attention has focused primarily on the challenge of negotiating between the structure of the school as an oppressive institution and a vision of schools as a humanizing space (Stovall, 2004). Given that the majority of Black and Latino students attend schools that are also majority Black and Latino (Frankenberg et al., 2019), most of this work on CRT and school leadership has focused on principals in segregated Black and Latino schools (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2019; Gooden, 2012; Green & Dantley, 2013; Ishimaru, 2013; Theoharis, 2007). Some exceptions (Diamond & Lewis, 2015; Evans, 2007; Galloway et al., 2015; Zirkel & Pollack, 2016) address the barriers to equity created by limited racial literacy on the part of school leaders and staff. However, there is very little attention to the task of leadership in racially diverse schools of managing the political influence of White parents while creating a school that can be a

humanizing place for Black and Latino students as well as a politically progressive force for change. The outsized influence, pressure, and privilege that White parents exert in racially diverse schools, in spite of or with the support of school leaders, has also been well-documented (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Diamond & Lewis, 2015; Oakes et al., 1997; Posey-Maddox et al., 2014; Roda & Wells, 2012; Stillman, 2012; Wells & Serna, 1996). Similarly, scholars of education leadership have acknowledged that in the interests of equity in diverse schools, principals must manage White parents (Capper, 2015; Riehl, 2000, 2005); nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the agency of principals—and how that agency is enhanced or inhibited by their policy context—to resist acquiescing to not only those demands or engaging White parents in antiracist support for integrated, equitable schooling, but also the role of the SAP context in principals’ willingness to confront White parents.

Far from being mere technicians or street-level bureaucrats whose sensemaking serves only to interfere with policy implementation, principals in racially diverse schools are in a position to define for themselves and others what desegregation and equity will mean within both the micropolitics of the school community and within the macropolitical context of education policymaking. CRT elucidates the macropolitics of White supremacy; implementation as cognition illustrates how individual principals’ sensemaking responds to the macropolitical conditions; and implementation as politics establishes the responsibility and agency of principals in the reckoning stage between policy and practice. Specifically, because some districts are adopting student assignment policies designed to increase racial diversity but are leaving to the school principals the task of defining in practice goals like equity and excellence, it is important to explore how principals make sense of their agency and the districts’ goals as well as how the policy is structured to foster or stifle that agency. To understand fully how principals’

sensemaking and racial literacy intersect with a policy context that promotes equity as a value, I turn our attention specifically to student assignment policies and how they intersect with the sociology of reputation to influence the limits of principal agency.

### **Sociology of Reputation, Choice, and Policy**

The research on school reputations and race helps unravel the role that racial hierarchies play in establishing the value of a school and how dubious measures of educational achievement are used to mask socially constructed notions of status and quality. This theoretical framework, generally known as the Sociology of Reputation, argues that the evaluation of an organization is based more on the status of its members than on any evaluation of tangible factors of success (Wells, 2015). In exploring the role of school principals tasked with implementing a variety of equity practices in a policy context in which their cognition can be shaped by the racial politics within which they operate, the Sociology of Reputation also helps explain how diversity, equity, and excellence come to be defined as contradictory goals in a zero-sum game that forces principals to choose one at the expense of the other. While equity and excellence are not inherently contradictory, equity and privilege are. As the CRT tenet, Whiteness as property, together with the Sociology of Reputation explain, the exclusivity and advantage that White elite parents seek in their children's education has real consequences. But, the real stakes "are generally not academics at all, but, rather, status and power" (Wells & Serna, 1996, p. 96).

Thus, when a school's reputation is tied to the social status of the families it serves and high-status families equate exclusivity with excellence, equity loses out. Managing this conflict in a competitive school choice context compounds the complexity that principals confront and heightens the importance of their political skills. "The privilege, status, and advantage that elite

students bring to school with them must be carefully deconstructed by educators, parents, and students alike before meaningful [equity] reforms can take place” (Wells & Serna, 1996, p. 117).

In their study of patterns of resegregation in urban and suburban communities, Wells et al. (2018) found that as the skin color of the student population changes the intangible reputation of the district often declines or increases even absent tangible changes in the schools’ practices, resources or achievement. In other words, as the population of White students at a school increases, the reputation of the school as “good” improves almost immediately, even though nothing else about the school has changed.

This relationship between demographics and reputation creates an incentive for school principals to market their schools to attract White families and to prioritize them in admissions decisions. Additionally, because White middle-class families wield disproportionate political capital and exit options, principals are more likely to cater to their demands and preferences once they enroll, rather than to pursue equity practices designed to mitigate White privilege. As principals navigate decisions about equity practices, the impact they believe these decisions and their explanations of these decisions will have on their schools’ reputation and popularity among White middle-class families is an important part of the sensemaking context in racially diverse schools. It also highlights the agency of principals and their central role not only in making decisions about equity practices but also in framing those decisions in ways that either garner support or opposition. In other words, as principals consider how to assign students to classrooms, they are likely to consider both their own views about tracking or racial diversity within the classroom and how those decisions are perceived and received by White middle-class parents. In responding to classroom behavior or conflicts between students or decisions around PTA fundraising, principals may be influenced as much by how these decisions sit with White

parents as well as the ease with which White parents can choose another school as they are by their own sense of racial equity.

In racially diverse districts with SAPs that cater to the demands of high-status White parents, it is *possible* that a principal could prioritize equity practices like detracking, antiracist curricula, and restorative justice practices and still attract White middle-class families. But doing so would require a high degree of racial literacy on the part of the principal. It would also require the principal to function not only as an instructional leader and building manager but also as an organizer. Where these equity practices represent the decision-making of individual principals and not the policy of the district, they are most likely to appeal to a self-selecting minority of the White families in the district and may put the school and the principal at odds with the district leadership. But absent a principal with the skill and the will to influence parents' definitions of school quality, under these kinds of unrestrained SAPs, most White parents, and many parents of color, will continue to define school quality by the Whiteness of the student body.

Still, when I set out to conduct this study, I did wonder whether, if SAPs suddenly changed to distribute White families more evenly among the district's schools, such a distribution might alter the impact of White enrollment on the school's reputation. Free from the need to attract White families, and with the explicit, policy-endorsed embrace of desegregation, racially literate principals might be more willing to advocate for and begin to implement equity practices within their schools. On the other hand, reputational attention may shift to factors within the school beyond percentages of White students to the presence of exclusive programs such as dual language and accelerated tracks within schools. The presence of White families with disproportionate social capital in schools previously serving Black and Latino students will likely present new challenges and conflicts to principals unaccustomed to managing challenges to their

authority from influential parents. Similarly, principals at schools experiencing an increase in Black and Latino students may struggle to maintain their reputational identity relative to other schools with increasing percentages of White students. While the impact of the sociology of reputation may decrease for principals, it may increase for superintendents who, fearing the exit of families from the district's schools and anticipating a simultaneous decline in reputation, may message to principals the need to create enclaves of privilege within schools instead of between schools. When I began this project, I thought that I would learn how principals make meaning of shifting messages communicated by policy parameters and goals, and how that meaning-making intersects with their individual cognition and identity will have a significant impact on how these street-level policymakers define equity in practice. What I did not anticipate was what a powerful critique of privilege these principals would offer or how they would draw on their professional knowledge to envision what good schools look like and to try to utilize the student assignment policies they are given to make that vision a reality.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Frustration with and attention to the stubborn segregation and inequity in the nation's schools, particularly as the population and many urban centers are becoming increasingly racially diverse, is leading to small experiments in local 21st century desegregation. But the success or failure of these experiments in repeating or in overcoming the mistakes and limits of 20th century desegregation depends, in large part, on the role of school principals charged with converting abstract goals like equity and integration into practice. This implementation challenge can only be examined and understood through a theoretical lens that recognizes that racially diverse schools are an intensely political arena, where institutional structures and practices continue to reflect and perpetuate racial oppression and discrimination and where responsibility



falls on the shoulders of the school principal to not only confront that reality but to manage the conflict inherent in sustaining it or changing it.

Principals' professional knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy, and social-emotional learning that challenge assumptions of White superiority will have a profound impact on their skill and will to embrace the agency that abstract policy goals like diversity, equity, and excellence pass on to them. But the legitimacy, and therefore the impact, of the principals' agency is a function not only of their own individual sensemaking but also of the policy contexts within which they function. The extent to which these policy contexts reinforce or mitigate the relationship between schools' reputations, perceived quality, and racial hierarchies are likely to shape not only the principals' sensemaking and sensegiving, but also their decision-making about equity practices. By weaving together social theory on policy implementation theories, CRT, and the Sociology of Reputation, I established a framework through which to examine the sensemaking of principals in the middle of crucial experiments in 21st century desegregation.

Now is not the first time that school principals have been charged with desegregation implementation, nor is this a new era in grand social expectations of public education (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). A review of the literature that explores the policymaking agency of principals at the nexus of policy and practice—how that agency and a principal's willingness and ability to exercise it is shaped by racialized conceptions of quality and equality—is useful in understanding the challenges that principals in racially diverse schools face in their roles today. This literature situates schools and education policy not only within the context and history of the nation's origins in racism and slavery but also in the simultaneous resistance and antiracism that has occasionally found expression there as well.

## Chapter 3

### Review of the Research on Principals' Sensemaking of Agency, Equity, and Race

School principals are central to implementing the school district desegregation efforts necessitated by metro migration patterns that have fostered racial diversity in urban and suburban spaces and the bottom-up demands for racial diversity. Unfortunately, the research from the prior top-down era of school desegregation largely ignores the central role that school principals played in past efforts to integrate schools, leaving a gap in our understanding of the relationship between changes in student assignment policy created to address racial inequality and the realities of school practices. This is a particularly problematic gap in the research, considering that the new school integration efforts are more grassroots and reliant on local leaders, especially principals. Through the lens of the theoretical framework described in Chapter 2, which examined principal agency through the lens of policy implementation theory, critical race theory (CRT), and racialized conceptions of school quality, I highlighted how throughout history, the interplay between principals' sensemaking of race and reputation within both the micropolitics of the school community and the macropolitical context of student assignment policies in which they function defines the limits and latitude of that agency and its impact on educational equity.

This chapter reviews the literature on the agency of principals at the nexus of policy and practice and the exercise of that agency by principals in segregated Black and White schools in the first half of the 20th century, then in desegregating schools following *Brown*, and finally under more recent market-based accountability and school choice policies. Understanding how principals' own professional knowledge about teaching, learning, and race intersects with the

demands of different policy contexts helps clarify why it is so important today to understand how principals in racially diverse schools make sense of policy goals like equity and excellence and how they view their role in facilitating the realization of these goals in practice.

To situate my current study of the sensemaking and agency of principals in contemporary desegregation experiences, I review the history of the establishment of the principal position during the segregated Progressive Era, with particular emphasis on the development of antiracist school leadership among Black principals. I then contrast that model of antiracist leadership with an examination of the literature on predominately White principals in past school desegregation implementation who, without the racial literacy of their displaced Black colleagues, limited their agency to pragmatic management of desegregation that subjugated the pursuit of equity to the suppression of conflict. Finally, I review the current scholarship on school leadership in an unregulated choice market to highlight how racialized conceptions of school quality encourage principals in racially diverse districts to cater to the demands of White middle-class parents, whose presence confers important reputational status on principals and schools.

### **Black and White Principals at the Nexus Between Policy and Practice**

A historical review of the establishment of the principal's position in relationship to education policy and segregation in the first half of the 20th century and the influence of that education policy context on defining the roles of Black and White principals helps to illustrate that (a) principals have agency, though limited, to shape policy; (b) Black principals' racial literacy shaped their agency to challenge racist policy, while White principals exercised their agency within the socially acceptable limits of policy debates; and (c) the loss of Black principals post-*Brown* largely eliminated experienced, race-conscious exercise of principal

agency, leaving desegregation in the hands of White principals unprepared or unwilling to challenge White supremacy.

Understanding this history of the principalship and its relationship to the maintenance of a racial hierarchy and models of advocacy by racially literate Black principals in pursuit of equity and excellence helps clarify why it is so important today to understand how principals in racially diverse schools, operating within different student assignment policies, make sense of policy goals like equity and excellence and how they view their role in facilitating the realization of these goals in practice.

### ***Creating Principals at the Nexus Between Policy and Practice***

The development of industrialization, population growth, and urbanization in the early 20th century transformed public education in both the North and the South. As student enrollment increased by 700% nationwide between 1880 and 1918 (Tyack, 1974), the form, content, and purposes of education changed as well. The administration, governance, and politics of public schools created a new kind of professionalism and a new education policy elite committed to supporting the productive efficiency of the education system in the age of industrial capitalism. Though the changes in public education would impact the entire country, North and South, the new national policy elite focused first on the exploding public school population among the nation's growing urban and immigrant populace in the North.

The new professionalism in education shifted importance away from school leaders' personal relationships and community rapport and emphasized technical expertise instead. In an era when local machine politics dominated most urban centers, and seats on school boards and positions in schools were subject to local political patronage and base-building, Progressive Era reformers advocated taking the schools out of local politics and centralizing decision-making in

the hands of non-elected, professional educators. With the professionalization of education as an institution came the creation of “a whole galaxy of principals . . . who do no teaching but are concerned in one way or another with keeping the system going” (Tyack, 1974, p. 185).

Though principal teachers had existed prior to the Progressive Era, the principal as a single person charged with connecting the new policy elite to the masses of children and adults in the schools was a new breed. Professionalization of the role limited access primarily to White men and moved the principal, particularly in northern cities, from the middle of the school house to the middle of the educational bureaucracy (Rousmaniere, 2013).

**Professionalization and Identity.** The process of creating the principal’s office and position as separate and distinct from that of principal teacher required changing the duties of the principal from direct instruction of students to the supervision of teachers and shifted the identification of the principal away from students and teachers and closer to the education bureaucracy. Professionalization streamlined the position and “emphasized administrative loyalty over educational innovation” (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 56). School system reform, and the centralization that the Administrative Progressives sought, required that authority and leadership be based on technical expertise rather than on personal relationships and defined expertise in terms of organizational management rather than curricula and pedagogy. Whereas prior to the Progressive Era, teachers were selected more for their affinity to the community and its beliefs, principals in the era of efficiency were selected based on their credentials and technical expertise (Rousmaniere, 2013). This began to limit access to the position primarily to university-educated White men, who often had little familiarity with the community. This belief in the value of scientific management established and defined the position of the school principal as a technocrat and rooted it firmly in the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). But this

image of the principal as a loyal technocrat in an efficient, mechanized education bureaucracy did not readily translate to Black principals in segregated schools in both the South and the North, where the goals of education for Black children were more about control than professionalization.

**Black Education in the South.** Against Southern opposition to universal public education for Black children, a coalition of northern philanthropists and southern education reformers advocated for universal industrial education for southern Black children not only as a means of making the Southern political economy more efficient by training Black children to labor in the fields, mines, and simple trades, but also “to substitute education for older and cruder methods of socialization and control” (J. D. Anderson, 1988, p. 80). Clearly, schools were hardly necessary to prepare for the menial, physical labor reserved for Black workers. However, new industrial schools with an emphasis on manual skill development and labor, staffed by Black teachers and principals trained in similarly industrial normal schools, were seen as useful in challenging the association between education and political power that was forged in antebellum clandestine Black schools (J. D. Anderson, 1988). The reality of Black schools was much more complicated.

Many Black educators, including principals who graduated from these Black normal schools, rejected the role for which the schools prepared them and took advantage of the agency they found at the nexus between policy and practice to challenge both their roles and the goals of Black schools. A review of this agency and how Black principals wielded it is important to understanding how profoundly Black principals challenged the Progressive Era conception of the principal’s position and, therefore, the potential agency that Black and White 21st century principals in racially diverse schools have in continuing to shape equity and excellence in

education. Black principals, unlike their White counterparts, were not only more aware of the need to resist racism, but they also functioned on a day-to-day basis beyond the attention of the White policy elite and within the context of an internal policy debate that encouraged and supported them in questioning the official goals of education for Black children.

Disagreement over the kind of education best suited to serving the needs of the Black community is most often encapsulated in the debate between Booker T. Washington, the leading proponent of manual training, and W.E.B. Du Bois, the leading advocate for a classical education for Black children. Du Bois (1903) recognized access to the classical curriculum and higher education as a means to political, social, and economic equality in much the same way that many later advocates for school integration recognized that school segregation and Jim Crow laws needed to be dismantled in the battle for Black civil rights and against White supremacy (Guinier, 2004; Hamilton, 1986; Patterson, 2002). This understanding of education reform as an arena in the larger struggle against racism is important in understanding the agency that Black principals found and exercised at the nexus between policy and practice under segregation.

***Black Principals and Political Agency.*** Black principals' embrace of schools and education as an arena in the struggle for Black civil rights helped imbue them with an awareness of their own agency both within their schools and within the larger arena of education policy. Many Black principals in segregated schools developed strategies and tactics for subverting the demands and expectations of the national educational efficiency movement while quietly playing a leading role in community organization and advocacy for Black children (Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Rousmaniere, 2013; Savage, 2001; Tillman, 2004a; Walker, 2009, 2018). Black principals in Black schools were largely ignored by the ruling elite and, consequently, enjoyed significant

autonomy and authority within their schools and communities that they used to set their own goals and to navigate the system to get more of what they needed for their schools (J. D. Anderson, 1988; Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Tillman, 2004a; Walker, 1996). Black principals in Black schools not only exercised authority within the school, but were also important leaders outside the school, in the immediate community, within the larger Black community, and in interaction with White society. In a review of the literature on Black principals within the essentially closed system of Black schools, Tillman (2004a) found four themes consistent with the practices of Black principals:

(a) resistance to ideologies and individuals opposed to the education of Black students, (b) the academic and social development of Black students as a priority, (c) the importance of the cultural perspectives of the Black principal, and (d) leadership based on interpersonal caring. (p. 104)

In struggling to maintain Black schools in the face of neglect and indifference from the White power structure that at best supported a policy of manual training for Black children and often opposed any schooling at all, Black principals were instrumental agents in support of Black education. In exploring how Black principals consistently did “more with less,” Savage (2001) enumerates the key ideas that characterized how Black principals made sense of their agency:

1. Education was purposeful, not aesthetic. It was the chief means to individual freedom, political rights, and economic stability.
2. African American education was a collective process. Individual achievement came on the backs of the struggles of others. Moreover, the fruits of that academic achievement had less value within an individualistic community. Consequently, all African Americans had to prosper for individual Blacks to fully enjoy their prosperity.
3. Self-reliance was at the center of African American education. With exceptions, African Americans, especially in the South, were told their education was at best not a priority. Thus, if education for all African Americans was to exist, African Americans would have to take ownership of the process in their community. (p. 173)

This ownership on the part of Black principals for the education of Black children and the collective needs of the community, in the face of policies hostile to their success, required a level



of political consciousness far greater than the technocratic demands on White principals. Black principals organized schooling in opposition to racist theories of Black inferiority and in resistance to the education of Black children within an alternate Black counterculture.

Within the Black community and subversively in interaction and opposition to the White power structure, Black principals also struggled to negotiate the debate between Washington and Du Bois. As Northern philanthropists with the support and encouragement of Washington began to invest in common schools for Black children in the South based on the Hampton-Tuskegee model of manual training, many Black educators and communities not only embraced the development but contributed significant financial and physical investment of their own in the construction of the schools (J. D. Anderson, 1988). Then, many took advantage of the subsequent inattention and neglect to develop curricula and pedagogy quietly in line with the classical curricula espoused by Du Bois and for which some of their colleagues in Black schools in the North more openly advocated (Alston, 2005; J. D. Anderson, 1988; Danna, 2009; Tillman, 2004a; Walker, 2009, 2018).

The professionalization of the position and expectations of the principal that developed with the growth of cities and urban school systems during the Progressive Era did not completely replace the persona of the principal teacher rooted and beholden to the local community. While the creation of the office of principal was designed by the administrative progressives to shift the attention and loyalty of the principal away from the classroom and community and closer to the administrative authority of the educational bureaucracy, Black principals in segregated schools in the North managed their position and the latitude or leeway at the nexus between policy and practice to continue to advocate for their communities and in pursuit of the more political goals of public education. Principals like Gertrude Ayers and Mildred Johnson embraced the same

student-centered curricula and pedagogy advocated by their colleagues in the South as well as by followers of John Dewey in the North. But, unlike their White colleagues whose challenges to the Progressive Era's emphasis on efficiency was supported in private or university-affiliated public schools, these Black principals in school for Black children "faced the contradictory task of escaping their brutalizing experience and environment as well as constructing meaning out of them" (Perlstein, 2019, n.p.).

The political awareness and courage that Black principals exhibited in the struggle for desegregation that began long before *Brown* stands in stark contrast to their White colleagues who faced resistance to desegregation after *Brown*. In the South, there were also many Black principals and teachers whose public persona never called into question the education of Black students for manual labor and the service industry, but who nonetheless quietly instituted radical reforms within their schools for a classical liberal education, college preparation, and an NAACP chapter. While the NAACP and non-educators less vulnerable to retaliation became the face of the struggle against Jim Crow education in the decades before the *Brown* decision, much of the actual organizing was conducted by Black principals and teachers (Karpinski, 2006; Walker, 2018). Every Black principal counted on the Black community for much needed encouragement and financial support; all functioned as middle-managers between the community and the White power structure.

Those who clandestinely organized among themselves, in collaboration with the NAACP and with parents in their communities, to both demand that separate be more equal and, ultimately, to dismantle Jim Crow segregation assumed a risk and an agency in the fight for equity that stands out even among the highly respected leadership of Black principals (Walker, 2018). Overall, though, their vision of the education that Black children deserved along with the

support they found within the Black community and its leadership defined their understanding and exercise of their agency at the nexus of policy and practice in ways that not only distinguished them from their White colleagues but also foreshadowed the limitations and latitude of principals after *Brown* and today. The lessons that the research on Black principals teach us is that, when supported—albeit by an alternative policy context within a larger, hostile context—the agency “to unmask and expose racism in its various permutations” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 17) and to challenge relationships of privilege and subordination allows principals to not simply implement education policy, but to shape it and change it.

**Differences in Practice Reflect Different Goals.** In spite of official policy, Black principals clandestinely developed a professional knowledge of teaching and learning that recognized the centrality of race and the importance of the cultural and community context in engaging students to not just succeed in an unequal society but also to challenge that inequality. Meanwhile, it appears as though most White principals, in accordance with official policy, accepted a professional knowledge of teaching and learning that prepared students for unequal stations in life.

Anderson (1988) reminds us that “both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education [that] occupied the same time and space [and] were fostered by the same governments” (p. 1). In the mechanized and industrializing society of the Progressive Era, the combination of science and efficiency in schooling reflected efforts to bring order to the rapid expansion of burgeoning U.S. capitalism. Moreover, as Horace Mann had advocated half a century earlier, public schools were seen as the institution best suited to manage the contradictions between the *economic inequality*, embraced as natural and necessary to the effective functioning of a capitalist economy, and the

*political equality* promised in a democratic republic (Mann, 1848). As Anderson (1988) emphasizes, White supremacy and social inequality were not inconsistent with capitalist democracy. The common school movement that extended access to schooling to children throughout the North and South in the first half of the 20th century reflected this same simultaneous ideological embrace of both equity and racism. Without acknowledging how education policy pursued equity at the same time that it was rooted in and sustained racism, it is difficult to recognize what CRT scholars (Ladson-Billings, 2009; E. Taylor, 2009) refer to as the permanence of racism in contemporary policies and the need for current movements for new SAPs and race-conscious knowledge of teaching and learning to support each other.

White and Black principals in the first half of the 20th century functioned in segregated school systems in a symbiotic relationship designed for maximum social, political, and economic efficiency. As CRT maintains, racism and its deep roots in history defined and engrained the inequality between these two systems. At the same time, the awareness of Black principals and the Black community of this racism and how it was used to sustain and reproduce inequality and oppression allowed many Black principals to subvert the goals of education policy:

Racial pride, self-esteem, and self-respect were instilled as a form of passive resistance to theories of inferiority, while the introduction of academic and classical curricula and the recruitment of qualified teachers represented more overt forms of resistance to ideologies and individuals who would keep Blacks in subservient positions. (Tillman, 2004a, p. 113)

Unfortunately, implementation of the *Brown* decision led to the closing of many Black schools, particularly high schools, and massive job loss for Black principals and teachers (Karpinski, 2006; Tillman, 2004b). This loss of Black leadership handed the leadership of racially diverse schools to White principals, whose more technocratic identity and training as well as lack of racial literacy left them woefully unprepared to mediate integration and equity in the era of desegregation.

## **Principals in the Wake of Brown: Choosing the Letter Over the Spirit of the Law**

Most of the history of school desegregation focuses on the actions of lawyers, politicians, community activists, parents, and students. Names like Thurgood Marshall, Bull Connor, James Meredith, Louise Day Hicks, or Elizabeth Eckford elicit recognition by most students of desegregation. But who can recall the name of a single school principal in the history of *Brown v. Board of Education*? In numerous volumes that recount the histories of school desegregation in various parts of the United States (Crain, 1969; Daugherty & Bolton, 2008; Delmont, 2016; Egerton, 1977; Erickson, 2016; Gadsden, 2013; Garland, 2013; K'Meyer, 2013; Metz, 1980; Patterson, 2002; Wells et al., 2009), specific attention to school principals occurs in a single chapter of two (Egerton, 1977; Metz, 1980) but minimal to none in the others. Despite their relative invisibility in the recounting of 20th century desegregation, principals after *Brown* played a crucial role in implementing radically altered student assignment policies and in defining in practice the extent to which those new policies led to more equitable education.

Black principals are not simply missing from the *recounting* of desegregation after *Brown*; they are largely missing from the history of desegregation, and their absence had profound consequences for teachers, students, and school leadership (Daugherty & Bolton, 2008; Karpinski, 2006; Patterson, 2002; Tillman, 2004b; Walker, 2018). As Karpinski (2006) summarizes, the sacrifice of Black principals and teachers in exchange for integration deprived the profession of some of the most competent educators in the country; the displacement of Black principals to positions outside of schools eliminated the policymaking agency Black principals had established within school buildings; the voices of African Americans in “decisions on student placement, staffing, curriculum, textbooks and other educational policies” (p. 255)

were lost; and the experience that Black principals gained in navigating racially diverse and often racially charged atmospheres and conflicts was eliminated from school leadership.

As I noted in Chapter 1, today the federal government has largely withdrawn from involvement in school desegregation; states and local districts assume responsibility for their own equity policies. But even when school principals' actions are unlikely to be eclipsed by actors on a national stage, they continue to negotiate the politics of desegregation and equity in relative invisibility. Exploring the sensemaking and actions of school principals as they were thrust into the position of street-level policymakers in the wake of *Brown*, particularly as they did so without the more dynamic and antiracist agency of their Black colleagues, can provide insight into the sensemaking and decisions of their 21st century colleagues still grappling to define equity in practice.

### ***Essentially Ill-equipped and Unprepared***

Unfortunately, the vast majority of principals charged with leading 20th century desegregated schools to equity and integration adjusted to the new demands of their jobs not by embracing the role of change agent that was thrust upon them by the Court's decision, but instead simply "by developing an ability to handle ambiguity and frustration" (Turnage, 1972, p. 5). As implementers of desegregation, principals were surely aware of the social and political conflict that was swept into their hallways and classrooms by policymakers; however, there is little evidence that they welcomed it and significant evidence that they overwhelmingly responded by minimizing it and suppressing it in ways that maintained White supremacy. Turnage (1972) argues, "Equality is a sociological concept, not an instructional or educational one. As public education has been drawn more intimately into the economic, political and social

affairs of this era, schools have become the arena of the contest of ideas over the nature of society” (p. 8).

But principals were not viewed, by themselves, by school communities, or by policymakers, as the leading players in this contest. Though schools have long played a role in the economic, political, and social affairs of the nation, the policy elite has maintained control over the goals and roles of education and counted on principals to be the loyal technicians. As Stone (1980) has argued, policymakers only shift the arena in the contest of ideas to the street-level team to avoid conflict and to minimize change. As Turnage (1972) argues and a review of the role of principals in 20th century desegregation (Egerton, 1977; Forehand & Ragosta, 1976; Metz, 1980; Turnage, 1972; Wey & Corey, 1959) bears out, for desegregation to have resulted in integration, principals would have had to accept a new role in the policymaking process—one that few, after the sidelining of most racially literate Black principals, were willing or able to embrace.

**Redefining the Role of Principal.** “The elimination of a dual segregated school structure within a school district adds to the principal’s job of instructional leader that of change agent” (Turnage, 1972, p. 3). In a paper presented at the Southern Sociological Society meeting in Miami in 1971 entitled “The Public School Principal as the Change Agent in the Desegregation/Integration Process,” Turnage (1971) argued that it was a principal’s performance that determined whether desegregation led to integration or back to resegregation. Describing the principal as “the forgotten man [sic]” in desegregation, she cautioned against overlooking the principals’ agency as well as the meaning they made of that agency and the goals of desegregation.

Like later scholars of policy implementation, Turnage (1972) maintained that the implementation of desegregation was far more than a technical process of adjusting enrollment and transportation. But unfortunately, the political demands that were ultimately shifted onto principals after the Court declared that education was the “very foundation of good citizenship . . . that must be made available to all on equal terms” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954) required not only skills beyond the command of many of the nation’s school leaders but also support from local policymakers that was largely absent in southern school districts (Daugherty & Bolton, 2008).

Given the dearth of research exploring the sensemaking of (predominately White) principals during desegregation, we must rely on studies documenting the practices that characterized racially diverse schools after *Brown* and the second-generation segregation that developed as a result of those practices. These allow us to glimpse into the sensemaking that principals made of the goals of desegregation and their roles in achieving those goals.

**Confronting Controversy, Contradiction, and Conflict.** What emerges from the literature that recounts or describes the specific experiences of principals still in their positions after *Brown* (Egerton, 1977; Metz, 1980; Oakes, 2005; Turnage, 1972), and from handbooks designed to advise principals in desegregated schools (Forehand & Ragosta, 1976; Wey & Corey, 1959), is a picture of previously secure, almost exclusively White, educational administrators in a relatively bounded and closed system involuntarily thrust into the driver’s seat of significant social change with no preparation, limited support, and competing pressures from within and without. The scholars mentioned above all maintain the centrality of the school principal in determining the success or failure of school desegregation. However, while highlighting the agency of school principals, they portray contrasting definitions of successful



desegregation and, therefore, different sensemaking, skill, and will required to embrace that agency and to employ it successfully.

These accounts universally acknowledge that new demands on principals required them to respond beyond the traditional demands of instructional and organizational leadership to understand and make meaning of their roles as social and political leaders, to reexamine their philosophies of education, and to manage conflict in their communities. But, absent any tradition within the communities they commonly served or within the professional relationships they maintained, they failed to regard their roles as different from the Progressive Era view of the middle-manager whose job was “to implement state educational policy to the school and to maneuver, buffer, and maintain the stability of the school culture at the local level” (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 3). But while principals in the wake of *Brown* may have personally struggled to understand or embrace the antiracist goals of the school desegregation movement—and some were openly hostile to them—they were also encouraged by education leaders to pursue stability and avoid conflict rather than embrace equity and antiracism.

**Compliance with the Letter of the Law.** In 1959, Phi Delta Kappa, a self-described “international professional fraternity for men in education,” published *Action Patterns in School Desegregation: A Guidebook* (Wey & Corey, 1959). The purpose of the book was to gather the experiences from 70 different districts that had completed or were in the process of completing a desegregation plan and to share the lessons learned with “beleaguered colleagues” throughout the nation committed to upholding “free public education as basic to American democracy” (p. iv.).

The advice and language of the text are clear and firm, much as it advises its readers to be in their leadership. Principals (and superintendents) were encouraged to comply affirmatively with the law of the land and to prepare others in their communities to do the same, regardless of

their own personal thoughts or feelings about the Court's decision. Colleagues were cautioned that failure to step up to their role as leaders would create a vacuum that could soon be filled by either the NAACP or segregationist parents.

The *Guidebook* (1959) reminded principals that their main objectives were discipline and order. Conflicts could be avoided by minimizing, even prohibiting, social interaction among Black and White students and by using the intercom for schoolwide communication rather than assembling students together. Though principals were wise to avoid putting Black students in classrooms with staunchly segregationist teachers, they were also advised to shut down vocally segregationist students quickly and firmly and to rely on a strict adherence to laws and rules to discourage any actions that would keep students out of school. In particularly difficult situations, it was advisable to “sacrifice smaller goals for larger” which, in the instance, described as a model for other principals, meant “convincing” Black students not to ride a school bus to a football game to avoid upsetting the White students who would be uncomfortable with the integrated transportation (Wey & Corey, 1959, p. 165). The message was clear: Equity and antiracism are the smaller goals that principals should sacrifice for the larger goal of peaceful desegregation. Principals who sacrificed Black students' rights in order to avoid or avert conflict with White students were seen as managing desegregation successfully.

The *Guidebook* counseled principals that

to reach base safely—and honorably—most officials find their best strategy lies in going beyond their normal function as educators of children to assume a responsibility in educating their entire community, or at least important segments of it, toward attitudes of peaceful acceptance of desegregation. (Wey & Corey, 1959, p. 47)

It is significant that the *Guidebook* encouraged principals to expand their view of their agency and to reach out to the “important segments,” i.e., White parents, in their community to convince them to accept desegregation, given the traditional Progressive Era view that principals maintain

a professional distance from students and families. Nonetheless, it is also clear that principals were supported in their acquiescence to the demands of White parents over the rights and needs of Black children. As indicated above, the path to successful, peaceful implementation of desegregation turned away from equity, and established that it was possible to pave the way to compliance with *Brown* with new forms of exclusion and White supremacy that could maintain the social order successfully.

The best way, according to the *Guidebook*, to meet the instructional needs of Black students without jeopardizing the needs of the White students and their parents was through increased tracking, the practice of assigning students to courses or classrooms based on perceptions of their academic readiness or ability. That tracking effectively resegregated students and relegated Black students to the lowest groups was accepted as a function of assumed deficiencies in Black students' abilities, prior schooling, and home lives (Wey & Corey, 1959, p. 214), just as similar views of immigrant children had been used when tracking was first practiced in the Progressive Era (Blanton, 2003; Fass, 1980; Gamson, 2007; Tyack, 1974).

**Tracking and Desegregation.** The practice of tracking increased with desegregation and was used in some cases as a bribe to gain support or at least acquiescence to desegregation from White, particularly White middle-class parents (Cuban, 1975; England & Meier, 1985; Mickelson, 2001). Mickelson describes the quid pro quo employed by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board to win the acquiescence of the White middle-class residents to the closing of the White school, Myers Park High, and the enrollment of its students in the previously all-Black West Charlotte High:

According to documentary evidence and testimony presented in the Swann case, racially correlated tracking began in Charlotte at about the same time as actual desegregation efforts commenced in CMS. In an interview with the author, Mr. William Poe, who chaired the CMS Board of Education during the early years after the Swann decision,

stated that when Whites from the prosperous White Myers Park neighborhood desegregated West Charlotte (the flagship high school of the Black community), an optional Open Program (a rigorous college prep track) was instituted to encourage Whites to participate in desegregation (personal communication, December 22, 1998). Poe recalled that “[the Open Program] was created as an impetus for Whites to enroll their kids in the school. The school board viewed it as a sop to White people.” (Mickelson, 2001, pp. 245, footnote 7)

Cuban (1975) describes similarly explicit efforts on the part of Carl Hansen, who was the District of Columbia School Superintendent from 1958-1966 and whose 1956 plan, “Four-Track Curriculum for Today’s High School,” was found by Judge Skelley Wright to have been created specifically as a response to thwart the Court’s decision in *Bolling v. Sharpe* that mandated the desegregation of the District of Columbia’s public schools in 1954 (*Hobson v. Hansen*, 1967). These examples highlight that within a national movement to undo a separate and unequal system of schools, the local policy elite were making decisions that communicated that the goals of desegregation implementation conceded to eliminate “separate,” but not “unequal.” By all accounts, principals followed suit.

Scholars of second-generation segregation—the inequitable and racially correlated allocation of education resources within a school—identify ability-level tracking as the practice most associated with the maintenance of inequity within desegregated schools (England & Meier, 1985; Mickelson, 2001; Oakes, 2005). It is true that when principals of White schools began to receive Black students in the decades following *Brown*, the tradition of assigning children to classrooms based on perceptions of the students’ capacities and future prospects was well established, and the wording in the *Brown* decision itself seems to recognize and accept this tradition implicitly (*Hobson v. Hansen*, 1967, see footnote 207). The Court declared, “To separate them from others of similar age and *qualifications* solely because of their race generates

a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954, italics mine).

Declaring as the Court did in *Brown* that the state should not communicate a sense of inferiority to Black children by assigning them to separate *schools* did not challenge the practice of assigning children to separate *classrooms* within those schools on the assumption that some students were academically and intellectually inferior to others. The Court simply stated that separating children is harmful when it is executed “solely because of their race.”

But what the Court did not acknowledge is that it was impossible to separate the tradition of assessing intellectual qualifications from blatantly false, historic, and devastatingly consequential notions of race (Gould, 2008; Graves, 2001; Lewontin et al., 2017). These fallacious assumptions that linked together the equally unscientific concepts of race and intelligence were deeply embedded in dominant society, schooling, and culture in the wake of *Brown*. Rejecting them required a level of racial literacy uncommon in White principals, though not in Black principals. In her history of a segregated Black school in rural North Carolina, Walker (1996) described how the commitment of the school’s principal to racial uplift and antiracism made him a fierce advocate of access to rigorous curricula and extracurricular activities for all students, regardless of past academic performance or skepticism on the part of some of their teachers. But again, we see that not only did White principals in the wake of *Brown* lack an antiracist professional knowledge of teaching and learning, but they were also unsupported by the stated goals of desegregation. As I demonstrate later in Chapters 6 and 7, principals benefit from both antiracist knowledge and policy support.

**Avoidance and Abdication.** Almost 10 years after the publication of the *Guidebook*, in 1967-1968, Mary Haywood Metz conducted a study of two desegregated junior high schools in a

midwestern city. Metz (1980) argues that the fundamental challenge of school desegregation stems from a crisis in the authority of desegregated schools to pursue the twin goals of order and education, the former being a prerequisite for the latter. She maintains that in desegregated schools, the moral legitimacy of purpose is called into question by the introduction of social conflict. The conflict stems from pursuing the dual goals of order and education or, more accurately, the pursuit of education as the primary goal for White students and order as the goal for Black students. The principals at the two schools in Metz's study managed this situation by choosing either to avoid acknowledging any conflict or disparity in Black and White students' experiences or to concede the contradictions, but then abdicate any responsibility for navigating, making meaning of, or pursuing them to resolution. Both of these strategies allowed the principals to thrust contradiction and conflict to the classroom and individual level on the one hand or to the higher authority of the law or supervisors on the other. One principal functioned as a single-minded bureaucrat in search of order, the other as a hapless supervisor of inequity.

The experiences of the administration and staff at the schools in Metz's study are reminiscent of the muddling through of incrementalism elucidated in CRT's critique of liberalism (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and the negotiated compromise of peace in an inequitable situation—or in the language of CRT, a racial sacrifice (Bell, 2004). In exchange for the educational legitimacy that the upper-track classes confer on the school, the school—and the principal—accepts as normal a tracking system that defines Black students as less intelligent and less invested in learning. This trade-off of legitimacy among high-status White families—what in Chapters 6 and 7, I refer to as reputation—in exchange for needs and rights of Black children, is common when the goals of racial diversity are not explicitly supportive of equity.

**Relying on Professional Knowledge to Move from Desegregation to Integration.** In contrast to the *Guidebook*'s advice to suppress social change and conflict through technical compliance and the avoidance and abdication of agency demonstrated in the pragmatism of the principals in Metz's study, *A Handbook for Integrated Schooling* (Forehand & Ragosta, 1976)—a research report created under contract with the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare—encouraged principals in racially diverse schools to make an affirmative commitment to integration and racial equity. Like Turnage (1971), the *Handbook* recognized the principal as “the most important person in successful integration” (Forehand & Ragosta, 1976, p. 13) and stressed that it was the responsibility of the principal to lead in both words and actions in favor of racial equity.

In addition to making racial equity an explicit and primary goal of the school, principals were advised to affirmatively create integrated teaching and administrative staffs and to guarantee that the classroom curricula, the classroom texts, and the library collection include material that presents the positive contributions of “African, Asian, American Indian and Latin American cultures, as well as European” (Forehand & Ragosta, 1976, p. 83). Principals were expected to lead the staff regularly in monitoring racial balance in student assignment to classrooms and in student representation in clubs, teams, and extracurricular activities.

This research report acknowledged that in the face of inevitable resistance from teachers and parents, and the historic power imbalances between the White and Black communities that traditionally result in advantages for White families and faculty, only those principals able and willing to prioritize equity explicitly had any chance of leading desegregation to integration. For desegregation to result in integration, the *Handbook* pushed principals to recognize their role in setting the tone and goals around racial equity *without assuming that such equity is implicit or*

*inherent to the general goals of the racially diverse school.* The *Handbook's* understanding of the professional knowledge necessary to lead for excellence and equity in a racially diverse school was forward-thinking, but as I explain in Chapter 6, forward-thinking is not enough.

### **Principals, Choice, Reputation, and Equity**

Not long after the publication of the *Handbook*, the federal government, in 1983, published *A Nation at Risk*, which solidified a shift in education policy away from equity towards a new definition of excellence. Though it is unclear how many principals had ever read *A Handbook for Integrated Schooling* or attempted to follow its advice, this regime change in education policy significantly complicated prioritizing equity in racially diverse schools and coincided with a shift in the Supreme Court that ushered in a sequence of rulings enabling federal district courts to dismantle desegregation court orders (Orfield & Eaton, 1996).

### ***The Problematic Juxtaposition of Equity and Excellence***

*A Nation at Risk* made no mention of the *Brown* decision or school desegregation. But concerns about “a rising tide of mediocrity” and references to “lost sight,” “weakness of purpose,” “confusion of vision,” and “unnecessary social demands” on schools, along with (unsubstantiated) declines in test scores, served as a critique of the pursuit of equity and a new call for excellence, implying that the former had been a fetter on the latter. The solution was to disrupt the policy monopoly on schools, to define parents as consumers of education, and to turn to colorblind, market-based competition as a way to push principals to produce more in the way of test scores or perish.

As discussed above, a single-minded emphasis on student test scores as the measure of accountability to the public was part of an effort to extricate education from social issues—particularly equity and antiracism—and portray schooling as the delivery of standardized



information and the nurturing of intellect whose quality could be objectively quantified and measured like any product in a market economy. The development of this accountability regime and the concurrent rise in market-based school choice plans were instrumental in shaping definitions of school quality and providing a colorblind cover for racial inequality.

Proponents of school choice have argued that market-based reforms, in addition to promoting greater efficiency, more responsiveness to consumer demand, and more innovation, also help disentangle school segregation from residential segregation by allowing families with lower socioeconomic status to escape the inferior schools that more economically advantaged families avoid by moving to different districts or private schools (MacLean, 2021). However, school choice, in effect, exacerbated segregation by both class and race in large part because White families avoided schools with significant percentages of Black children, regardless of other measures of school quality (Bifulco et al., 2009; Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Saporito & Lareau, 1999; Sikkink & Emerson, 2008; Wells, 2018). How these findings, known as the Sociology of Reputation, apply to school principals is less well-known but important as choice, even in districts changing SAPs to enhance diversity, is still an important part of student assignment policy.

### ***Desegregation, Race, and Reputation***

As Wells (1995) points out in a critique of the research on the effects of desegregation, the original purpose of desegregation was premised on the idea that “guaranteeing African-American students access to predominantly White institutions would enhance their opportunities for social mobility and thus improve their life chances” (p. 692). Civil rights activists fully understood that the Jim Crow policies in the South and similar practices in the North robbed Black people of access to equal resources and sustained an ideology of White supremacy. When

the NAACP challenged the law of “separate but equal” in court, they argued that the tangible resources available to Linda Brown and her classmates may have been equal to those of White children in White schools, but the mere fact of separate facilities enforced the doctrine of White supremacy. In previous decisions involving graduate schools, the Court ruled that Black students be admitted to White schools because no equal Black institution existed (*McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, 1950; *Sweatt v. Painter*, 1950). But in *Brown*, the Court’s decision was premised on equal physical facilities and other “tangible” factors and argued that segregation “generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954).

That these equal Black schools almost immediately came to be characterized as inferior is testimony to the very notions of White supremacy that the decision was meant to address. In very few instances of desegregation were Black schools left open to accommodate Black and White students together. Instead, Black schools were closed, and Black students bused to White schools. Recent scholarship has challenged the portrayal of pre-*Brown* Black schools as inferior or damaging to Black children, even when the physical plant and other tangible factors were indeed less than those of local White schools (J. D. Anderson, 1988; Walker, 2000). Rather than narrowing the inputs of school to material, easily quantifiable elements, these scholars consider the value to students of inputs like relationships with adults whose cultural capacity and pedagogical approach encouraged them to see and teach the whole child. As I describe in Chapters 5 and 6, principals experiencing 21st century desegregation also embrace this antiracist understanding of school inputs, even if they struggle put it into practice.

As Wells (1995) argues, the long-term positive effects of school desegregation, such as increased college attendance and access to social networks, are as much a function of access to

status and the informal resources conferred by status as they are of traditional educational resources. Debates about school quality notwithstanding, from the perspective of reputation and status, schools serving Black students in the decades before and after *Brown* were considered less than those serving White students.

### ***Accountability, Choice, and Race***

Before and in the wake of *Brown*, the relationship between dominant definitions of school quality and the race of the students in the school was reflected in and reinforced by the makers of student assignment policies. But with the advent of market-based school choice systems, the judgment of school quality has devolved to parents as consumers of education who are encouraged to view student test scores as an objective, colorblind metric. While significant attention has been paid to the behavior of parents in a market-based choice system (Holme, 2002; Kimelberg, 2014; Sikkink & Emerson, 2008), less attention had been paid to the behavior of school principals in response to competition. In a study of principals in New Orleans, where market-based reforms dominate student assignment policies, Jabbar (2015) identified a range of strategies that principals employed in response to competition. Though changing curriculum and instruction to improve test scores was one strategy available to principals, Jabbar found that these strategies were more often than not ignored in favor of efforts to avoid or circumvent competition. Principals created niche markets through specialized instructional or extracurricular programs, employed focused marketing and recruitment, and engaged in selective enrollment or exclusion of particular students, despite rules to the contrary. Jennings (2010), in a study of principals in New York City, also found that even though the official district policy forbid principals from selecting higher-performing students, NYC principals employed a variety of

strategies to exclude students they believed would jeopardize their schools' accountability measures.

Jennings (2010) found that principals' agency in employing these strategies was influenced by their knowledge, gained through their access to socio-professional networks, of the strategies to which district leaders would turn a blind eye. Though she also found that some principals refrained from exercising this covert agency out of a personal commitment to principles of social justice and equity, "by drawing attention to the role of networks and their structural features in the sensemaking process, sensemaking theorists can bring structure back into their theory and, in doing so, address the frequent critique that sensemaking gives actors too much agency" (p. 245). In other words, sensemaking always exists in relation to the surrounding policy context.

A third study (Holme et al., 2013) that found that schools require awareness, motivation and capability to respond to competition further emphasizes the interrelatedness among principals' individual capacity, sensemaking, and the external constraints of accountability systems, district supports, and reputation within the local market. All three of these studies explore the responses of principals in districts and schools serving predominately Black and Latino students, which is not surprising given the theories that market-based reforms were instituted to spur improvements among low-performing schools. But even less attention has been paid to the response of principals to parents' demand in racially diverse schools, although as I describe in Chapter 6, the SAP context and accountability still weigh on principals' sensemaking and decision-making.

## *Principals at the Nexus Between Parents and Practice*

Recently, some White middle-class parents, primarily in gentrifying urban centers, have challenged the findings of the research cited above and enrolled their children in schools whose student body is majority Black and Latino. Studies of these parents indicate that while they often report to value diversity (Torres & Weissbourd, 2020), they still seek either exclusivity within racially diverse schools through: academic tracking or special programs (Diamond & Lewis, 2015; Oakes, 2005; Roda, 2015), outsized influence and power through fundraising and organizing (Cucchiara, 2013; Posey-Maddox, 2014), and, in some cases, outsized pressure and influence on school leadership (Kimelberg, 2014; Oakes, 2005; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017; Stillman, 2012; Wells & Serna, 1996). In these studies that mention the relationship between the White parents and the principals of the racially diverse schools, the principals who do not readily cater to the demands and desires of the White parents either leave the school or eventually concede to the White parents. When White parents did not feel sufficiently acknowledged or appreciated, they moved on to different schools.

My own personal experiences as a principal at a school experiencing an influx of White middle-class families has provided me with a particular insight into the challenges of leading for equity and integration in a competitive choice marketplace where White middle-class parents are accustomed to wielding disproportionate voice and exit options (Hirschman, 2004). In a context where school quality is judged primarily by the presence of White families, White students become a resource for increasing demand; thus, rejection or approval by White families are powerful signals to consumers, both White and Black. But little scholarly literature exists on leading for equity under these circumstances (Roda, 2020). Still, scholars of educational leadership have studied principals in schools experiencing an influx of Black or Latino students

as well as the equity practices of principals serving predominately Black and Latino students. These studies shed light on the challenges of moving from diversity to equity that confront principals in racially diverse schools.

### **Leadership for Equity**

In Chapter 2, I outlined how the major tenets of CRT serve as a lens through which to understand the relationship between school practices and the persistence of racism in U.S. education. I also promoted the argument that the first step to equity in education is racial literacy or the “ability to understand what race is, why it is, and how it is used to reproduce inequality and oppression” (Horsford, 2011, p. 96). Numerous other scholars have similarly argued that a leader’s sensemaking of race and racism will directly impact not only how they interact with students and parents but how they interact with seemingly colorblind policies and practices (Capper et al., 2006; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Lomotey, 1993; Theoharis, 2007). According to Evans (2007) on sensemaking about race, “The importance of school leaders’ sensemaking lies in the assumption that the meanings they make of educational issues and situations determine how they define and respond to them via their actions and decisions on school programs, policies, and practices” (p. 160).

The scholars mentioned above, as well as others who argue for the importance of racial literacy in leadership preparation (Diem & Carpenter, 2012; Horsford et al., 2019; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004), seem to accept that providing an equitable education for those children currently receiving a less-than-equitable education will largely occur in schools with few, if any, White middle-class children. Though there is increasing attention to the metro migrations that are leading to racially diverse suburban districts and some racially diverse schools within those district (Diamond & Lewis, 2015; Holme et al., 2014; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Turner, 2020; Wells

et al., 2017), most scholarly attention to equity leadership within schools is focused on those Black and White principals serving student populations that are majority Black and Latino (one notable exception is the work of Burris and Garrity [2008] on a principal's detracking efforts in a majority White suburban school).

The reality of school segregation today does not discount the findings of these scholars any more than the reality of Jim Crow segregation discounted the experiences of antiracist Black principals before *Brown* as models for contemporary, racially literate, antiracist principals in schools today. But context matters. Just as some Black principals before *Brown* were instrumental in creating schools that not only challenged racist views of Black children but also celebrated their brilliance and humanity, some Black principals in segregated Black schools today have rejected deficit ideologies that define their students and their schools as inferior (Lomotey, 1993; Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Other scholars, recognizing that school principals are overwhelming White, have argued that all principals serving Black and Latino communities must embrace the need to develop their own racial literacy before developing an equity vision for their predominately Black and Latino schools and communities (Capper et al., 2006; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017; Theoharis, 2007).

Additionally, these scholars of school principals argue that while school leadership is key to establishing an equity culture within a school (Riehl, 2005), true equity leadership requires that principals engage with the inequities that students and communities encounter outside the school. Rather than shielding their communities from inequity, they engage them in leading struggle against it (G. L. Anderson, 2009; Capper, 2015; Ishimaru, 2013).

Still, as Riehl (2000) points out, "Most social movements are not predicated on the expectation that formal heads of established organizations will be the agents of change" (p. 58).

In other words, principals and their racial literacy matter, but so does the larger social and policy context within which the principal functions. As attention to shifting demographics and educational inequity has increased, more districts, like New York City, are including language about equity to their organizational goals. But as Knaus (2014) points out, “It is in the interest of White educators to adopt social justice language instead of integrating antiracism into the foundation” (p. 422). Conversely, technical changes in racially diverse schools adopted without a commitment to challenging the normative (ideological) and political dynamics of racism and racial inequality will ultimately undermine the implementation of those changes to practice (Holme et al., 2014) as we saw in the implementation of 20th century desegregation.

I agree with those scholars who recognize the centrality of principals to transformative changes in schools (Branch et al., 2013; Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Riehl, 2000). But as important as principals and their racial literacy are to embracing the agency, they have at the nexus of student assignment policy and equity practice the policies themselves and the social context within which those policies exist and influence the limits of that agency and sensemaking. As I argue above, many Black principals were instrumental in not only creating schools for Black children that rejected the policy goal of preparing Black children for second-class citizenship, but they also helped build the movement that ultimately challenged that goal. Their racial literacy and their courage to act on it not only pushed the limits of their agency. It pushed the limits of the policy. However, not every principal, even those with racial literacy, is willing to be a trailblazer. As Riehl (2005) adds, “When official educational policies themselves require principals to act on behalf of equity, the likelihood of real transformation increases, though only time will tell if the stated intentions of the policy are genuine” (p. 433). As districts like those in NYC continue to espouse equity as a goal but leave principals to negotiate what



equity means in practice, understanding how principals make sense of equity is increasingly important.

## **Conclusion**

The literature above reviewed the establishment of the principal's position during the segregated Progressive Era and explained the structural latitude that grants principals agency at the nexus between policy and practice. It further demonstrated how principals within the context of segregation and a White supremacist racial hierarchy employed that latitude differently in Black and White school systems. The ability and willingness of many Black principals to push the limits of their agency to challenge racist views of Black children and the segregationist structures that upheld those views established the importance of principal sensemaking in the exercise of their agency at the nexus of policy and practice and the transformative impact of this agency on policy itself. Unfortunately, the displacement of Black principals as a concession to the racism of many White families in the implementation of desegregation robbed the profession of a cadre of racially literate school leaders.

Reviewing the role of principals in the implementation of 20th century desegregation and the literature revealed that a narrow and technical commitment to the mechanics of the new student assignment policies after *Brown* subverted the political and antiracist goals of the movement for school integration and encouraged principals to sacrifice the interests of Black students in order to minimize conflict with White students and families. It further revealed that while the importance of principals' agency in the wake of the *Brown* decision has been largely overlooked in the literature, the principals themselves were overwhelming unable or unwilling to embrace that agency in favor of equity or in opposition to the social and political pressures of White supremacy.

As the education policy regime evolved from equity to accountability, and seemingly colorblind reliance on test scores as a measure of school quality obscured the role of racism in shaping perceptions of school quality, principals found themselves once again in the position of challenging policy goals and/or contending with the outsized influence of White parents. The literature revealed that similar to the period before *Brown*, principal development of the racial literacy necessary to pursue antiracist equity was heavily concentrated in the schools serving predominately Black and Latino students and limited to those principals willing to challenge the social and political structures that define their schools and students as inferior.

Principals occupy a unique position at the nexus of policy and practice. Their sensemaking of value-laden policy goals like equity, particularly in racially diverse districts, is critical not only to the experiences of students in those schools but also to the further definitions of policy. As Stone (1980) contends, “program implementation is infused with social conflict, is inescapably political, and is therefore an integral part of the *making* of public policy” (p. 5). As racially diverse districts, in response to pressure often from White middle-class parents, adjust student assignment policies to increase the racial diversity in schools, exploring how principals will make meaning of those changes in policy and student demographics is crucial to understanding these 21st century experiments in school desegregation. It is impossible to know that sensemaking without centering the voices of the principals themselves.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Purpose of Study and Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to understand how middle school principals in racially diverse urban school districts make sense of value-laden but vaguely defined policy goals—such as excellence, equity, and diversity—and how the social context of the school choice market, along with the particular terms of school assignment policies (SAPs) constrain or foster the principals’ pursuit of those goals. Thus, through my research, I explored how principals, as professional educators, made sense of school quality and the relationship between their schools’ racial demographics, reputation, and popularity among high-status consumers—namely, affluent and mostly White parents. In relation to these understandings, I also explored how principals made sense of their agency to define school quality in practice and responded to changes in SAPs that limit, or not, the influence of market law.

In this chapter, I tell my research story, from my research questions to my study design and methods, to the context of these middle school principals and the schools they led, as well as the impact of a global pandemic on all of the above. As most qualitative researchers do, I had to adapt to the profound changes taking place in NYC public schools from the beginning of my data collection in October 2021 and readjust my research strategy several times. Still, I learned many powerful lessons from these committed educators that have changed the way I understand school choice and the power of some student assignment policies to support well-intended educators, which I discuss in more detail in Chapters 5-7.

#### **Research Questions and Study Design**

I set out to answer the following research questions:

1. How do middle school principals working in four racially diverse NYC Community School Districts with different student assignment policies (SAPs) make sense of excellence, equity, and diversity as policy goals?
2. How do these middle school principals make sense of the relationship between the racial demographics of students across different schools in their districts and their school's reputation and popularity within these district contexts?
  - a. How does this sensemaking impact principals' decision-making around in-school practices, including teaching, learning, and school culture and climate?
  - b. How do the restraints on market demand imposed by changes to SAP impact the principals' sense- and decision-making related to in-school practices and their schools' reputations within the school choice context?

To answer these questions through qualitative comparative case study methodology, I adopted both an interpretive framework that “assert[s] that reality is at least partly socially constructed by people who are living it” (Riehl, 2001, p. 117) and a critical framework that maintains that “knowledge is both socially constructed and influenced by power relations from within society” (Scotland, 2012, p. 13). My research questions and methods were designed to compare how middle school principals in four racially diverse districts in New York City understand and exercise their agency to define in practice policy goals of excellence, equity, and diversity under different student assignment policies (SAPs) established by the NYC Department of Education (NYCDOE), all geared toward creating more school-level diversity.

This methodological approach was informed by the theoretical framework I outlined in Chapter 2 that examined policy implementation critically through a lens of race and reputation. As Spillane et al. (2006) argue, “From a cognitive perspective, implementation hinges on

whether and in what ways local implementing agents' understanding of policy demands impacts the extent to which they reinforce or alter their practice" (p. 47).

However, purely phenomenological or constructivist research and analysis that explores the aggregate of individual strategies and experiences as if they alone account for the perpetuation of, for example, social inequality or segregation runs the risk of denying the ways in which structural forces are in fact a part of that "sense making" and thus can account for the creation of these phenomena in the first place (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Thus, my decision to conduct a comparative case study of principals in four districts under different SAPs allowed me to richly explore not only the sensemaking of principals in racially diverse schools but also the interplay of that sensemaking with larger structural forces of race and racialized school reputation. The comparative case study is perfect for situations where multiple variables that affect the particular entity or phenomenon cannot be separated from the context. The case study revealed the interaction, interplay, dependency, and synthesis of interweaving variables that *in their interaction* create the entity (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2012). Choosing principals as the unit of analysis embedded in a complex context of districts, student populations, and SAPs sheds light on the interactions between the SAPs and principals' understanding in a process-oriented comparison that explains how SAP plays a role in the practice of school leadership (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017)

### **Site Selection**

Every qualitative case study researcher has to make choices about who, what, and where they study, and those choices should align with the goals and the methodology of their research design. Below, I describe the context within which the principals I studied make meaning of the relationship between policy and practice. While some aspects of the context are bounded in the

traditional sense, e.g. middle school principals, other aspects reflect many local contexts, like New York City, which “are quite heterogeneous and produced from the intersection of social, economic, and cultural relations linked to various scales” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 13).

### ***New York City and the Long Road to Addressing Entrenched Segregation***

Before its recent experimentation with SAPs explicitly designed to address segregation, NYC’s comprehensive embrace of market-based reforms distinguished the city as a policy forerunner. In 2004, the city introduced a program that eliminated automatic assignment based on residence of any student to a particular high school and required all eighth graders to participate in a public school choice plan. Similar experiments in middle school assignment were also underway within select Community School Districts (CSDs).

But at the same time, NYC has been much slower than other cities and metro areas in states as distinctly different as Connecticut, Ohio, or Nebraska in addressing desegregation (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014). Recent attention to segregation and debates, primarily among White parents, over changes to SAPs as a means to address racial segregation in schools has led to the creation of a patchwork of reform efforts that make New York City an ideal site to study how SAP context interacts with principals’ sensemaking of excellence, equity, and diversity in schools.

The sheer size and complexity of the NYC school system distinguish it from almost every school system in the nation. But that size and complexity, specifically its 32 CSDs—each of which employ one or a combination of seven different middle school admissions methods (New York Appleseed, 2019)—also make it possible to explore within one city how SAP context influences principals’ understanding of and decision-making around race, equity, and school quality. New York State, NYC, and the surrounding metropolitan area, in addition to mirroring

the metro migrations of the nation as a whole (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014), also present an ideal site for the kind of comparative case study I described above.

Like many northern cities, NYC never experienced court-ordered desegregation, in spite of the intense segregation of its schools. Although, in the wake of *Brown*, many NYC leaders and institutions upheld the city's reputation and identity as the model of liberalism by playing an active role in the struggle to desegregate schools in the South, New York City resisted desegregation (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014; Ravitch, 1974). Subsequently, it has “tried all the basic educational reforms of the post-civil rights era . . . [that] have dominated state and federal policy ever since: raising standards, intensely testing children, and enacting harsh sanctions on students, schools and staffs to try to force change, and implementing the Common Core test” (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014, p. iii). Few places have embraced school choice on the scale that NYC has. Today, NYC is both one of the most persistently segregated districts in the country and one of the most prominent in espousing integration and diversity. As hundreds of districts across the country embrace integration policies (Potter & Burris, 2020), the experiences of schools in NYC will serve as an important model. Additionally, with close to a million school children in the NYC public schools, the 32 individual CSDs are equal in size to many mid-sized school districts throughout the country.

It is important to note here that although the city is divided into 32 CSDs whose boundaries are set and controlled by state law, the entire NYC public school system, in every district, is currently under mayoral control; this means the mayor selects the Chancellor who then appoints a superintendent to each CSD. While each CSD is supervised by a different Superintendent, SAPs—and any revisions to them—are under the purview of the Chancellor and the mayor. Every CSD has an 11-member Community Education Council (CEC) that serves an

advisory role. According to New York State law, the CEC is required to approve any changes to attendance zones proposed by the Chancellor and the mayor. But other than this approval/veto power, the CECs have no policy authority over how children get into schools.

### ***Middle Schools***

I selected middle schools because the student assignment policies in NYC middle schools are the most varied and conducive to a comparative case study. Additionally, middle school is the beginning of secondary education, when increasing parent concerns over academic quality have greater influence on their perceptions and choices of school (Kimelberg, 2014).

The seven basic admissions methods to a particular middle school—all defined in terms of the selection variables schools can and cannot use to admit students, as described in the *New York City Department of Education Admission Guide* (generally referred to as the Directory for each of the five boroughs)—are as follows:

1. Unscreened: Students are selected randomly.
2. Limited unscreened: Students are selected randomly, with priority to certain groups of students (i.e., continuing students, students who sign in to show interest in the program, residents of the district, or some combination thereof).
3. Zoned: Students are guaranteed a match to their zoned program (based on either the zone in which they reside or the zone in which their current school is located), so long as they do not match to a program ranked higher on their middle school application.
4. Screened: Individual schools rank students based on specific factors determined by the principal in consultation with the superintendent, such as 4th grade report card, reading and math standardized test scores, attendance, punctuality, audition, writing sample or other assessments.
5. Screened language: Students are ranked based on language proficiency.
6. Composite score: Students are ranked based on a composite score calculated by a citywide formula assigning points to certain categories corresponding to an applicant's academic record; certain aspects may be weighted differently than others.



7. Talent Test – Students are matched based on their score on a particular program’s Talent Test. (New York Appleseed, 2019, n.p.)

Note that only in screened programs (Option 4) do principals have the ability to choose the students they want to serve.

It is also important to note that the particular admissions methods are neither “good” nor “bad” per se. What matters are the goals and consequences of the particular SAP. For example, assigning students to schools based on where they live may, by design, achieve either segregation or desegregation, depending on how the district boundaries are drawn. Most schools employ screens to select students based on test scores and then later on grades and attendance, and research suggests that screens in middle school admissions contribute to within-district segregation (New York Appleseed, 2019). However, the screens could be based on criteria that enhance racial diversity, such as prioritizing students from particular elementary schools or zip codes. While, ultimately, the decision to employ a screen and to set the criteria of a screen rests with Chancellor through their superintendents, a principal can request to remove or alter a screen.

### ***Community School Districts***

Of the 32 CSDs that make up the vast NYC public school system, I selected four that vary in terms of their size and precise percentages of White, Asian, Black, and Latino students but which are similarly distinguished by their racial diversity. All four districts have experienced community attention to between-school segregation and to suggested or actual revisions to their SAPs in the interest of racial diversity, even though each is in a different stage of that process and under different SAPs. In addition to attention from policy researchers (Halkitis & Mullen, 2019; Hornick-Becker et al., 2020; Kucsera & Orfield, 2014; Lallinger, 2020) and the press (Elsen-Rooney, 2020; Swaak, 2020; Veiga, 2020a) to the extreme segregation within these

districts, local parent groups have also issued calls for change (Elsen-Rooney, 2020; Nunberg & Smith-Thompson, 2020; Veiga, 2020c).

Additionally, all four districts have been a part of a New York State Integration Project-Professional Learning Community (NYSIP-PLC) Grant initiated in the 2017-2018 school year with the purpose “to increase student achievement in New York State Title I Schools, particularly those schools identified for improvement, by encouraging greater integration by race and ethnicity, as well as socioeconomic, special education, and English language learner/Multilingual learner (ELL/MLL) status in Title I schools” (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2020). Thirteen NYC school districts originally participated in the grant, but these four were the most racially diverse of those districts. Phase I of the grant (September 2017-August 2018) supported data collection and development of a theory of action, with Phase II (September 2018-August 2019) supporting community engagement and piloted solutions. Three of the four districts in my study remain eligible for Phase III of the grant (September 2020-August 2023), which is designed to allow participants to fully implement the specific integration strategies that the district developed in Phase I and then piloted and refined in Phase II.

These four districts represent four of the most racially diverse districts in the city but also stand out for having the greatest number of schools whose demographics are not representative of that diversity. Table 1 below charts the number of middle schools and racial demographics of the K-12 public school students in each district, followed by a brief description and history of the district’s middle school admissions methods before the COVID-19 pandemic:

**Table 1: District Demographics**

District*	#MS	% Asian	% Black	% Latino	% White	% Other
A	17	21	15	33	26	5
B	19	8	28	32	27	5
C	11	15	17	36	28	6
D	13	30	21	28	15	6

\*The CSD number has been changed to a letter to protect the anonymity of the principals.

Below are descriptions of the SAPs in each of the four districts that provided the context for the principals I studied. As embedded case studies, each principal’s story and sense of agency are impacted by their district context, specifically the relationship between the districts’ racial demographics and the distribution of admissions options.

**District A: Selectively Screened Diversity SAP.** This district has 17 middle schools. Five of those schools have two programs within the school that each uses unique admissions policies. Therefore, while there are 22 MS programs in District A, there are only 17 middle schools. Because these programs are under the supervision of the same school principal, I considered schools, rather than programs, for sampling purposes but programs when reporting admissions type. Of the 22 middle school programs in District A, 72% are screened, 20% are limited unscreened, 4% are unscreened, 4% are zoned (New York Appleseed, 2019). This helps account for District A’s distinction as among the least representative in a report that analyzed the demographics of each school in a district relative to the demographics of the district overall (Hornick-Becker et al., 2020). For the 2019-2020 school, as part of the NYSIP-PLC grant, three District A middle schools opted into a diversity in admissions (DIA) pilot program that

guaranteed priority to screened applicants eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) for 17% of seats. In an Open Letter to the Chancellor first posted in July 2020 calling for the complete elimination of screens in MS admissions, almost every District A MS principal signed (*Educators for an End to Middle School Screening*, n.d.), but debate among parents in the district remains contentious and intense (Friedersdorf, 2020).

To encapsulate the differences among schools' admissions options within the district and the district's participation in the NYSIP-PLC grant, I refer to District A's pre-COVID SAP as the Selectively Screened Diversity SAP.

**District B: Selectively Screened Diversity SAP.** This second district has 19 schools and programs. Of those 19 programs, 76% are screened, 12% are screened: language, 6% are limited unscreened, and 6% are unscreened. For the 2019-2020 school year, all but two middle schools within District B participated in a diversity in admissions (DIA) pilot program that gives priority to applicants eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) and who are lower-performing for 25% of seats. Ten percent of seats in each school are prioritized for the lowest-performing FRL-eligible students and 15% for lower-performing FRL-eligible students. The remaining 75% of seats are open to all students. These priorities are applied within the basic admissions method, so in a screened program, an applicant must first pass the screen before the priority status is applied. The two schools not participating in the pilot, while located in District B, are specialized screened programs open to all NYC residents. Still, in the recent report on school segregation, District B was also among the districts with the highest number of non-representative schools, meaning that in spite of the district's racial diversity and the pilot program, District B's middle schools are still intensely segregated (Hornick-Becker et al., 2020). Despite the limited impact of

the program, the adoption of the diversity plan met with significant hostility from many parents (Smith, 2018).

To encapsulate the differences among schools' admissions options within the district and the district's participation in the NYSIP-PLC grant, I refer to District B's pre-COVID SAP, like District A's, as the Selectively Screened Diversity SAP.

**District C: District Diversity Lottery SAP.** This district has 11 middle schools. As of the 2019-2020 school year, District C eliminated the use of admissions screens in all of its middle schools and instituted a district-wide plan that matches applicants according to random selection, with priority given to applicants who are students from low-income households, students in temporary housing, and/or English Language Learners (ELLs) for 52% of seats at each District C middle school. Prior to the implementation of this new SAP, all but two very small District C middle school programs used admissions screens and, like District A and District B, District C was among the most segregated districts (Hornick-Becker et al., 2020).

In the 2017-2018 school year, the NYCDOE hired an urban planning and design firm to engage the community in discussions around diversity, integration, and admissions and to form a working group that would produce a set of recommendations to the DOE. The final plan created by the working group proposed replacing schools' selective admissions screens with a weighted lottery based on students' ranking of schools as well as calls for more teachers of color, restorative approaches to conflict, inclusive untracked classrooms, and commitment to monitoring the implementation and impact of the plan (WXY Studio, 2018). However, the DOE instituted as policy only the changes in student assignment proposed by the working group and left all other recommendations to be considered at the school level.

In addition to replacing selective admissions screens with a lottery, the new plan prioritized 52% of the seats in each middle school for students eligible for FRPL, STH, and ELLs. I refer to District C's plan as the District Diversity Lottery.

**District D: Segregated Zoned Priority.** This district has 13 schools and 17 programs. Of those 17 programs, 10 are unscreened, 5 are limited unscreened, and 2 are screened. While the percentage of screened programs in District D is far fewer than in Districts A, B, and C, District D is still among the districts with the fewest schools representative of the district's racial diversity (Hornick-Becker et al., 2020). Part of the reason for the school segregation in District D is the priority given to students in unscreened schools who live in designated MS attendance zones. While the zones are roughly geographic and reflect the residential segregation within the district, with White students concentrated in the one end and Black and Latino students in the other end, three of the five zones have two MS schools assigned to them; one zone is not contiguous, requiring students to travel across one zone to get to their zoned school.

District D participated in Phases I and II of the NYSIP-PLC grant but was not selected to participate in Phase III. The district did, however, receive a \$200,000 grant from the city for the 2019-2020 school year to support a process similar to that of District C designed to create a working group that would craft a diversity plan (Veiga, 2019). However, even at the very initial stages designed to engage the community, opposition to the process, primarily from the end of the district with more White families, was strong (Elsen-Rooney, 2020). The process has since stalled, and the involvement of the firm WXY, hired to facilitate the process, has been eliminated citing budget cuts due to COVID-19. The process is, however, anticipated to reconvene under the guidance of the NYCDOE.

I refer to District D's overall plan as Segregated Zoned Priority.

## **COVID-19 and the Impact on Middle School Student Assignment Policy**

In March 2020, the NYC public schools shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools did not fully re-open for in-person learning until September 2021. In December 2020, the mayor announced that the use of all middle school screens would be placed on pause. This pause continued into SY2021-2022, as did the cancellation of all in-person school tours and open houses. In the fall of SY2022-2023, schools were allowed to resume in-person recruitment events.

In September 2022, the Chancellor announced that middle school screens could be reinstated at the discretion of the superintendent. In October of that same year, the superintendents of Districts A and B announced the permanent suspension of screens in all middle schools, with the exception of one specialized program in District B. Because District A still maintained DIA priorities for the choices of students eligible for FRPL, ELLs, and STH for some schools but not all, I call their new plan the School-by-School Diversity Lottery. District B adopted a DIA priority of 25% for all schools, so I call their plan the Minimal Diversity Lottery. District C had already eliminated screens, and though District D dropped screens in two schools, the pandemic and post-pandemic changes were minimal. Table 2 summarizes the changes in the four districts SAPs.

**Table 2: District SAPs Pre- and Post-COVID**

District	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID
A	<b>Selectively Screened Diversity</b> – most schools use screens to select applicants with some of those schools using DIA priority for 17% of seats	<b>School-by-school Diversity Lottery</b> – all schools use lotteries to select applicants with some of those schools using different DIA priority percentages from 17% - 50%
B	<b>Selectively Screened Diversity</b> - most schools use screens to select applicants with some of those schools giving DIA priority	<b>Minimal Diversity Lottery</b> - all schools use screens to select applicants use DIA priority for 25% of seats
C	<b>District Diversity Lottery</b> – every school uses a lottery to select applicants and prioritizes the choices of FRPL, ELL & STH for 52% of seats	<b>District Diversity Lottery</b> – every school uses a lottery to select applicants and prioritizes the choices of FRPL, ELL & STH for 52% of seats
D	<b>Segregated Zoned Priority</b> – priority in all but a few schools is given to applicants living within a geographic zone	<b>Segregated Zoned Priority</b> – priority in all but a few schools is given to applicants living within a geographic zone

### **Participant Sampling**

Knowing that I wanted to study middle school principals in each of these four racially diverse districts as embedded case studies, I set out to recruit any of the school principals in these four districts. Thus, after receiving IRB approval in August 2021, I emailed all the middle school principals in the four districts using their public NYCDOE email addresses. Initially, only two principals responded. Several weeks later, I emailed again and received responses from four more principals. Over the next 5 months, I sent three additional emails and made phone calls to the schools. Ultimately, I interviewed, over Zoom, 16 of the 60 middle school principals at 15 schools across these four districts, with at least three principals from each district. One school had co-principals, each of whom participated in an interview.



My original goal was to interview 20-30 of the 60 principals, but I had to adjust that goal in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2021-2022 school year, when I was reaching out to principals, was the first time that all students reported for instruction in person since schools shut down in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While reported COVID-19 cases in NYC were under 2000 per day at the start of the 2021-2022 school year (New York COVID case and risk tracker, 2021), schools still had to deal with regular testing and reporting while simultaneously welcoming students and teachers, many of whom had not been inside a school building for over a year. Principals were overwhelmed. One principal with over 15 years of experience told me in April of 2022, “This has been the hardest year of them all.” That 16 middle school principals during that school year agreed to participate in a research study still surprises me.

### **Participant Principals**

The principals who agreed to participate in this study had a wealth of experience as educators. On average, they had been working in schools for close to 20 years. All of the participants began their careers in education as classroom teachers and remained teachers for an average of 7 years. Eleven of the 16 participants had worked as assistant principals and another three as staff developers before becoming principals. Three of the participants had been principals at their current schools for fewer than 5 years; four had been principals for between 5 and 10 years; four had been principals for between 10 and 15 years; four between 15 and 20 years, and one for more than 20 years. With the exception of one participant who had worked as a principal in a Catholic school for 4 years prior to working for the NYCDOE, all of the participants had served as principal only in their current schools, and six of the participants were their schools’ founding principals.

In addition to their years of experience as practitioners, the participants in this study had also been schooled in the research of curriculum, pedagogy, and leadership. As is required for certification as a principal in any NYCDOE school, all of the participants had earned master's degrees in addition to completing the coursework required for School Administration and Supervision certification. Two participants had also earned their doctorates in education. It was not uncommon during interviews for principals to refer to a particular mentor who was influential in helping them develop as leaders; however, many also referenced graduate programs, conferences, or particular texts as sources of their ideas and values as school leaders. Their professional knowledge was both a source of pride and inspiration, and it deeply influenced how they understood their work and their hopes for their schools, as I discuss in Chapter 5.

### **Participants' Schools**

Given the relationship between student demographics and a school's reputation (Wells, 2018) and my goal of exploring principals' understandings of different SAPs in relationship to reputation, I hoped to find principals embedded in a variety of contexts as I reached out to all the principals in the four districts. The schools led by the participant principals were fairly representative of the different racial demographics of the schools across the four districts, though in one district, I was unable to interview a principal of a predominantly White and Asian school, and in another district, I was not able to interview a principal of a predominantly Black and Latino school. Table 3 below lists the schools (with pseudonyms) and the racial demographics of their student population at the time of the study:

**Table 3: Participant Schools Demographics**

District	School	% Black	% Latino	% Black + Latino	% Asian	% White	% White + Asian
A	Common Care MS	22	24	<b>46</b>	4	42	<b>46</b>
A	Destinations MS	1	8	<b>9</b>	20	61	<b>81</b>
A	Investigations Academy	0	11	<b>11</b>	24	57	<b>81</b>
A	Neighborhood Academy	3	11	<b>14</b>	22	54	<b>76</b>
A	Society Prep MS	4	11	<b>15</b>	20	58	<b>78</b>
B	Hidden Figures MS	44	45	<b>89</b>	1	6	<b>7</b>
B	Rigor Is Us MS	8	19	<b>27</b>	12	52	<b>63</b>
B	Southside Prep	36	50	<b>86</b>	6	6	<b>12</b>
B	University MS	12	31	<b>43</b>	4	46	<b>50</b>
C	Collegiate Research Academy	16	23	<b>39</b>	12	43	<b>55</b>
C	Ensemble Academy	20	37	<b>57</b>	3	35	<b>38</b>
C	Pensamientos MS	3	77	<b>80</b>	10	8	<b>18</b>
C	Parkside MS	10	28	<b>38</b>	13	44	<b>57</b>
D	Expanding Horizons Academy	68	14	<b>82</b>	14	2	<b>16</b>
D	Middlestreet Academy	12	39	<b>52</b>	32	13	<b>45</b>

In order to better understand each school’s historic relationship to SAPs, Table 4 lists each participant school with its admissions options before the NYSIP-PLC grant, after the grant but pre-COVID, and post-COVID. Table 4 visually portrays the variety of admissions options embedded within districts, and when viewed in conjunction with Table 3, it suggests a relationship between those options and the racial demographics of the schools. More importantly, it illustrates the different approaches taken over time in each district in response to segregation. Specifically, what stands out is the contrast between the more incremental and school-by-school approach to SAP reforms in Districts A and B, compared to the bolder, district-wide approach in District C and the lack of change in District D.

**Table 4: Participant Schools' Admissions Option History**

District	School	Pre-NYSIP Grant	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID
A	Common Care MS	Screened Citywide	Screened Citywide	Lottery, citywide DIA 50%
A	Destinations MS	Screened	Screened DIA 17%	Lottery DIA 17%
A	Investigations Academy	Screened	Screened DIA 17%	Lottery DIA 17%
A	Neighborhood Academy	K8 Priority Zoned	K8 priority Zoned	K8 priority Zoned DIA 36%
A	Society Prep MS	Screened	Screened	Lottery DIA 20%
B	Hidden Figures MS	Unscreened	Unscreened DIA 25%	Lottery DIA 25%
B	Rigor Is Us MS	Screened	Screened DIA 25%	Lottery DIA 25%
B	Southside Prep	K8 Priority Zoned	K8 Priority Zoned DIA 25%	K8 Priority Zoned DIA 25%
B	University MS	Screened	Screened DIA 25%	Lottery DIA 25%
C	Collegiate Research Academy	Screened	Lottery DIA 52%	Lottery DIA 52%
C	Ensemble Academy	Screened	Lottery DIA 52%	Lottery DIA 52%
C	Pensamientos MS	Unscreened	Lottery DIA 52%	Lottery DIA 52%
C	Parkside MS	Lottery	Lottery DIA 52%	Lottery DIA 52%
D	Expanding Horizons Academy	Limited Unscreened Zoned	Limited Unscreened Zoned	Limited Unscreened Zoned
D	Middlestreet Academy	Limited unscreened District-wide	Limited unscreened District-wide	Limited Unscreened District-wide

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Given these district-level contexts of the principals I studied, I set out to understand the relationship between the district SAPs and the experiences and understandings of principals about their schools' reputations and practices.

### ***Open-ended Interviews***

My primary method of data collection consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted over Zoom, with open-ended questions about principals' professional histories, their personal goals for their schools and their understandings of broader district goals around excellence, equity, and diversity. Each interview was semi-structured in nature. I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to guide the discussion, but the questions and structure of the interview were flexible to allow principals to expound on topics that mattered most to them and to reveal the connections they organically made between policy goals and the reality of their positions. Given the recursive link between objective and subjective structures (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), these interviews were helpful in exposing assumptions informing policy and how injustices were sustained, as well as suggested strategies for social transformation (Ozga & Gewirtz, 1994). Given the limited research on the role of principals in moving from desegregation and diversity to integration and equity, it was important that these open-ended interviews gave voice to principals navigating the largely unexplored nexus between student assignment policy and practices that either foster equity or maintain inequity. Over and over again, throughout my interviews, principals (like the principal from Southside Prep above) expressed how rarely they had been asked to share their thoughts on policies or policy goals.

In relying on thick description, or "the researchers' constructions of other people's constructions of what they are up to" (Geertz, 1973, as cited in Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis,

1997, p. 8), using open-ended interview questions helped “to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). During these interviews, principals often shared lengthy anecdotes about their interactions with parents, teachers, colleagues, and superintendents. In addition to learning about their sense of agency at the nexus of policy and practice, I learned how principals speak about race and racial diversity as it applied to their schools and to school practices and to assess their comfort level with race-conscious terminology and attention to race. Overall, I had a window into their racial literacy, i.e., their “ability to understand what race is, why it is, and how it is used to reproduce inequality and oppression” (Horsford, 2011, p. 96) in general and specifically within education and their schools.

To assure accuracy, I recorded interviews with 15 of the 16 principals who granted permission and had them transcribed professionally. I read each transcription while listening to the audio recordings to check the transcripts for accuracy. I relied on detailed notes for the remaining interview. After each interview, I recorded my initial thoughts and impressions in a written memo. I also took notes during tours and open houses and similarly recorded my impressions in a memo upon returning home.

### ***Public Tours and Open Houses***

My original goal was to augment and triangulate the in-depth interviews of my case study principals with observations of school tours, open houses, and other recruitment events as well as parent and teacher meetings. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person research was prohibited, and all school tours and open houses

were suspended for the 2021-2022 school year. However, when they resumed in the fall of 2022, I was able to attend events at 13 of the 15 schools. In NYC, fifth graders typically submit their choices of middle school in order of preference by the beginning of December of their fifth grade year. During September, October, and November, schools host tours during the school day to allow fifth grade students and their parents to observe the school day in session. Principals often address the tour groups to present the school to them. During the fall, schools also host larger Open Houses in the evenings when school is not in session. Principals typically address the crowd and are available to meet and greet prospective families.

The purpose of these observations was to collect data on the principals' sensegiving, or "the words, actions, behaviors, and messages they send in an effort to make the environment sensible for themselves and others," as a manifestation of their sensemaking (Evans, 2007, p. 168). Weick (2005) maintains that sensemaking takes place within a social and an organizational context, in which actors make sense of their own roles and identity while simultaneously interacting with dynamic circumstances. This sensemaking is not only a springboard to action. The act of decision-making and the retrospective explanations of those decisions are part of the sensemaking process itself. For this reason, in addition to interviews with principals, it was important to examine how they presented their schools to prospective families. As I discuss in Chapter 6 and illustrate in Table 5, the families attending these events were overwhelmingly White.

**Table 5: Participant School Tour or Open House Demographics**

School	District	% Black + Latino Students at School	% Asian + White Students at School	% White + Asian Families at Tour or Open House
Common Care MS	A	46	46	94
Destinations MS	A	9	81	Event “sold out”
Investigations Academy	A	11	81	97
Neighborhood Academy	A	14	76	Event limited to current families
Hidden Figures	B	89	7	50
Rigor Is Us MS	B	28	63	96
Society Prep MS	B	15	78	94
Southside Prep	B	86	12	NA
University MS	B	43	50	95
Collegiate Research	C	39	55	98
Ensemble Academy	C	57	38	96
Parkside MS	C	38	57	Zoom event
Pensamientos MS	C	80	18	75
Expanding Horizons	D	88	10	NA
Middlestreet Academy	D	59	38	88

### **Data Analysis**

After all of the interviews and observation fieldnotes had been transcribed, I began the process of identifying themes and categories that emerged across interviews and of highlighting particularly relevant quotations. I was struck by the similarities among principals’ descriptions of their own professional goals and visions. This initial finding led me to look for subcategories to better identify principals’ professional vision of school quality and pay attention to the ways that



principals discussed the challenges they faced to begin to identify what they believed limited their ability to pursue or achieve their professional vision.

While I used Dedoose software to open-code across interviews and observation notes, I found myself regularly rearranging and recoding excerpts in Dedoose, in Excel, and by hand on copies of transcripts to develop categories that were responsive to my research questions, sensitive to the data, exhaustive of the relevant data, mutually exclusive, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 2009). Through a process of reflection, categorization, and consolidation of my coded data, I ultimately established themes around the constructions of school quality and their relationship to racial diversity that shaped my findings. Throughout this iterative process, I also returned regularly to the conceptual framework I had laid out in Chapter 2 as well as to my literature review to inform my identification of initial categories and to identify new categories and themes that emerged from the words of the principals themselves.

Ultimately, in interpreting the meaning principals make of their schools' quality, student demographics, and student assignment policies through the combined lenses of policy implementation theory, CRT, and the Sociology of Reputation, I was better able to present the role that these street-level bureaucrats play in challenging or maintaining the racial stratification of schools in racially diverse districts.

### **Challenges and Limitations of This Study**

The most significant challenge to this study was the disruption to schooling and access to schools caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. With little to no in-person instruction, not only were traditional school practices altered, but the entire notion of school attendance and interaction among students, teachers, administrators, and parents existed only in virtual reality. Furthermore, the NYCDOE suspended the traditional middle school application process and, at the time of the

interviews, had yet to make any announcements on how current fifth grade students would be assigned to middle school. Principals with whom I had spoken were preoccupied with the constantly changing configurations of student attendance between hybrid and fully remote learning and the anxieties and realities of student and teacher health and well-being. While concerns about equitable access to teaching and learning and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and Latino communities were at the forefront of many principals' minds, the insecurity of the moment and lack of information from the DOE pushed SAPs, recruitment, and enrollment to the back burner of principal attention.

Nonetheless, a policy decision by the DOE about middle school enrollment for the 2021-2022 school year was imminent, as interviews were taking place and principals had to make sense of it for themselves and others. The attention to racial inequality so prevalent over the summer of 2020 contributed to demand for at least a 1-year moratorium, if not permanent elimination of screened admissions for middle schools (Lallinger, 2020; Luce, 2020; Nunberg & Smith-Thompson, 2020) as well as vocal defense of the screens (Adams, 2020; PLACE NYC, 2020). Even as principals adjusted to the return of in-person schooling, the discussions, debates, and realities of admissions and enrollment continued. Again, in the middle of the fall of 2022 recruitment season when I was able to observe tours and open houses, the DOE devolved the decision about the use of selective admissions screens to each district superintendent (Closson, 2022; Elsen-Rooney, 2022c).

Finally, I must address the generalizability of the findings beyond the sample of NYC principals interviewed. One interesting feature of schools throughout the United States is, given a federal system that leaves education to the states and localities, how despite inequities (many of which I illustrated in Chapter 3, the Literature Review), schools across a diversity of local

settings are so similar and recognizable to each other. This institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) does not guarantee generalizability of findings across every school, but it does speak to the political and normative pressures on principals to maintain structures and practices that define schooling and minimize the differences between schools in different localities. It is also this institutional isomorphism and the political and social legitimacy that principals seek which contributes to the significance of this study's comparison of principals' sensemaking in different SAP contexts. Similarly, critical race theorists argue that it is precisely the centrality of race and racism that connects "the two levels of racism: the individual and institutional," (Leonardo, 2013). This lends a generalizability to this study of principals in racially diverse schools and invites an exploration of the relationship between principals' individual racial literacy and the institutional pressures of SAPs and school reputation.

### **Researcher Positionality**

I am intimately familiar with the yearly rituals of recruitment, the intricacies of middle school choice, and the leadership of a school with a racially and socioeconomically diverse population. My 15 years of experience as a principal at a middle and high school, including the specific experience in 2015 of welcoming a sixth grade class with a demographic shift from no White students to 25% White students, strongly impacted my interest and choice of principals in racially diverse schools as a subject of study. I have often asked myself the research questions I outlined earlier. Though I know the specific situations in which I grappled with conflicting conceptions of the quality of my school and the constant need to make sense of and to give sense to our school's racial diversity and decisions around equity as well as the extent to which district policy was a help or a hindrance, it is difficult to draw general conclusions from my own experiences alone. The context of my experience, on one hand, provides me with unique insight

into the context of my colleagues' experiences. At the same time, most of my tenure as principal of a school with increasing racial diversity played out under a Chancellor who opposed policies mandating racial diversity in favor of a one-school-at-a-time approach (Zimmerman, 2016). Our efforts at integration and equity unfolded without the context of a district-wide diversity policy or even demands to create one.

As the principal of a school in a choice district, I had to learn to present and market my school to a diverse community of parents—Black, Latino, and White—while being aware of the reputations of the schools but not necessarily their almost singular correlation to student demographics. When my school began to integrate, I learned that to provide an excellent education, advocate for equity, and maintain consumer interest in my school, I had to interrogate the role and goals of public education and racism and learn to engage a diverse community of teachers and parents in a similar process.

As a researcher, I cannot dismiss my own experiences and biases. But to maintain the validity of my research, I conducted interviews and analyzed data in ways that centered the voices and experiences of the principals in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, I believe that my insider status as a former principal put me in a unique position not only to center the voices and experiences of the participant principals but also to establish a unique careful trust during interviews. Principals candidly shared their thoughts and practices with me—even when they were not necessarily proud of those thoughts or practices—because they trusted me to both understand them and respect them.

## **Conclusion**

Local districts throughout the country are adjusting to increasing racial diversity amid intense public attention to racial inequality. In school systems like NYC, where policymakers are

instituting reforms to student assignment policies designed to counteract the segregation born out of decades of school choice, principals are grappling with their role in leading excellent, equitable, and diverse schools. This study explored the interplay among the micro context of individual implementer consciousness, the macro context of institutional racism, and the influence of district policies on the choices principals in racially diverse schools make about school-level practices to better understand if 21st century efforts at integration will succeed in leading to greater equity or if they will replicate the separate and unequal practices that characterized much of 20th century desegregation.

School diversity issues in gentrifying cities such as New York will be closely watched by advocates of diversity, equity, antiracism, and integration. Researchers will continue to measure and evaluate student demographics, teacher demographics, student test scores, access to learning, and parent satisfaction. But it would be a mistake to overlook the crucial role that school principals will play in all of these outcomes and to take note of the shifting demands and role definition this next attempt at integration and equity will bring.

## Chapter 5

### Asserting a Professionally Constructed Vision of School Quality:

#### The Inputs and Outcomes That Matter to School Leaders

You know, it doesn't mean test scores and things like that.  
(Principal Parkside Middle School)

I think excellence might fall into place if kids are loved and  
cared for and made to be whole humans. (Principal Collegiate  
Research Middle School)

In my interviews and observations of middle school principals in four racially diverse districts in NYC, I found that these professional educators, despite vast differences in their schools' reputations for quality and significantly different student demographics, still share a remarkably similar vision of an excellent school. All of the principals in this study envision schools staffed by teachers who care deeply for their students and who, under the guidance of their principals, provide their students with daily opportunities to engage productively with each other. They also provide content that reflects the lived experiences of all the students and prepares all of their students to understand, critique, and change the larger world around them. Although these principals lead schools with vastly different student demographics and must contend with popular reputations that link excellence to the percentage of White students and with policies that champion students' test scores as the ultimate indicator of educational excellence, principals still maintain a professional vision of a quality school that rejects seeing students solely as indicators of status. Instead, they aspire to see a whole child who enters their school as having valuable experiences to share and vast intellectual and emotional potential to nurture and develop.

In Chapter 6, I explore how despite this professional construction of school quality that principals used in their professional evaluations of their work and progress, these principals had to contend with the fact that within the context of choice SAPs, their schools' reputations for quality within their racially diverse districts hewed very closely to the racial demographics of their student populations and those students' test scores. Furthermore, this sociopolitical construction of school quality converted White students into both indicators of and contributors to status. It is important to explore how principals understood their schools' reputations and how they came to those understandings so that we can begin to understand how these socially constructed reputations for quality—specifically the importance they placed on White students— influenced principals' pursuits of excellence, equity, and diversity.

Later, in Chapter 7, I explore how different SAPs enhanced or mitigated the relative influence of socially constructed reputations versus the principals' professionally constructed vision of quality. But first, I explain how principals learned the market value of White students and families, how that value impacted their schools' reputations and status, and how the sociopolitical construction of school quality encroached on the principals' professionally constructed vision.

In this chapter, I focus on the first major finding from my study, which is that the middle school principals I interviewed and observed maintain a shared professionally constructed vision of school quality that does not depend on the racial characteristics of incoming students or student test scores, which correlate closely to students' race and class. This theme across my data stood out, even as these principals were well aware of the focus of parents and policymakers on standardized test scores and the racial demographics of a school as proxies for school quality.

In contrast to these proxies, the principals I studied centered their vision of a good school in their professional knowledge of how students learn. A principal at Middlestreet Academy summed up this vision as follows:

We're talking about a model that centers on the whole child, that's looking at the child holistically as not just an academic learner but their social emotional growth. We're talking about a curriculum that is meaningful and ends in meaningful projects, provides opportunities for students to interact with the world, that there's a focus on interdisciplinary work, that students are engaged in not only these projects, but these projects connect content to other content and to life outside of school.

Absent from these principals' professional construction of an excellent school was any mention of popularity or status, even though all of these principals led schools in competitive choice districts where parents selected schools in ranked order. Even though, as will become clearer in Chapters 6 and 7, the principals in this study were encouraged by superintendents to view their schools as best for particular students based on individual student characteristics and race, their ideal vision of an excellent school was welcoming of all students and equally capable of meeting all and any needs. Remarkably, school leaders across these four diverse NYC Community School Districts (CSDs), serving vastly different student populations and with widely divergent reputations, espoused amazingly similar visions of the inputs necessary to create quality schools as well as the outcomes these schools ought to provide for their students to prepare them for success. Moreover, principals retained and cherished their professionally constructed vision of school quality that incorporated equity and diversity as indicators of excellence, even as the vision was overshadowed by a sociopolitical construction of school quality where exclusivity, privilege, and Whiteness were proxies for excellence and where SAPs effectively matched students to schools based on students' racial identities or on characteristics that correlate closely to race.



## **Beyond Student Characteristics: The Needed Inputs of a Professional Vision of a “Good” School**

The principals in my study all believed that they had the agency and the know-how to create a good school. To most non-educators and many researchers, school is often seen as a black box whose inner workings can only be known by comparing what they can measure about the child who enters to what they can measure in that same child when she exits years later. To these principals, however, the inner workings of a school consist of the interaction among component parts that they, as professional educators, fashion, direct, and develop. In a late 20th century review of the research on school desegregation, Wells (1995) argues that simple input/output studies of the short-term effects of desegregation on the achievement of Black students ignore important variations in context caused by variations in the implementation of desegregation. In other words, simply looking at the test scores of Black (and White) students after any level of desegregation ignores the role that school leaders played in managing desegregation and limits our view of inputs to the mere existence of some level of racial diversity within the school. My findings problematize this narrow view of inputs as the individual characteristics of the students who enter a school by revealing that school leaders have a robust and informed vision of the components that go into the school itself and determine its quality.

### ***Principals Value Real-World and Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Pedagogy***

The principals from across districts and schools in my study spoke at length about the curriculum and pedagogy they believed were necessary to create good schools, reflecting the trend I mentioned in Chapter 1 toward a more antiracist vision of school quality. They wanted students engaged in making meaning of the world and seeing themselves and their classmates as important actors in that world. Teaching and learning, in the professional vision of the principals

in this study, interacted in a dynamic relationship between creative teachers and the students whose interests and skills their teachers cared to know. Rather than seeing their middle school students as passive vessels simply to be filled with information they did not yet have and equipped with particular skills they had not yet mastered, principals envisioned curriculum and pedagogy that could build on students' lived and learned knowledge and skills. They envisioned curriculum and pedagogy that engaged students' curiosity about their own environments and experiences as well as the environments and the experiences of people unfamiliar to them. Furthermore, they believed that it was their responsibility to provide leadership and professional development to teachers to see that schools improved when teaching improved. The principal of Expanding Horizons Academy, a predominately Black school, explained his thinking upon taking over the leadership of his school:

The definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing you're doing and think you're gonna get a different result. So, we can't say it's the kids, because the kids change, right, so we have to look at ourselves. . . . So, these pedagogical practices you've been using, they're not working. You have to figure out: how am I going to meet my students' needs?

What principals believed students needed most—from schools with the highest-performing students to those with the lowest test scores—was not test prep. The principal of Hidden Figures MS, where 89% of the students are Black or Latino, stated:

I wanted to make sure that we're providing a whole child approach to learning and we're not just focusing on building test scores. I believe if you do all those other good things then the test scores would naturally improve, which they have since I've taken over.

Similarly, the principal of Neighborhood Academy, where 76% of the students are White and Asian, explained, "Teachers do a really good job of helping kids make meaning. It's not just grinding through the tests, like everything you have to do for the test. We have to do a little bit because it's not fair to give a kid a test if they've not been prepared."

Both of these principals were fully aware that test scores mattered; but they also clearly believed that their students deserved to engage with knowledge in ways that acknowledged the students' intellectual agency. In other words, instead of limiting students' learning to the narrow content selected by the writers of standardized exams, the principals wanted students, under the guidance of their teachers, to have some choice and voice in the particulars of the content they studied. Principals spoke often of the value of curricula with "real-world connections" as well as curricula that exposed students to new ideas and experiences. They were proud of the partnerships they had cultivated with arts and cultural organizations; quite a few of the principals expressed pride in the sense of agency and efficacy they instilled in students. As the principal of University Middle School said, "We want our kids to be activists. We want them to feel like they can make a difference in their lives."

This emphasis on curriculum and pedagogy that sees in every student the potential to make meaning of the world and to live meaningfully in the world is much more similar to the model of the Southern Black principal than to the Progressive Era or post-*Brown* White principal. While not every principal spoke of activism or "social justice" as part of the curricula at their schools, 15 of the 16 principals interviewed spoke explicitly of the importance of culturally responsive curricula pedagogy, which they viewed as opportunities for students to see both themselves and others in the curriculum. In other words, principals recognized that it was their responsibility to ensure that teachers created learning environments that recognized and valued all students' previous learning experience—both formal and informal—and that provided students with opportunities to engage together in learning about critical issues in the world through a lens that not only recognized past and present inequities but also invited students to be part of ways to redress those inequities.

It is clear that the research on 20th century desegregation has documented the ways in which school curricula reflected a view of the world where Black people and other people of color were dependent on and subservient to White people, where “great” literature was limited to White authors, and where all great discoveries and contributions were attributable to White people (Hester, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Leonardo & Grubb, 2018; Yacovone, 2022). Thus, it is significant that school principals in racially diverse districts express familiarity with the concept of culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy and a responsibility to implement it in their schools.

Admittedly, this study does not include data on how faithfully or effectively principals instilled in their teaching staff a commitment to such curricula and pedagogy. Increasing the representation of non-White people depicted in the books students read or in the content of the curricula is positive. But it does not guarantee that the teachers or the principals truly understand the historical or ongoing impact of racism or the complexly lived lives and contributions of the majority of the world’s population. But particularly in an era when political and parent groups are accusing schools and teachers across the country of infusing critical race theory (CRT) into K-12 curricula, principals made a point to highlight their knowledge of and belief in culturally responsive and sustaining educational practice—a clear indication of a shift in the leadership capacities of principals in desegregating schools. Furthermore, principals’ professional knowledge of antiracist school leadership was sufficient to convince them to reject, at least in theory, the practice of tracking that led to second-generation segregation in 20th century desegregated schools.

### ***Principals Embrace Diversity Within the Classroom and Reject Tracking***

All of the principals in this study led schools with some degree of racial and economic diversity (see Chapter 4), and the principals at these schools believed that their classrooms should reflect the diversity of their schools. In addition to a noticeable familiarity with culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy, the vision that the principals in this study had of quality education included replicating whatever racial diversity existed within the student population as a whole within individual classrooms. Of the 16 principals, 14 spoke thoughtfully and knowledgeably against the practice of tracking—that is, assigning students to courses or classes on the basis of past academic performance or assessment of ability, specifically because it tended to segregate students into separate classrooms. In addition to its origins in the Progressive Era school designed to provide each student with no less and no more than their supposed innate ability required, after the *Brown* decision tracking became one of the most widespread instigators of second-generation segregation that relegated Black students within racially diverse schools to less rigorous and intellectually engaging coursework and separated them from their White peers, who were much more likely to be offered “advanced” or “honors” courses. Principals in the racially diverse districts in NYC seemed to be very aware, as the principal of Society Prep MS put it, that “[honors classes] tend to segregate kids racially and economically, so that’s not a good thing” (Burriss & Garrity, 2008; Diamond & Lewis, 2015; Oakes, 2005). In other words, in the vision of the principals in this study, the classrooms in a good school should reflect the racial diversity of the school as a whole.

With the exception of the principals at Rigor Is Us and Expanding Horizons, the principals spoke of consciously assigning students to classrooms to create as much diversity as possible. Using information about students’ race/ethnicity, gender, elementary school, and past

academic performance, principals worked to create heterogeneous classrooms that defied labels like “honors” or “regular” or “remedial.” Some principals spoke proudly of their teachers’ abilities to differentiate instruction within the classroom so that students had choices and options that allowed them to approach a subject from different perspectives or using different texts. Other principals cited this level of differentiation as a goal while acknowledging that they had work to do to help teachers become more skilled at lesson planning that met the needs of all the students in their classes.

Only the principal of Rigor Is Us Middle School expressed the opinion that not all students were equally capable and presented the idea of diverse, heterogeneously grouped students as merely performative equity: “I can’t put them in a high school level math class here just to make sure it looks like mixed colors and ethnicities and race.” But her view was the exception.

Meanwhile the principal of Expanding Horizons, where 88% of the students are Black and Latino, created an Algebra class for only select middle school students because he did not believe all students had received sufficient mathematics instruction in elementary school. However, he also did not feel his teachers were skilled enough to meet the needs of every student when their skill levels were so wide-ranging.

New York State requires all high school students to pass exit exams, called Regents, before graduating. Recently, the NYCDOE instituted an *Algebra for All* policy that requires all middle schools to offer Regents Algebra, though it does not require that all eighth grade students be enrolled. Unlike the principal at Rigor Is Us, the Expanding Horizons principal philosophically believed that every eighth grade student in his school should be taking Algebra and he had plans to make it available eventually to all students. Teachers willing and able to

recognize the talent in all of their students and to create classrooms that inspired and enabled students to develop that talent were key to his plan and to the shared vision of the principals in this study.

### ***Principals Hire Caring, Well-trained Teachers***

In addition to guaranteeing curricula with “real-world connections” as well as curricula that exposed students to new ideas and experiences, principals expressed that it was their responsibility to provide for students a teaching staff prepared to put students at the center of the classroom, to build caring and respectful relationships, and to be role models for their students. The principals who had been in their positions for more than 5 years spoke with pride in their ability to retain teachers, the quality professional development they provided for teachers, the care they put into hiring decisions, and the work they had done over the years to push unqualified teachers out of their schools. Newer principals explained the priority they placed on working with teachers to align their pedagogy with the principals’ professionally constructed vision of quality—especially in schools serving predominantly Black and Latino students.

The new principal at Pensamientos Middle School shared an early observation of teacher practice that failed to pass muster: “It is very much the teacher talks, talks, talks, and kids are supposed to absorb. In most classrooms, not all, there’s very little of kids being the holders and the doers [of learning].” This principal saw it as her responsibility to make sure that teachers prioritized student engagement and student voice, not student passivity and teacher control. She knew how important it was for students to be active participants in learning and how crucial it was for teachers to embrace her vision. When they did, she reflected on the impact: “The teachers just grabbed onto it so quickly and so many have just totally transformed their classrooms, and through those conversations with teachers I just quickly learned that it wasn’t a

lack of wanting to. It wasn't necessarily valued previously and/or no one was shown how to do it." Principals, both new and experienced, accepted that teacher quality was a reflection of their vision and leadership and something they had the agency and responsibility to affect.

### ***A Diverse Teaching Staff Matters to Principals***

#### ***Serving More Black and Latino Students***

Nine of the 16 principals interviewed cited creating a diverse faculty as an important goal. As the principal of Investigations Academy said, "To have kids be able to see themselves in the people within the community was important." The principal of Parkside Middle School agreed and added, "We're able to have a Black Student Union and an Asian Student Union and a Muslim Student Union . . . because we have staff members qualified to facilitate those groups and that kids would be comfortable looking towards to say, Hey, will you facilitate this club?" While these two principals were particularly concerned that students had the opportunity to learn from teachers who shared their racial or ethnic identity, other principals stressed the importance of having a diverse staff who could identify with any and all of the students in front of them. According to the principal at Hidden Figures MS, "I make sure that I hire a diverse staff, people who are not afraid to be in front of children, people who are not using this as a step to get into law school or medical school or a way to pay off their loans."

The principal at Pensamientos, where over 75% of the students are Latino, echoed the primary importance of hiring teachers who shared her vision—the professionally constructed vision—of serving the whole child and all children:

I'd love my teacher population to reflect my student population. I don't think it ever will in my lifetime for a lot of reasons, and so I'm less concerned about that and more concerned about the beliefs of my teachers, and not just do you have high expectations, but do you really understand how to teach a diverse group of students, how to reach all of them and give them what they need?



This principal pursued a diverse teaching staff but recognized that having teachers who could identify *with* all of the students, even if they did not claim the same racial or ethnic identity *as* the students, was what mattered most. I explore the importance among principals of identifying *with* rather than *as* more in Chapter 7, but it is worth previewing here.

It is interesting to note the general correlations between the racial diversity of the students at a school and the racial diversity of the teachers (see Table 3 in Chapter 4). While not absolute, in the schools that served more than 50% Black and Latino students, the percentage of White teachers was below or almost below the city average and never higher than 60%. Whatever the systemic challenges to recruiting and retaining non-White teachers to the NYC public schools, principals serving most of the Black and Latino students within the most racially diverse districts in the city did a better than average job of pursuing a racially diverse teaching staff.

It is also interesting to note that although there was some correlation between the racial identity of the principal and the racial diversity of the students and staff, it was far from absolute. Of the eight schools where both a majority of the students were White or Asian and over 65% of the teaching staff was also White and Asian, seven of the principals were also White and one was Black. The Black principal of a predominately White school worked to recruit Black teachers when the school first opened because most of the students at that time were Black. But as the student population became more White and Asian, this principal let go of that commitment:

I'm happy to say that a lot of the talented people of color that I had here moved on to leadership, so that's great. right? Some became assistant principals. Some of them went on to get their Ph.D. and a number of things. I think our focus kind of changed a little bit. We realized that we needed more men in the school, men in general, just because we had so many boys and we wanted for them to see men as teachers.

Of the remaining eight principals who worked hard to create a racially diverse staff for their students, four were White, two were Black, one was Latino, and one was Asian. What

began to emerge from principals' understandings—as expressed in both words and deeds—of the importance of providing students with a racially diverse teaching staff was the recognition that what inspired principals to pursue racial diversity among teachers had less to do with who the principal identified *as* and more to do with who the principal identified *with*. I explore the ways that schools come to be identified and valued according to the racial demographics of the students, as well as how principals took on that identity, more in Chapters 6 and 7.

But this short discussion of teacher diversity as an important input in the professionally constructed vision of principals in racially diverse districts hints at the extent to which principals in racially diverse schools identified not only with that racial diversity but also with their role in guaranteeing curriculum, pedagogy, and teachers who could meet the needs of all of their students. Principals' understandings of curriculum and pedagogy as crucial inputs to school quality reflected not only the developed sophistication of principals' professional construction of school quality but a commitment to equity as well. That same vision of a school that welcomed and served all students showed up also in the vision of the climate and culture to which principals aspired.

### ***Principals Envisioned Bringing Joy and Support to Students***

Regardless of the racial demographics of their schools or their own racial identity, principals described the importance of creating an environment that was safe and welcoming for all students. As the principal of Hidden Figures MS explained, “I want my kids to . . . experience joy when they're here. I want them to know that there are people . . . who really know them, like their birth date and their favorite color and their favorite football team. . . . [That] we're gonna love you up and we're gonna help you grow.”

Similarly, the principal of Neighborhood Academy, a school serving predominantly but not exclusively White students, explained:

You know, we want to give kids an opportunity to be in a safe environment that provides them with a well-rounded education so that they can figure out who they are and what their interests are and to try things that they might not have tried otherwise, and also that it was inclusive.

That students should enjoy school and see it as a place where they are both recognized for who they are and can experiment with who they want to be was an idea expressed in some way by all of the principals in the study. Unlike the Progressive Era schools that gave rise to the position of the principal (Rousmaniere, 2013), these schools, through their leaders, strived to be places where all children could grow and develop rather than be places equipped to determine a child's fixed potential and then send them down the appropriate path to fulfill their role in a socially efficient yet unequal society.

Principals did not take for granted the climate and culture of their schools, nor did they assume that it was valued as much by the staff and the district leadership as it was by them. The principal of Expanding Horizons MS told me that when he started as the principal at his current school, "There were no systems or structures in place and no learning going on." This principal did not attribute this situation to the student characteristics but to the lack of vision, agency, and accountability of the adults in the building: "Where's the goal setting for the adults to make sure they're monitoring themselves and they're having an impact, not only on children but the families that we service and their colleagues?"

This principal spoke proudly of the changes he had implemented in the school, as did several other principals who had worked hard to provide teachers with the tools and understandings they needed to prioritize student learning *and* students' social-emotional health and well-being. In the words of a principal at Middlestreet Academy, one of the most racially

diverse schools in the city, “We’re talking about definitely a model that centers on the whole child, that’s looking at the child holistically as not just an academic learner but their social emotional growth.” This emphasis on the “whole child,” embraced to some extent by all the principals, suggests that school leaders believed it was their responsibility to create a school climate and culture that welcomed children in all of their humanity and provided those children with the attention they needed to thrive both academically and personally. Again, the striking similarities between this commitment to the whole child among 21st century principals and the 20th century principals of the segregated schools committed to serving Black children in all of their humanity signal a certain optimism for the potential for equity within and between schools serving children in racially diverse districts.

***Principals Rejected Punitive Discipline That  
Disproportionately Impacts Black and Latino Students***

Many of the principals in this study also spoke explicitly about curbing or eliminating punitive systems of discipline that they recognized had a disparate and disadvantaging impact on Black and Latino students. Overall, the attitudes that principals expressed about the kind of climate and culture they worked to create at their schools, including how they addressed conflict and challenging behavior, reflected a much broader and far less technical view of the inputs required to create a good school than both the model of the Progressive Era principal and the post-*Brown* 20th century principal.

Two relatively new principals, one White and one Latino, at schools serving predominantly Black and Latino students referenced the need to shift immediately how their schools responded to student behavior. As the principal at Southside Prep explained, “Some of my initial plans were related to my concerns around the disproportionality in the data for the

students in the school. The year prior to my arrival there were a lot of suspensions. . . . All of them were Black students.” Not only did this principal notice and discuss removing students from class or school as a potentially racist practice, but she also recognized it as a practice she had some agency to change:

So, I just started pointing out these things and saying that these are things that cannot be. We need to change these things. Maybe they occur in schools that may be similar to ours, but that is what we have been saying through our equity conversations, that that is what we don’t want to do.

Like her colleague, the principal at Pensamientos expressed optimism that with the right kind of leadership, a school could move away from potentially harmful practices if somebody in charge supported that change:

I think early in the school the suspensions were more out of exasperation and us not having built and learned together about what alternative supports within the school could look like to help students sustain being in a community. So, we’ve just built out our human capacity to do that more, and that’s been really powerful.

Significantly, principals in schools where 40-60% of the students were Black or Latino, that is, schools with significant racial diversity, also expressed an awareness of the need to avoid making the same mistakes that historically have harmed Black and Latino students in desegregating schools: “We’re implementing restorative practices and figuring out ways to make sure that kids stay within the learning community and aren’t removed. I’m very, very proud that we haven’t suspended a kid in three years.”

This principal and several others spoke passionately about restorative practices as a way to manage the conflicts they knew were inevitable in any middle school, but that might be even more fraught in a school with significant socioeconomic and racial diversity. Here is how a principal at Middlestreet put it: “For a lot of kids, it’s the first time they’ve ever been in a class with somebody who might have been coming from a shelter the night before or might have slept

in a mansion the night before or comes from a different background than them in terms of their racial or ethnic culture.”

Unlike the principals charged with managing 20th century desegregation who were described as avoiding conflict by either keeping students apart or catering to the needs and desires of White families, these principals believed in facilitating contact among students and looked for strategies to help students and teachers anticipate and navigate potential conflict. Even principals who spoke with less elegance or commitment to restorative practices recognized that disproportionality in discipline was a mistake they wanted to avoid. As the principal at University MS explained, “What you don’t want to have happen is, and this is something that is part of the landmines that you have to avoid, you don’t want to have diversity visually, but when you look at suspensions . . . you’re only seeing one kind of kid.”

Not surprisingly, the principals at the schools serving predominantly White and Asian students spoke very little about formal discipline practices. Studies show that White students are formally disciplined far less than their Black or Latino classmates even for identical behaviors (Martin et al., 2016), so it is possible that suspensions and removals from class were simply not a part of the culture of these schools. Studies also show that although Black and Latino students at predominantly White and Asian schools are disciplined at a higher rate than their White classmates, they are still disciplined at a much lower rate than Black and Latino students at schools that serve mostly Black and Latino students (Anderson & Ritter, 2016). But overall, in addition to embracing a school environment that catered to the whole child, like in the model of the Black school established prior to *Brown*, many of the principals in this study consciously rejected practices, like suspensions and other punitive discipline policies, specifically because of the pattern of racial discrimination associated with them.

It is significant that principals have constructed, through their professional practice, such a developed view of the inputs that focus not on the characteristics of the students but on the professional practices that principals believe they have the agency to provide to students. It is even more significant, in this era of accountability, how decisively principals rejected test scores as the ultimate expression of successful schooling in favor of more holistic outcomes.

### **Beyond Test Scores—A Professional View of Outcomes**

As discussed above, every principal in this study, when asked how the NYCDOE understood excellence in a school, immediately responded, “test scores.” In contrast, the principals in this study rejected student test scores as the singular output or outcome measure of school quality, just as they insisted that the curriculum, pedagogy, and school climate they provided contributed more to student success than the particular characteristics of individual students. This complication of the traditional view that school quality is measured simply by assessing student test scores and then correlating those scores to the individual characteristics of the students in the building furthers our understanding of principals’ professional construction of school quality and the possibility that equity and diversity can be appreciated as indicators and elements of excellence rather than as fetters upon it.

Though only some of the principals in this study completely rejected test scores as a valid measure of student learning, all of the principals objected to test scores as the *only* measure of student learning. Every principal valued student acquisition of knowledge and skills, and some believed that standardized exams measured some learning but failed to capture much of the important knowledge and skills that schools helped students to acquire. Just as these principals shared a vision of a good school that relied on all the educators at their school to see the whole child who entered the school, they also insisted that the focus be on seeing the whole child who

graduated. In other words, principals believed that the measures of their success were embodied in more fully developed human beings who exit their schools prepared not only to succeed in continued schooling but to succeed as engaged members of society.

Focusing exclusively on test scores, according to these principals, robbed their schools of the opportunity to nurture the whole child. In the words of the principal at Hidden Figures MS:

I think kids should want to find joy when they come to school and not be made to feel like they are lacking something and it's just your fault and now I need to just stress you out for six hours and twenty minutes in order for you to get higher test scores, which I really don't care about. I wanted them to have an enjoyable middle school experience because middle school can make or break a child.

This idea “that middle school can make or break a child” was expressed in a variety of ways by principals who not only embraced the whole child entering their schools in sixth grade but who also embraced their responsibility to send a more fully developed human beings off to high school. Even beyond content and skill development, principals believed that quality schools, like theirs, imbued all students with intellectual curiosity, with social-emotional knowledge and capacity, and with a readiness to contribute value to and be valued by the world at large.

### ***Principals Believed Students Should Love School***

As discussed above, principals cared a lot about curriculum and pedagogy and teachers who honor the whole child and engage that child in making meaning of the world. They wanted students to acquire knowledge and skills but believed that a singular focus on test scores was detrimental to students specifically because it removed the joy from learning and turned it into a chore. As the principal of Collegiate Research Academy, who was quoted at the beginning of this chapter, said:



I want school to be appropriately challenging for students and I want them to learn and grow and I want them to be able to embrace academic habits and intellectual pursuits, but there's something about excellence that just feels like actually what they're saying is like do they score well on tests? I think excellence might fall into place if kids are loved and cared for and made to be whole humans.

Over and over again, principals stressed the importance of learning content and skills but also stressed that was not enough. The principal at Pensamientos criticized the old culture of the school, saying, "I think that there was this lower expectation of if we can just get these kids to behave and graduate and get out of here and go to high school, that we did a good job."

The principal at University MS, seemingly in recognition of what his colleague found lacking, said, "I think if kids love middle school, then they're going into high school with the hope or the expectation they will love high school as well, and then if you hand them off and the high schools do their job, then they're gonna want more of it. They're gonna want to go to college."

All of these principals, at those schools where most students scored at or above grade level on standardized exams and at the schools where most students scored below grade level, believed that a singular focus on test prep would rob students of the joy they not only deserved but needed in order to achieve continued success in school. To diminish students and student learning to the scores achieved on standardized exams offended principals' professional construction of school quality, and they held themselves to their professional standard, even if it was higher than the view of excellence established by the NYCDOE.

### ***Students' Social-Emotional Development Was an Important Outcome of Quality Schools***

Just as principals expected curricular, pedagogical, and discipline decisions to honor and respect the whole child—that is, their past experiences, their sense of themselves, and their

feelings—principals believed that students should leave their schools with more than additional knowledge and skills. In addition to producing students who liked school and therefore learned more, principals felt responsible for producing good people. Social development, in addition to academic development, was a priority for the principals in this study. The principal at Neighborhood Academy summed up success as follows: “You want them to be curious, you want them to have some skills, you want them to have some self-confidence, and you want them to care about others.”

Every school in the study offered students some kind of advisory program designed in part to create community and teach students the skills they needed to manage their emotions and to manage conflict. But principals also expressed a responsibility to produce students who could contribute to the public good. The principal at Expanding Horizons explained, “When we think about excellence, we think about them becoming productive citizens.” What he and other principals talked about was creating in students a sense of responsibility to and for a larger community.

The principal at Ensemble Academy argued that if she had to choose between academic progress or social-emotional progress, “It is more important to me in some ways for you to be a good human being, for you to have our core values. That to me is what will make the world a better place for future generations.” This commitment to schooling as a public good that produces thoughtful, productive citizens with a sense of responsibility to others contrasted significantly with the Progressive Era principal-as-technocrats interested more in social and economic efficiency, the post-*Brown* principal-as-middle managers interested in circumventing conflict, and the accountability-regime principal/entrepreneurs competing with other principals by appealing to the individual interests of parents as consumers.

However, this commitment by principals to social-emotional development and a more collective benefit to the education that each child received was not always easy for all principals to maintain. The fuller comment by the principal above began:

In a dream world [our school] would be top caliber in offering an academic experience and the social-emotional education for your child. I do think if we get feedback and criticism, it's that we do too much of the SEL and we do that too well at the sake of not valuing [academics] enough. I'm certainly aware of the limited resources we have and if we could do all things, I would certainly want to do all things. We can't. So, it is more important to me.

Not every principal was as candid about the challenges of pursuing their professional vision of education or the pressures they felt to prioritize academics *over* social-emotional development or the implicit assumption that pursuing one took away from the other. This principal wanted to “do all things” but only believed that was possible “in a dream world.” While I return in later chapters to discuss how principals understood and managed the competing pressures to offer “top-caliber” academic and social experiences to students, it is important to note here that the principals serving more Black and Latino students felt this pressure much more intensely than did their colleagues serving predominantly White and Asian students. The principal at Neighborhood MS proudly described all of the academic skills students acquired at their excellent school who, upon leaving, also “have the confidence to bravely go forth into the world and say, Here I am, these are my ideas, and that [I] care about people.”

This principal animatedly lamented that the visiting superintendent, upon observing students passionately discussing each other's ideas in book clubs, asked only why they were not engaged in test prep and failed to recognize how seamlessly the school had merged academic and social development. In other words, though the supervisor was too focused on test prep to see it, this school was able to produce highly proficient readers who also cared about the ideas of others. In their shared vision of school quality that principals across schools expressed,

principals' aspirations were remarkably similar. But small fissures in their view of what they could realistically achieve were beginning to emerge.

### ***Principals Reject Test Scores as a Measure of Progress***

In describing the kind of schools they wanted to create for incoming students, the principals in this study very rarely distinguished one incoming student from another. When they spoke of the opportunities available to their students, or the attention students deserved from teachers, or the curriculum offered, they spoke simply of “students” and occasionally emphasized “all students.” Similarly, principals spoke about student learning, progress, and success as a universal outcome of quality schooling that applied to all of their students, not just some. But during interviews, as principals began to think about students' immediate future as high school applicants and high school students, they struggled to reconcile their vision of progress, or even to find the language to describe that progress, with test scores.

The principal at Hidden Figures MS described an excellent school as one “where they're all progressing and improving in a variety of ways that they need to, whether that be in their physical health, their academic health, their social-emotional health.” Nonetheless, principals struggled to reconcile the physical, academic, and social-emotional growth and development that their shared vision imagined for all the students in their schools with the narrow definition of progress or outcomes as nothing more than test scores.

Similarly, even though the vast majority of the principals insisted that every eighth grade student take Algebra, they acknowledged, like the principal at Neighborhood Academy, that “All of the eighth graders are signed up for Living Environment and Algebra I, but not all of them take the tests. Some of them don't take the tests because . . . you don't need a Regents exam to go to [a private school]. Some of the kids don't take them because they're not gonna do well.”

Every principal acknowledged in some way or another that student outcomes would vary. This variation did not seem to trouble principals—unless it was used for or against the student in the high school application process. Like the principals quoted directly above, they recognized that students came to them with different experiences and needs, and they were committed to honoring those differences. Principals wanted to make sure that all students had access to advanced courses but recognized that a fact of graded exams is that some students do better than others. But unlike the principal above who nonchalantly acknowledged that some students could forego the Regents exam with few consequences, the principal at Pensamientos, whose students were almost all Black and Latino, agonized over the consequences:

This is the first year they're all taking a living environment course and an Algebra course. Do they all sit for the Regents? They are all registered, but if there's a family who feels like their child's not ready, I'd prefer they take Algebra again in ninth grade rather have a [minimal passing score] sit on their transcript forever. I don't know what the right answer is, but I did want to make sure that every child regardless of their [special education] or [English language] level had the opportunity. Does that make sense?

This principal understood that for a variety of reasons, students learned and progressed at different rates. That a child might opt to retake Algebra in high school did not concern this principal. But knowing that scores on Regents exams followed students to high school and became a part of their permanent transcripts did worry her.

The confidence and clarity with which principals articulated their professionally constructed vision of quality schooling began to wane when it bumped up against the stratified system of high school and college admissions. Principals' professionally constructed vision of quality schools that sees children in all their humanity and possibility, that honors their differences but unites them in community, and that sees equity and diversity as components of excellence was very different from the competitive, highly stratified world beyond middle school. Principals were not protected from the demands of parents who wanted their children to

gain an advantage in that competition. Similarly, principals were not immune to the influence of a socially constructed vision of school quality that these demanding parents used to evaluate their schools. Principals expressed an acute awareness of their schools' reputations within a rigid hierarchy of good schools and bad schools and noted that ignoring the inputs and outcomes important to principals correlated instead to test scores and student race. Holding on to their professionally constructed vision of school quality in this environment proved very difficult for principals. This phenomenon is explored further in Chapter 6.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, this first findings chapter revealed that the professional educators who lead middle schools within and across the most racially diverse districts in NYC have developed a shared professional vision of school quality that embraced valuing and nurturing the whole child. They hired caring, talented teachers to engage students in a rich, culturally relevant curricula that prepared students to be engaged members of society, despite a system they believed only values test scores and practices that raise test scores. Principals, representing various racial identities and serving student populations with a wide range of racial demographics, all believed that as school leaders, they could and should create a safe, welcoming, and supportive environment where all children could grow and develop academically and socially. They embraced their agency in hiring and developing quality teachers willing and able to embrace culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy that connected children to their own lived experiences and to the lives and experiences of people different from them. They avoided punitive discipline practices as well as “ability” tracking, specifically because of the racially disparate impact they knew these practices had on students. When students left their schools after 3 years, their principals wanted them to have gained not only important academic skills but a love of school

and learning, a sense of place in the world, and a sense of responsibility to others and the world at large.

This professional vision of school quality, that is more complete, more dynamic, and more universal than the conflation of test scores as the definition of excellence, also more closely resembles the model of school leadership established by Black principals in the segregated South than it does either the original Progressive Era model of the principal or the post-*Brown* principals charged with managing desegregation (Rousmaniere, 2013; Savage, 2001; Tillman, 2004a; Turnage, 1971). Because so many Black educators were dismissed from their positions during 20th century desegregation, their vision of excellence—specifically for Black children—was sorely missing. What developed in many desegregated schools under mostly White principals was a system of second-generation segregation that catered or acquiesced to demands of White parents for exclusivity and exclusion. This significantly limited the progress toward equality that advocates of desegregation, including many Black principals, anticipated. As metro migrations and revised SAPs increase the racial diversity in many schools and districts, the presence of the model of Black leadership in the professional construction of school quality by 21st century principals suggests the potential for more equity in today’s racially diverse schools than those created over half a century ago.

However, as I discuss in Chapter 6, in spite of this professional construction of school quality that principals used in their professional evaluations of their work and progress, these principals had to contend with the fact that within the context of choice SAPs, their schools’ reputations for quality within their racially diverse districts hewed very closely to the racial demographics of their student populations and those students’ test scores. This socially

constructed vision of school quality often overshadowed and distracted principals from their shared professional vision.



## Chapter 6

### The Market Value of White Students:

#### How Principals Contend with Reputation, Status, and Race

Your students then became sort of like something in a stock market. You know if you've got shares of high performing [in terms of test scores] kids you did better than if you had shares of low-performing kids. (Society Prep Middle School Principal)

The principals in this study were eager to share with me, as described in Chapter 5, their professionally constructed vision of the quality education they aspired to provide for their students. Though many described themselves as their own biggest critics and spoke candidly about the work that still had to be done, they sounded confident and inspired when discussing their professional visions of school quality. But when the conversation turned to their schools' reputations and status within the context of their districts' SAPs, the principals in this study were forced to face the contrast between their professional visions of school quality and the harsh reality of a competitive educational marketplace within a society constructed on antiblackness.

When looking at their schools through this lens, a different vision of school quality emerged—one constructed through state policies, the market, and racial and class hierarchies. This social construction of school quality, with which principals had to contend through their interactions mainly with the school choice process, superintendents, and other principals, was built not on the educational decisions that principals made about curriculum, pedagogy, or climate but on the number of White students enrolled and a reliance on test scores, which are, in and of themselves, markers of race/ethnicity and class as the sole indicators of quality. Within the school choice marketplace, principals, often in spite of themselves, not only participated in the market competition, but in doing so, ended up reinforcing this social vision of excellence

that, unlike their professional vision, placed little value on equity or diversity and defined a school and its quality as the demographics of the student population it served.

This disconnect between what these principals knew professionally and how they acted within the system resulted from their interactions with superintendents, parents, and each other throughout a choice process that catered to the racialized social construction of school quality designating White students as a proxy for excellence. Thrust into the role of producers competing for consumers in a marketplace, principals either abandoned aspects of their professionally constructed vision of excellence in favor of the status and privileges conferred on them by the racialized social construction of school quality, or they adjusted their goals and visions to adapt to the place assigned to their schools within that hierarchy.

In this chapter, I continue to explore principals' understandings of school quality, not as the principals themselves saw their schools, but as the principals understood their schools' socially constructed reputations—that is, how their schools were seen by others. Unlike the vision of quality constructed through the lens of principals' professional understanding and experience, their schools' reputations were constructed through the social and racialized lens of the school accountability and school choice movements. Reputation, as Origgi (2018) explains, “is not created simply by *reflection* but rather by the *refraction* of our image that is warped, amplified, redacted and multiplied in the eyes of others” (p. 4).

To wit, rather than reflecting principals' professionally constructed vision of school quality, each school's reputation was refracted through a socially and politically constructed lens that was clouded by racism and the policy decisions of the accountability regime. Principals learned to see their schools as they were seen through the eyes of the state as testing examiner, parents as consumers, and colleagues as competitors. Over and over again, principals were

reminded that the more White students they served, the more highly regarded they were, the more richly they were rewarded, and the easier their path to success would be in the competitive marketplace of middle school choice.

In the first section of this chapter, I describe how principals learned from their superintendents how the particular student selection options (described in Chapter 4) assigned to schools within the marketplace of student choice reinforced the social construction of school quality and communicated to principals which students their schools were expected to serve. Even under the broad umbrella of policy goals that espoused excellence, equity, and diversity across the NYC public schools, principals, as the street-level bureaucrats who interacted most directly with the public in the school choice marketplace, learned to cater to a racialized hierarchy of schools. Publicly, NYCDOE-choice SAPs deferred to parents as consumers who, in ranking schools on their applications, indicated their assessments of which schools were better than others. However, principals learned privately from superintendents that admissions options were assigned to schools to facilitate the distribution of high-status White and middle-class students to particular schools in ways that satisfied the demands of those families.

In the next section of this chapter, I describe how White students, as an indicator of status in a competitive market, i.e., a proxy for quality in the eyes of others, conferred advantages on the schools that increased the autonomy principals had to pursue their professional construction of quality. High-status schools, and their principals, were afforded more latitude to bend rules and to forego compliance with mandates they opposed, such as the administration of a lengthy questionnaire to assess students' social-emotional health that many parents, teachers, and principals believed was ill-conceived and poorly designed (Amin, 2021). Principals also noted that teachers held themselves more accountable for rigorous curricula and coherent pedagogy

when the demands came from White middle-class parents than when they came from Black or Latino parents, therefore easing the supervisory responsibility of the principal.

Paradoxically, even though the market gave the principals serving White students more agency to implement their professional vision of a quality education, these principals still felt constrained by the demands of the high-status White middle-class parents, who are the most likely to rely on the racial identities of the students in a school—not on the professional expertise of the principal—as an indicator for quality (Holme, 2002; Sikkink & Emerson, 2008; Wells, 2018). Thus, in order to make their schools more attractive to those parents, principals made concessions to their demands. As the principal at Neighborhood Academy explained, “We held off for a long time not doing Regents courses because we were afraid that [the class] would just become teaching to the Regents test, but [the middle-class] parents really wanted Regents courses, so we caved.”

In the final section of this chapter, I focus on the ways that the market more aggressively moved the principals serving mainly Black and Latino students away from what they know is good education. Often laboring under state accountability demands to raise test scores as well as the stigma that lower test scores inflicted on already racialized reputations, the principals in this study serving more Black and Latino students often resorted to test-prep, in spite of their professional judgement of what would best serve their students. They worked to raise scores not because they believed in the value of the tests but because serving students with the lowest test scores trapped their schools at the bottom of a racialized hierarchy of school quality.

Not only did the principals serving more Black and Latino students have to contend with the designation as “failing schools” conferred by both the state and by the market, but they also had to contend with the difficulties of serving the students most marginalized by racial and

economic inequality *and* most marginalized by school choice policies and practices. As decisions made by parents and fellow principals concentrated the poorest students in the schools at the bottom of the racialized hierarchy, the principals at these schools faced challenges that not only impacted their ability to implement their vision of a good school but had serious implications for students. The principal at Hidden Figures MS grappled every day with the dilemma: “Children are coming to us with so many needs. At the end of the day, am I a school for education, teaching critical thinking, or am I a social work center now supporting all these other goals?”

The stories of these 16 principals, working in the context of a segregated and unequal marketplace, demonstrate that although state law no longer mandates the segregation of students by race, market law demanded a hierarchy of school quality beholden to racialized and specious measures—especially standardized test scores. This market law functioned within school choice student assignment policies that adhered to market principles, allowing richer schools with more advantaged students to become even richer—in terms of their ability to accumulate more high-status students and to provide those students with a valued education. In Chapter 7, I explore how the more substantive changes to SAP, designed to rein in the intense segregation caused by unrestrained choice, increased principals’ pursuit of their professionally constructed visions of excellence. In this chapter, I explore the findings from my data on the sacrifices principals made to their professional vision of a quality school to contend with the competing racialized social construction of school quality imposed by a school choice market run amok.

### **When SAPs Cater to the Market and the Social Construction of Quality**

All of the principals who participated in this study had years of experience as educators prior to taking over as school leaders. Whether they were stepping into the role after the departure of a valued predecessor, stepping up to provide leadership where it had been lacking,

or opening the doors of a brand-new school, they stepped into their new roles with their professionally constructed vision of a good school to guide them. But many of them learned directly from their superintendents that market demands required the principals to tailor their visions to a particular student demographic.

When the principal at Investigations Middle School accepted her position, she noted:

The Superintendent said to me, “You know, you’re going to have to recruit families. You’re going to have to sell your school.” That was odd to me that whole idea to sell the school to people or convince people to attend. “If you do a good job of selling, you’ll recruit great people, then this school’s gonna be great.” So, I guess without knowing that that was written up there as policy—I mean, who doesn’t lead a school and have the mission of we’re gonna make this the best place possible? I imagine all principals say that to themselves, right? But the whole idea was to attract kids who have a three or better on their test scores. Over time, the population [of the school] became Whiter and Whiter, and then it became more and more elitist, you know, to be in this school. It became very ugly in its elitism.

This principal, with years of experience as teacher in the NYC public schools became a principal with the straightforward goal of creating the best school possible. What she had in mind was the professionally constructed vision, described in Chapter 5, that she and her colleagues shared and that had nothing to do with the characteristics of the incoming students. She did not understand before she accepted the position that the DOE expected her, as the principal, to recruit families, nor did she see that to make the school great, she had to recruit a particular kind of family with students who scored high on standardized exams. She was not the only principal to learn from the superintendent that their expectations for all the schools in the district were not the same.

The principal of Destinations Middle School was the only principal to acknowledge candidly that from the very start of his career, he knew what the superintendent wanted. “[The superintendent] brought me on to make the school strong, to make it a destination, you know, a super affluent, super White school, and that’s how success was defined at the time, and it was like, no problem.” But, for other principals it was extremely difficult to reconcile what their

superintendents wanted with their own professional vision. The principal of Hidden Figures had a lot to come to terms with: “We’re a choice district, as you’re aware, and we are the only unscreened middle school in the offerings. So that gives off the perception of us being the dumping ground.” This principal went on to explain how clearly, yet unofficially, it was communicated to him that his school, while technically an option for any student in the district, was not just seen by others as a “dumping ground” but designed as one by policymakers:

When I took over in 2014, the rule was there were to be no new screened schools in [this District]. I’m not sure where that came from or what the decision behind that was, but then they allowed [this other screened school] to open up in the old [Former School] Building, and when I asked the superintendent why that is the case, she said there were not enough viable options in [this District]. I was like what does that mean, superintendent, my boss, my rater, my person?

The principal never received a direct answer to that last question he asked of the superintendent, but he did get the message, even if he did not know how the decision was made. When he had first taken over as principal, he told me he thought he was supposed to promote his school and make it attractive, particularly to White families. But when in spite of the rules, a new screened school opened, he realized that his school full of Black and Latino students was not considered a “viable option” for White families in the district. The White families would go to the screened school. What is more, by granting the ability to other principals to screen or select their students, the SAP effectively designated his school as the place for all the students not selected by the other principals.

The principal at Hidden Figures MS was not the only principal who felt constrained by the admissions options available to him or to see those constraints as a way to control which students attended which schools. Though Hidden Figures was the only unscreened stand-alone middle school in the district, there were also a number of schools, particularly in the neighborhoods with the highest concentration of Black residents, serving students in Grades K-8

where, in his words, “kids are siloed.” Though students in K-8 schools could participate in middle school choice, they were guaranteed a seat in their current school and the vast majority stayed. But sometimes, the K-8 designation was used to protect White neighborhoods. When the principal of Neighborhood Academy in a different district applied for her job, her new school was set to open in a relatively new area of the city that was attracting White middle class families. Though all of this principal’s previous experience was in elementary education, she remembered the superintendent telling her, “The parents who were really active wanted to make sure that this was a K-8 school.” It was several years later, when the lack of racial diversity in her school began to bother her, that she conceded the K-8 model was adopted to guarantee that the White students in her school, who were unable to secure seats in the more selective district middle schools, would still have a seat in a predominantly White district school.

What is interesting and significant about these anecdotes is how they reveal the role that principals were privately asked to play in carrying out the less public goals of SAP details, and then how those policy specifics asked principals to be complicit in segregating students and schools at the same time that they limited the principals’ agency to pursue their professional constructions of quality schooling. All but three of the 16 principals in this study shared some conversation or interaction with a superintendent that communicated to them that it was their job to make their school attractive to a particular kind of family defined primarily by race.

### **High-Status White Students Confer Status and Privilege on Their Principals**

Even as principals harbored visions of excellent schools whose excellence did not depend on the racial identities of the students they served, the marketplace of school choice conferred status and privileges on the schools and on the principals serving more White middle-class students. The idea that individuals or organizations with the greatest popularity, resources, or



status are more likely to accrue additional popularity, resources, or status than individuals or organizations with less is known as the Matthew Effect. As explained in Chapter 3, Podolney (2005) argues that under market competition, the Matthew Effect not only compounds privilege, but it also allows higher-status organizations to actually produce more for less. Research on school choice has documented similar findings (Holme, 2002; MacLeod & Urquiola, 2012).

The high status of the White students conferred both status and privilege on the principals whose schools served the highest percentages of these high-status students. High-status, middle-class White students typically require fewer services than many of their Black, Latino, and low-income peers who were more likely to be eligible for FRPL, ELL services, special education, and academic intervention. This concentration of high-status students within a school required less of the principals at predominantly White schools in the way of services provided and mandates to follow at the same time that it boosted test scores.

Principals recognized that White students, in their role as status indicators, triggered the Matthew Effect, not primarily in economic terms but in educational terms. They learned that not only did green follow White, as the literature on 20th century desegregation established (Carter, 1979; Liebman, 1990; Ryan, 2010), but so did agency over school-level practices and a sense of accountability to students and their families. Principals did recount some of the ways schools with White and middle-class families benefited economically: PTA fundraising, access to cultural capital, funding for specialized programs (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Kimelberg, 2014; Kohn, 1998; Posey-Maddox, 2014). But they also recounted how principals serving high-status students, in addition to attracting and enrolling more high-status students, gained more autonomy and latitude. Furthermore, teachers at schools with more high-status students held themselves

more accountable to students and families, thus making the supervisory work of the principal that much easier.

### ***Principals Get a Lesson in the Value of Whiteness***

As principals conceded that their schools' reputations and status were determined by the racial demographics of the student population, they also learned that managing demographics could be a shortcut to managing both their reputations and their quality. As the principal of Society Prep stated:

You just need to fill the building with the smartest, highest-performing kids in New York City, and you're gonna wind up with high /-performing classrooms. So, with us, that's a question. Is our reputation based on our kids or is our reputation based on our teachers?

But the principals serving predominantly Black and Latino students and students whose overall test scores ranked among the lowest in the district felt like the deck was stacked against them. "This is a failing school," said the principal of Expanding Horizons, referring to the school's designation from the state, "and if you want me to be successful, then why do I receive level 1 to 2 students? Why wouldn't I get 3s and 4s?"

In certain moments during our interview, this principal expressed pride and a real sense of hope and efficacy in his ability to create a school worthy of the students who attended. But when he saw his school as it was seen in the district hierarchy, students became nothing more than a test-score level, and getting more of the higher-scoring students became the road to success. The principal at Hidden Figures, whose school received more than its share of students enrolling after the school year had begun, in spite of his desire to keep class size small, also questioned why the enrollment centers "keep sending me all the special-ed overaged Black and Brown boys that all the other principals have rejected or have worked to get out or have counseled out. That's not cool."

Both of these principals, Black educators leading schools serving predominantly Black students, respected and cared deeply for the students in their buildings and often opened their doors and their arms to children who had been rejected by other schools. But they knew as well as every other middle school principal that it takes more commitment, more time, more heart to build the relationships and to meet the needs of students who have been repeatedly failed by previous schools. They also knew that their success would do little to improve either their reputations or their status in the district.

All of the principals in this study, when they discussed their professionally constructed visions of school quality, sounded supremely confident. Though they were humbled by both the challenge and importance of achieving that professionally constructed vision for the students they served, they embraced their agency and purpose. But when pursuing a reputation and status determined by the social construction of school quality that simply considers the socioeconomic and racial characteristics of the students, these same principals sound drained of agency and unable to see the whole children they aspired to serve.

### ***Principals' Identification with Their Schools' Reputations and Demographics Narrowed Their Goals***

Principals in this study did not enjoy their roles as recruiters or PR managers for their schools. They all found the time and energy these roles required of them to be a distraction from more important duties, and except for the principals at the highest-status schools, they often resented having to hawk their schools to uninterested consumers. Numerous principals mentioned that the only silver lining to the COVID-19 pandemic was the suspension of articulation events. In keeping with the research reporting that school choice encourages principals to find a niche in the market rather than competing with other schools to attract the

same families (Jabbar, 2016), I found that principals in racially diverse districts mainly conceded the slot the market had assigned to them in the racial hierarchy and adjusted their visions of excellence to focus on those students.

This concession to a socially constructed racial hierarchy of quality on the part of the principals did not necessarily signal agreement with that hierarchy or a lack of commitment to racial diversity in their schools; rather, it was a narrowing of their own professionally constructed vision of school quality that applied only to the students they served as well as a reluctance to rock the boat. Given the potential conflict with their superintendents and the difficulty of individually asserting a professional vision of school quality that contradicted the social construction of quality presented to parents, it was simply easier to focus their attention on the students in front of them and make the best of it.

***The Rich Get Richer as the Cycle of Segregation Continues:***

***Schools Are Seen as Best Suited for the Kind of Students Already There***

In contrast to their professional vision of a school able and willing to serve all students, the principals in this study accepted that schools with more White students were considered good for other White and high-performing students, while schools with more Black and Latino students were seen as good for other Black and Latino and lower-performing students. Again, unlike the principals' professional construction of school quality that did not depend on the characteristics of the students, the professional reputations of the schools—that is, how they were seen by other colleagues and even themselves—also came to reflect the racial demographics of the students they served. As I describe below, the boost in reputation awarded to schools serving more White students was accompanied by a boost in status for the principal. As schools with White students became seen as the “natural” place for other White students, these schools with

more status continued to accrue status, while the position of schools serving Black and Latino students became fixed at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Hidden Figures MS at one time was designated as a “failing” school based on test scores. This state designation allowed students to transfer out of the school to a more “successful” school with higher test scores. The principal at Hidden Figures, a school serving predominantly Black and Latino students, related a phone call he received after one of his students transferred to Rigor Is Us, a school serving predominantly White students:

About the second or third week of school, I’m having the Rigor Is Us principal call me. “I have this kid over here who belongs to you, and he doesn’t fit in here. Can you take him back?” Excuse me? Can I take him back? (Laughs) Does he want to come back? . . . You know what? Send him back, because clearly if you don’t want him there. Then he doesn’t need to be there, and you should send him back.

The Hidden Figures principal was genuinely taken aback by the Rigor Is Us principal’s declaration about where the transferring student belonged and by the suggestion that the Hidden Figures principal was somehow more responsible for this student. But ultimately, he relented and took the child back, conceding, with obvious contempt for the principal at Rigor Is Us, that the student would be better off in a school that truly welcomed him.

The principal at Pensamientos, a school serving predominantly Black and Latino students, had a similar response:

I did get a call from a fellow principal saying they got a boy, brand new to the country, speaks no English, only speaks Spanish, will we take him? It broke my heart because in my head I’m like, why can’t you take him? That’s what this is. You take some of mine, I take some of yours, and we balance it out. And instead, I just said, of course, we’ll take him.

Like the principal from Hidden Figures, the principal from Pensamientos understood that there might be some circumstances where a student might move from one school to another. But she, too, objected to the assumption that the sending school should not have to meet the needs of

the child or that the receiving school was somehow the obvious choice based on the similarities between the child in question and the racial demographics of the other students at the school.

Before the district changed its SAP (which I described in Chapter 4 and discuss more in Chapter 7), the principal from Ensemble described the backdoor her colleagues would leave open for White families who got shut out of the higher-status schools during the formal choice process:

Every summer we would watch the White kids disappear from our rosters. I know the principals at the other schools were keeping wait lists and enrolling students on their own even though “officially” we weren’t supposed to do that. But I never said anything. No one did. So, I’m becoming a part of something I don’t want to become part of.

This principal was confident that the few White children assigned to her school would do just fine. But she was far less confident that she could convince either the parent or her colleagues to see past the demographic mismatch. So, she just let it go, even though in doing so, she knew she was silently endorsing the practice. Ultimately, the principals, too, identified their schools and other schools within the district by the characteristics of the students who attended rather than by the schools’ climate and culture, or curriculum and pedagogy, or by any of the other characteristics that principals identified in their professionally constructed visions of quality schools.

In Chapter 7, I explore in more detail how differences among SAPs within a choice market impacted the relationship between principals’ professional construction of school quality and a social construction of school quality that turns White students into a status indicator. But the comments from the principals above, as well as comments like the one below from the principal of Rigor Is Us, indicate that it is very difficult for principals to function according to their professional visions in the context of marketplace pressures.

## ***Serving High-Status Students Means More Autonomy and Great Expectations***

On a day-to-day basis, principals as school leaders made hundreds of consequential decisions without any input from superintendents or the DOE central offices. Still, they functioned as part of a centralized bureaucracy, and some practices were simply mandated from above. Nonetheless, principals recognized that their colleagues serving a lot of high-status students had more leeway to ignore mandates with which they or the parents at their schools disagreed. The principal at Pensamientos recognized this difference and hoped that by mimicking the high-status principal, she, too, might also be granted a little latitude:

Your predominantly White schools, they have the voice and power. So, if they're objecting to some mandate and I agree with them, I will ally myself with them. You know, if it's not good for their parents, it's not good for my parents. But I find that I have to be loud and obnoxious about it and end up in *The New York Post* or else no one cares, or they don't care as much.

This principal envied the autonomy her colleague had to simply anticipate the objections of high-status parents and to act accordingly without any repercussions. As much as this principal tried to stand up for her students and their parents by grabbing hold of her colleague's coattails, she knew that she risked much negative publicity that her colleague would never face. The principal at Collegiate Research confirmed the Pensamientos principal's understanding and clarified that even in the absence of pressure from White parents, the school's status was enough to afford their principals increased autonomy and latitude.

I think that some of the principals in our poorer schools and our browner schools are getting more pressure to meet these compliance goals and more scrutiny. I mean it's the same thing. They're getting phone calls; have you . . . you're not this far along on this thing. And I'm not getting phone calls.

This freedom from scrutiny and rote compliance often allowed principals in schools with more high-status students to exercise increased agency to follow their professional vision, even

when that vision came into conflict with their superiors at the DOE. But, whether they exercised that agency depended on the support they had from high-status parents.

In addition to increased agency, principals at schools with higher percentages of high-status White students also benefited from the fact that teachers felt more pressure to perform when serving White students than when serving Black and Latino or working-class students. The realization that the presence of even a small number of White families could alter a teacher's performance was most common among principals who had worked in a variety of different schools or whose schools experienced a recent influx of White families:

I've seen it myself with my own eyes when you sprinkle in a couple kids who have parents who are going to email me about what happened in the class today, it totally sometimes changes the teacher's tone or their planning and preparation. Sad, but it does.

Managing a school is challenging work, and no principal or administrative team can know everything that is happening in every classroom. Principals set the tone and expectations, but they had to count on teachers holding themselves accountable to their students and to the school's vision. But in a stratified system with socially constructed good schools and better schools, it could be difficult for anyone's individual vision to compete with reputation. Here is how the principal from Collegiate Research described coming to this realization upon joining the faculty at a more high-status school:

What was the most striking thing to me when I came to Collegiate Research was the expectations difference. Part way through my first year here, I saw what the difference was. It's the expectations on the kids, and they are much higher. Everyone who goes into teaching, if they're like urban education soldiers like me, they're like, I have high expectations for all children. And I thought I did. On a micro level, on an individual level, I think I did have high expectations for my children, but my schools didn't. So, sort of like culturally as a school, we didn't.

Expectations are an expression of reputation. When reputations were stratified, so were expectations. But it could be difficult for educators to assess their expectations of one group of



students except in relation to another. Very few teachers intentionally held low expectations for their students or were even aware that they did. But these principals clearly noticed a difference in the attitudes and behaviors of teachers when high-status, usually White, students made up even a small fraction of the student body. Not only did principals of high-status students gain more information about their classrooms from parents who demanded greater accountability, but many teachers at these schools held themselves accountable to deliver more demanding and intellectually engaging content simply because they believed these students deserved it.

Still, as the principal of Society Prep stated earlier in this section, it would be a mistake to assume that the curriculum and pedagogy at high-status schools was responsible for the performance of the students or that principals took advantage of their agency to challenge the status quo or pursue their vision. Like the principal at Neighborhood Academy who admitted that she only offered Regents courses to appease middle-class parents who believed that their children would have an advantage in the competitive world of high school admissions if they took more Regents courses in middle school, the principal at Society Prep knew that the Regents curriculum some of his teachers followed sold students short:

Those Regents curriculums are very scripted and regimented and you have to go at a certain pace, like on Tuesday, October 16th you should be here, and by November 17th you should be here. I think that it can often be a disincentive to explore things in depth . . . to take into account the kids' interests and to respond to things that are going on in the community or the environment.

Still, it is clear that there was a sort of perverse internal logic to a social construction of school quality that defined middle-class White students as a status indicator in a market environment and then rewarded those schools and principals with superior reputations and status, even when the schools and their principals did little to earn them. The principal at Destinations MS was the most candid: "We had these kids who were very, very high achieving, very, very

successful students, and as a byproduct of that they were also pretty well behaved. You didn't need a teacher in the class. The kids practically taught themselves.”

### **Principals, High-Status Consumers, and the Limits of the Racial Hierarchy**

My findings indicated that though the risk of alienating White parents made the principals serving high percentages of White students reluctant to take full advantage of the status and privilege those White students conferred upon them, the principals in this study serving the highest percentages of Black and Latino students faced even greater barriers to their professional visions of school quality when SAPs left the school choice marketplace virtually unchecked and the racialized social construction of school quality unchallenged. As I described in Chapter 5, principals across schools loathed the emphasis that the NYCDOE and the state placed on test scores. But at the same time, schools faced very real consequences for students' poor performance on standardized exams that both required particular actions within the school and stigmatized the school in the court of public opinion.

The poor reputations that these schools suffered, particularly among high-status middle-class and White parents, were exacerbated by colleagues who—in seeking to protect their own schools' reputations in a racialized hierarchy that defined a school's quality according to the percentage of White students it served—accepted that schools defined as “bad” for middle-class and White students were still the “right” schools for the poorest and most marginalized Black and Latino students; the transfer requests described above demonstrate this. But the bottom-rung position on the socially constructed racial hierarchy that these schools occupied required that their principals adjust their goals and visions to contend with the compounding challenges of low scores, poor reputations, and concentrated poverty within their student population.

## *Market Law Forced Principals to Contend with Test Scores and State Designations*

According to the market law described above, then, the middle school principals I studied worried about students' test scores, not because they believed those test scores provided them with much information about teaching and learning but because those scores were public and important to others:

The Department of Ed wants excellence as something that they can measure on standardized tests, and I will tell you that standardized tests . . . I will go to my grave saying that standardized tests are maybe one piece, if I'm generous. They may be one piece of information that can tell you about the excellence in learning, but it is not the be all and end all, and too many schools just focus on standardized tests because that's what gets in the newspaper.

This principal from Neighborhood Academy acknowledged that not only did the DOE and the public form opinions about schools based on test scores, but principals, particularly those in schools serving the most disadvantaged students, then focused on strategies for improving test scores simply because of the political and social attention to them. As if to confirm what the principal above stated, the principal from Expanding Horizons Academy, whose school served mostly Black and Latino students from low-income families and, based on test scores, was designated by the State as a failing school, told me that his primary goal upon becoming principal was to "change the reputation because the school was on the state list; so one of my goals was to ensure that we linked teacher pedagogy to the tests, which would improve student outcomes so that we could come off the state list."

Not only did this principal insist on test prep to improve students' scores, but he also conceded that other aspects of his professional construction of school quality would have to be shelved as long as the state designation defined his school's reputation. This principal had many plans for his school: to expand course offerings, extracurricular activities, and students' exposure to the city's rich cultural resources—all of which he firmly believed his students deserved and

that would make them and the school more successful. He had a lot of confidence in his vision of school quality; but first, he had to quiet the critics by raising test scores, shedding the state designation, and improving the school's reputation. How long it would take to turn around a long history of low scores was not clear. So, for the time being, prepping for the tests was the priority. "Once we're no longer on the state list," this principal insisted, "there's nothing else they can say."

Every one of the principals in the study insisted either that they did not care at all about test scores, or they cared about them only because the state did. The principal at Ensemble Academy—in the years that the school was designated as a school needing comprehensive support and improvement (CSI)—also felt pressure to violate deeply held principles to manage test scores. Even though her school had gone through a rigorous process to garner a waiver from the state to replace Regents testing with state-approved performance assessments, "only because of CSI did we offer Math Regents because that was a way to game the system because it's actually easier to pass the Algebra Regents than it is to pass the eighth grade state math test."

In both of these instances, principals felt pressure to raise or manage test scores not so much in response to specific demands that the policy of measuring school quality by test scores imposed, but rather in response to the stigma attached to those designations. The practices they believed they had to forego or pursue to rid their schools of the stigma of failure actually limited their ability to pursue their own professional construction of school quality. This stigma of low test scores that was created by state and city policy as well as the correlation—real or assumed—between test scores, students' racial identity, and school quality also played a role in parents' perceptions of schools. Moreover, the perspectives of at least some of these parents played an outsized role in determining a school's status within the district hierarchy.

The incessant, recurring double jeopardy of racism in standardized testing and racialized reputations trapped these schools, their principals, and their students at the margins of the market in ways that severely limited the principals' ability to create the schools they dreamed of and believed their students deserved.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, this chapter illustrates that even though principals had a vision of school quality that was rooted in professional expertise and was responsive to the needs of all children in the public system, they had to contend with competing constructions of school quality that were rooted in hierarchies of test scores, social status, and exclusivity—all of which privileged middle-class and White families and converted White students into status indicators, i.e. both proxies for quality and conduits to reputation and status.

As discussed above, Podolney (2005) argues that producers engaged in market competition often contend with consumers who were either unsure of how to or did not have the time to truly evaluate the quality of a good or service available from a variety of producers. As the research on school choice, reputation, and race reveals, it is the high-status, White middle-class parents who are the most likely to rely on the racial identities of the students in a school as a proxy for quality (Holme, 2002; Sikkink & Emerson, 2008; Wells, 2018). What the findings discussed in this chapter indicated is that when reputation and status, instead of educational expertise, define school quality, not only did quality come to be defined by the percentage of White students in a school; that socially constructed vision often supersedes the professional vision that the principals themselves then pursued.

As I described in Chapter 5, principals aspired to a vision of excellence that viewed education as a product or service that conferred absolute value on all students. One student's or

school's success did not detract from any other student's or school's success. But in the current system, education has become a positional good. For one school to be the best school or a better school, another school must automatically be the lesser choice. In this context, excellence and equity are mutually exclusive goals, as are excellence and (too much) diversity. In this context, principals were forced into a position where pursuing their professional vision of excellence was impossible. Choices had to be made. As noted in this chapter, the choices available to principals were limited and constrained by the role that reputation played under SAPs that catered to the whims of the market and the demands of high-status White families. But those limits and constraints also varied according to the particularities of each district's SAPs that shifted over time and across districts.

In Chapter 7, I discuss how principals made sense of SAPs and the agency and latitude they had at the nexus of SAP and practice to manage the tension between their professional constructions of school quality and the racialized, social constructions of the choice market. Specifically, I found that principals had varied and often internally contradictory expectations of policies that were designed to promote equity and diversity. They were often frustrated by the responsibility and conflict that some policy decisions devolved to the school level and equally frustrated by the lack of agency that other policy decisions afforded them. They were often eager for individual autonomy and wary of that autonomy in the hands of other principals.

Additionally, principals had contradictory commitments to equity and excellence that seemed to vary in accordance with the racial identities of the students they served rather than with their own racial identities. As it turns out, as principals came to understand their schools' identities according to their racial demographics, they mainly sought to maintain those identities and the accompanying demographics. Finally, my findings indicated that when SAPs began to

increase access for all students to high-status schools *and* effect a more even distribution of high-status students across all the schools in the district, principals worried less about their schools' reputations and racial identities and felt empowered to publicly embrace their professional vision of school quality.

## Chapter 7

### **Making Room for a Professional Vision of School Quality:**

#### **How Student Assignment Policy Can Constrain**

##### **Market Forces for Better Schools**

I believe in the goals of the [District C] plan. I think that's where every school should be, right, that any kid can walk in any door and be as successful as they can be. I mean, there is so much more the DOE could do . . . but this is a start because it lets me do what I think is right by my students. (Principal, Pensamientos MS)

I wish we could shake up the whole system. Just distribute students equitably across everybody and then maybe we could start again. And then give principals the autonomy to do what we do. (Principal, Ensemble MS)

It was clear from Chapters 5 and 6 that public school principals and the school choice marketplace operate under very different understandings of what it is that makes a good school. Principals, in their capacity as professional educators, all yearned, at least in theory, to create good schools that served the whole child in all the variations that children come, and to send those children to go forth into the world prepared to make meaning and change. It was as if they carried in their collective professional backpacks the combined teachings of Horace Mann, John Dewey, and Gloria Ladson Billings. But, the high-status parents, choosing schools in a competitive market for their children, seemed more familiar with the ideas of Adam Smith and Milton Friedman—who argued that the unfettered competition of the free market would lift all boats—as well as the racial hierarchy that rationalized Jim Crow segregation. In the marketplace of school choice, the latter holds more sway than the former. In fact, despite their shared professional vision of good schools, the principals in this study found that their ideals were often dampened, and their status was determined by the unchecked influence of the market.



In Chapter 6, I explored the context of SAPs that allowed market forces to dominate school choice unchecked, as well as the influence that those forces and the racialized social construction of school quality had on principals' professionally constructed vision. I found that as the market defined schools' reputations for quality by the percentage of White students who simultaneously conferred status and privilege on their principals, schools' status and identity became fixed in a racial hierarchy and principals adopted practices—like test prep and between-school tracking—that contradicted their own professionally constructed vision of school quality.

In this chapter, I further explore the relationship between SAPs and the vision of school quality that principals pursue by exploring how principals made sense of the SAP reforms and the extent to which those reforms enabled or constrained principals' pursuit of their professional vision of school quality. Specifically, I find that small tweaks to SAPs aimed only at increasing access to high-status schools do little to rein in the competition for high-status students or to challenge the reputations of schools at the bottom of the hierarchy. However, when SAPs changed to distribute high-status students more evenly among all the schools in the district, in addition to providing access to high-status schools to more Black and Latino students (as they did in District C), principals embraced the opportunity to pursue their professional construction of school quality rather than the racialized social construction of the marketplace.

The public school marketplace, as well as principals' understanding of it, is not only influenced by the laws of supply and demand or the sociology of racialized reputations. It is sanctioned and supported by policy. SAPs, depending on how they are devised and what goals they are supposed to achieve (including integration in some cases), can be powerful tools to further equity by dismantling separate and unequal educational opportunities and supporting

school leaders to enact their visions of good schools. But too often, these student assignment policies, particularly those based on the belief that deregulated competition for students inspires better teaching, only exacerbate segregation, inequality, and lower-quality pedagogy for all.

As discussed in Chapter 6, principals, whose schools' reputations in this context rise and fall according to this social construction of quality rather than according to their professional construction of school quality, often abandon their professionally constructed vision of a good school and succumb to the quest for high-status White students and high-test scores. This abdication of a vision of quality education rooted in curriculum, pedagogy, and a commitment to all children in favor of a racialized social construction of school quality rooted in status and privilege not only continues to maintain separate and unequal schools, but it hamstring the very professionals whose vision has the greatest potential to foster better, integrated, and equitable schools.

The good news is that when SAPs were structured to lessen the impact of the market on constructing a racial and SES hierarchy, these reforms mattered and helped to create the latitude that principals needed to pursue their vision of a school whose quality could be determined by the professional decisions of their principals rather than the individual characteristics of their incoming students. In the first section of this chapter, I describe how the District Diversity Lottery SAP, by guaranteeing the presence of high-status White students in every school in the district, impacted schools' reputations and the perception of what makes a good school. In the following section, I describe how the District Diversity Lottery SAP, by designating every school in the district a good school, allowed principals to reclaim their professional vision in the interests of all students.

## **District Diversity Lotteries—Where Every School is a Good School**

When the District Diversity Lottery SAP in District C required that every school in the district be considered an acceptable school for any child, schools' reputations were less beholden to their share of high-status students. This loosening of the relationship between a school's reputation and the number of high-status White students it serves is allowing the principals in District C to pursue a vision of excellence that is better for every student. But, with the exception of the District Diversity Lottery, all the other SAP reforms limited their goals to increasing the number of Black and Latino students in high-status schools but did not aspire to increase the number of White students in predominantly Black and Latino schools, thus leaving the racialized hierarchy of schools intact. The principal at Parkside MS in District C gave an example of the impact the new SAP had on reputations: "Two White staff members at my school who live in the district send their kids to [Pensamientos]. Before the [District Diversity Lottery] I know they would not have considered that an option."

### ***Some SAPs Can Reinforce Racialized Reputations***

The message of the District Diversity Lottery is that schools serving predominantly Black and Latino students are good schools. The message of the Selectively Screened Diversity, School-by-School Diversity Lottery, and Minimal Diversity Lottery SAPs was that more Black and Latino students should have access to the schools with good reputations. As detailed in Chapter 4, the four districts included in this study joined a New York State Integration Project Grant that began in the fall of 2017. Two years later, Districts A and B introduced Diversity in Admissions (DIA) priorities in some or all of their middle schools. But, these Selectively Screened Diversity SAP pilots, which asked principals in the most heavily White schools to prioritize the choices of FRPL, ELL and STH families for a certain percentage of their seats, did

nothing to challenge the racialized social construction of quality upon which schools' reputations were based.

These SAP pilots were aimed only at the predominantly White schools as a way to increase access for Black and Latino students. There were no DIA pilots aimed at sending White students to predominantly Black and Latino schools. From the perspective of the principal of Hidden Figures, "It's insulting. The way I see it, all the [Selectively Screened Diversity SAP is] saying is that my school isn't even good enough for the [higher scoring] Black kids." The principal at Destinations MS who opted into the Selectively Screened Diversity SAP pilot and set aside 17% of his seats for priority admissions freely admitted the insignificance of the change: "I was just tinkering with my school, but it's in the middle of this huge system and I can't really make a change. I think the other piece is it's like there's no support, there's no direction."

Surrounding the implementation of the DIA pilots was integration advocates' discussion of replacing the Selectively Screened Diversity SAP that allowed the high-status middle schools to select their students with lottery SAPs. But this bolder shift to lottery SAPs still failed to challenge racialized reputations. In addition to 14 of the 16 principals I interviewed who privately told me they were opposed to admissions screens, many principals publicly embraced removing screens specifically because they wanted more support from the DOE to create more racial diversity at their schools and equity in the district (Elsen-Rooney, 2022; Veiga, 2020b). The principal at Society Prep understood that even though test scores at his school might drop if he could no longer admit only the highest-scoring students, he also hoped that removing screens might alter how schools were evaluated: "If our reputation is based on [test scores], we're gonna look like a declining school. If it's based on how happy and engaged the kids are in the school, who knows, we might be going up in reputation."

Given that this principal, like all the principals in the study, rejected test scores as a valid and reliable measure of student learning and school quality, he was not suggesting that his school would, in fact, be declining because test scores declined. He was acknowledging that his school's reputation had been based on this specious measure of quality and expressed a small glimmer of hope that, in the near future, it might be based on what the school itself actually provides for children and their families—that is, on his professionally-constructed vision of school quality. Unfortunately, the principals in this study from Districts A, B, and D reported that the removal of screens, so far, has had very little, if any, impact on their applicant pool or on which students actually attended their schools.

### ***Other SAPs Challenge Racialized Reputations***

But in District C, where the District Diversity Lottery was adopted in 2019, the demographics of the middle schools has shifted significantly (Margolis et al., 2020; Tullis, 2022; Veiga, 2020b). With that shift in demographics has come a shift in reputation. The principal at Pensamientos shared that after the new District Diversity Lottery SAP:

Every Friday we would have a tour of our school and every Friday about a hundred White families would come. We almost never got a Latino or an Asian family from the neighborhood to come see the school because they already knew they were sending their kid here, but it was all the other families who were like: We've gotta rank all the schools so we're gonna see this place. And many of them are liking what they see.

Although Black and Latino students made up about half or more of each district's student population (see Table 1 in Chapter 4), they were still grossly underrepresented at the articulation events hosted by the schools in these racially diverse districts (see Table 5 in Chapter 4). Tours and a variety of other events designed to give parents the opportunity to learn about the schools within the choice marketplace were heavily dominated by White parents and serve as one

indicator of a school's reputation and status. Prior to the District Diversity Lottery SAP in District C, the principal told me that White families never toured Pensamientos.

Before the District Diversity Lottery SAP, Pensamientos, like the schools in the other three districts with the highest percentages of Black and Latino students, were virtually invisible to high-status White families. Though all the schools advertised tours or open houses on their websites and on the official NYCDOE website, when I showed up at Southside Prep and Expanding Horizons Academy, they were completely surprised to see me. Even though I had confirmed the events through their parent coordinators, I was the only person present. It was clear to these principals that tours and open houses were provided for White families, and their schools were simply not of interest to the White families in their racially diverse districts. But, in a sign of the power of SAP to provide a counterbalance to the racialized reputations forged in the unfettered market, Pensamientos, practically overnight, experienced a reputation makeover.

The principals in District C attributed high-status parents' willingness to consider every school in the district as an option to the District Diversity Lottery SAP. The principal of Collegiate Research remembered the days before the new SAP when her school was one of the three most popular schools among high-status parents in District C:

I used to hate it when [the superintendent] would stand up at the [District C] MS principals forum and tell the crowd "All the schools in our district are great schools," when privately she admitted that most of the families only came to hear about the Big 3's screening criteria. She told me the three of us had to [present] last so that all the parents wouldn't leave early. But now parents want to hear from every principal.

The principal from Parkside thoughtfully considered the role of the SAP in reshaping parents' understanding of a good school:

Even though I get frustrated at the privilege that some of our White families have in our system, I actually think that they get a little bit of a pass, right. Not a full pass, but in this crazy system everyone is just scrambling and trying to figure it out. The [District

Diversity Lottery has] certainly been a great way to dismantle this notion that there are only three acceptable schools.

## **District Diversity Lottery: An Invitation to Lead for Excellence, Equity, and Diversity**

Principals heard the message communicated by the District Diversity Lottery SAP—that every school in the district is a good school—as an invitation to assert their professional vision. In the tours and open houses I attended in the fall of 2022, the presentations of the principals in District C differed from those of their colleagues in the other districts. Not only did the high-status parents who dominate these events show up to all the schools, but the principals took advantage of these events to take the lead in helping families to see the principal’s vision.

The principal at Pensamientos was often surprised by the opportunities that these tours afforded her to present her school’s strengths according to her professional vision, even when she was anticipating the need to frame her school according to the social construction of quality. She related the following story to me. During one of her Friday tours, she was speaking to a group of families when an eighth grade girl stopped to give her a hug. A parent commented that this was not the first student he had seen stop to hug the principal and wondered about it aloud. The principal steeled herself for “one of those questions like ‘This place is so great but why are your test scores so low?’” But when the question he asked was, “Do all the kids here feel so safe and supported?” she found herself expounding on the work her school does to support all students, including students newly arrived in the country, like the girl who had hugged her.

During the Q&A part of the tour I attended, the Pensamientos principal fielded a question from a White parent about meeting the needs of diverse learners with an explanation of the professional development she provides for her teachers. Her explanation resonated with the description she gave me during our interview of the curriculum and pedagogy she envisioned for

a quality school. Another parent asked about the school's mission. She related her own history as a Brown girl who had grown up in this district and had experienced the different expectations teachers had of students in tracked schools and tracked classrooms within schools. She then explained the power of cultivating independent learners of all children who also know how to support one another.

By contrast, the principal at Hidden Figures still felt beholden to the social construction of a quality school even after District B eliminated screens. He acknowledged that the first-time-ever presence of nine White families made this open house the largest he had ever held, and it was also a consequence of the removal of screens. He mused, "Maybe [the White families] are worried that without the screens, they have to consider a few more options. It would be nice if someone finally noticed the great work we're doing here." But in addressing the small gathering, he tailored his comments to highlight strengths that correlated to the social construction of quality when, in our interview, he highlighted the culture of care and community he created, the opportunities he guaranteed for students to take trips out of the neighborhood, and the talented majority Black and Latino faculty he had assembled. During his open house, he turned to where the White families in the audience were sitting and assured them, "Even though our test scores don't match up, our students outperform most other students. We're serious about children's education because you are. Everything is designed to get them ready for the Regents."

The presentations to parents from other principals in District C, in contrast to their colleagues in Districts A, B, and D, also more boldly articulated the principals' professional vision of school quality rather than either a promise of exclusivity or an explanation of their schools' place in the hierarchy. The principal of Parkside MS during a virtual open house on Zoom addressed a similar question that had been asked of the principal at Pensamientos about



supporting successful students in heterogeneous classrooms. The Parkside principal confidently explained differentiation of instruction, citing her teachers' "deep knowledge of students, low-stakes assessments, and curriculum with projects and problems that are already complex enough to allow any student to take them for a creative spin."

She went on to explain, "As a school that values equity and diversity, we don't track our classes. Research shows that tracking is harmful to all students." She elaborated on the eighth grade project-based math and science curricula that all students received, adding that any students who wished to could sit for the Regents exams. In discussing a question about homework, she again asserted her professional knowledge and cited research arguing that "more homework doesn't necessarily improve learning."

In contrast, when asked how the school would respond to the possibility of increased diversity that the new School-by-School Diversity Lottery SAP promised (but has not delivered), the Investigations principal seemed willing to give up on the spot her opposition to tracking that she had so fervently expressed in our interview, to assure parents that equity and diversity would not threaten excellence. After assuring the audience that students at her school always passed the Algebra Regents exam, she added, "But given the lottery process, I'm not sure how that will change. I don't know if all the students coming from the lottery will be as strong. We don't believe in tracking, but we'll have to see how that goes."

The District Diversity Lottery SAP, by guaranteeing a level of racial diversity in *all* the schools in District C, gave the principals the opportunity to present racial diversity, equity, and even antiracism as qualities of a good school for all children, not just the for the families who wanted it. The principal from Middlestreet Academy in District D explained to me that he did not expect his racially diverse school to appeal to all parents:

[T]here are parents who are looking for honors programs and test prep and you know ten AP courses and “academic rigor” and sometimes thinly veiled racist language around caliber of student, and so we’re really clear with people, like we may not be the school for you. Sometimes in our open houses it almost feels like we’re trying to convince people not to come because we don’t want somebody to come and have buyers’ remorse.

But, at Ensemble MS in District C, the principal, in a very no-nonsense tone, launched into a PowerPoint presentation with the declaration that “school integration has always been a part of our mission.” She proceeded to explain the school’s commitment to “rigorous learning in and out of the classroom for students who are the leaders of their own learning.” As she talked about the curriculum in each of the school’s departments, there were multiple slides featuring texts by Black authors, multiracial groups of students, Black Lives Matter posters, and a guest speaker series featuring a multiracial group of adult speakers. The image of the school the principal was presenting hewed closely to the vision she described to me in our interview.

The principal at Collegiate Research whose school had once been considered one of the district’s “Big 3”—a reference to the schools most coveted by high-status White parents—opened her presentation to a packed auditorium with a slide of the school’s core values: “Inquiry-based experiential learning around big questions; Collaboration and partnerships; and Education of the whole child.” A later slide on the school’s advisory program had four bullet points: “safety, community, racial identity, and antiracism.” The many, many slides describing the school’s philosophy of academic and social-emotional growth took up most of the hour. One slide of a typical eighth grader’s schedule indicated that all eighth grade students were enrolled in Regents Algebra and Living Environment. In a reference to the old world of the untamed market and intense competition, the principal’s closing remarks to the crowd were, “All the schools in our district are great, so rank them in your real order of preference. There’s no gaming the system.”

The new District Diversity Lottery SAP is not a panacea for all the racist inequities and stereotypes that past policies have baked into the institutional structure of schools and schooling. But, at a minimum, the District Diversity Lottery SAP has created the opportunity for principals to not only reject many of the practices like tracking, testing, and segregation that sustain racism, but also to be presented as good schools for doing so. The principal of Ensemble MS related that the district is still granting transfer requests from White families who bring in doctor's notes that cite "anxiety and depression" as reasons to transfer from a school like Pensamientos to a school like Collegiate Research. The principal at Pensamientos does occasionally tire of "groups of White families gawking at these children of color and asking me, Are there fights?" A lot of the onus of shifting the construction of school quality from one based on a racial hierarchy of status to one based on professional knowledge still falls to the principals. But the support of the District Diversity Lottery SAP is helping principals embrace their agency at the nexus of policy and practice to explain that equity, diversity, and excellence are inseparable.

Similarly, as significant as it is that principals, when addressing large crowds of White parents well-versed in the racialized social construction of school quality, are presenting their schools as embodiments of their professional vision of integrated, equitable, and excellent schools, what is actually happening in the schools may be a different story. While the principals at Parkside, Pensamientos, and Ensemble remained fully committed to detracking and other school-level practices that they believed promote equity in their racially diverse schools, the principal at Collegiate Research was admittedly struggling:

This year is the first cohort to come through the lottery. It's our most academically diverse eighth grade class ever, and it has been marked by heavy interruptions academically. Everybody's programmed in Algebra. We have a lot of questions about that. What about the kids who are really struggling with Algebra because there are some. Is it actually healthy for them to sit for an Algebra course, whether or not they take the

test, or is it a lot of heartache? We've thought about flipping to a choice option. I don't know. We don't quite know what to do. We're gonna see how it goes over the next year. But I do want to be on the right side of history.

The new SAP in this district is successfully creating more racial diversity within all the middle schools in the district, although the all four principals from the district who participated in this study acknowledged that it still had its limitations and that one or two principals in the district still exploited those limitations to facilitate the transfer of high-status students to their schools. But, anecdotally, the four participants were confident that with the possible exception of two of their other seven colleagues, principals in the district shared their vision of excellence. Moreover, like the principal at Collegiate Research, they had a professional understanding of the role that race and racism had played in the history of school integration, and their desire, this time around, was to be on the antiracist side.

## **Conclusion**

Principals in the four most racially diverse districts in NYC espouse a desire for more racial integration within their schools. What is more, they maintain a professional vision of the education they would provide to those students, which they believe would be better than the education they currently provide in their segregated schools. But without SAP reforms that constrain the market and challenge the racialized social construction that defines school quality by the number of high-status White students in the school, individual principals are no match for market forces. Although, along the spectrum of the racialized hierarchy of school reputation, every district has a place for one, maybe two, racially diverse schools where principals pursue diversity and equity as part of the pursuit of excellence, most principals labor under the social construction of excellence that has no room for equity or diversity.

However, when SAP changed, as it did in District C, in ways that impacted all of the schools in the district and that also limited—even slightly—the concentration of high-status White middle-class students in only a few schools in the district while also increasing the number of Black and Latino students at high-status schools, principals began to assert their professional construction of school quality in opposition to the racial hierarchy of the socially constructed definitions that accountability politics and market competition created. When the District Diversity Lottery SAP in District C required that every school in the district be considered an acceptable school for any child in the district, schools’ reputations were less beholden to their share of high-status students. This loosening of the relationship between a schools’ reputation and the number of high-status White students it serves is allowing the principals in District C to pursue a vision of excellence that is better for every student. As the principal of Investigations MS insisted, “Maybe there are outliers like one or two people, [but] principals are not the ones standing in the way of integration and excellence in schools.”

## Chapter 8

### **Shifting Policy Decisions Away from the Market and Toward What We Know About Good Schools to Serve a Multiracial Democracy**

What emerges clearly from the findings of my research is that student assignment policies, or SAPs, have the potential power—if created and structured to assure integration—to disrupt the stranglehold that racialized school reputations have on principals’ ability to pursue their vision of a good school. The principals in this study envision schools where any child who walks in the door is welcomed by caring, knowledgeable teachers who engage all of their students in culturally relevant and sustaining curriculum that allows every child to connect to learning, to make meaning of the world, and to create their place in it. What makes these findings, as they cut across my Chapters 5-7, so important is that, in sharp contrast to measuring school quality in terms of racialized reputations, principals’ professional vision of what a good school is fosters a mutually reinforcing and inseparable connection of excellence, equity, and diversity.

But school quality in the racialized marketplace of school choice is not measured according to the principals’ professional vision but according to the number of White middle-class students and, to a lesser extent, their test scores—as proxies for school quality. Thus, it is only in the marketplace of school choice that equity and “too much diversity”—coded language for too many Black and Latino students—are framed in stark contrast to “excellence.” What we learn from principals’ professional vision is why this juxtaposition of equity and diversity on the one hand and excellence on the other is false. Indeed, their professional knowledge calls on us to reframe the dominant social construction of “excellence” to become more aligned with what is

known about how children learn and thrive and less about status and privilege. In the current construction of “good” schools in the racialized marketplace of exclusion, privileged parents frame their choice as being between excellence and diversity. Thus, even if they say they value diversity and equity (as many say they do), they believe they must choose what the market and their networks tell them is excellence—a.k.a. exclusion—for the sake of their children. This is how ongoing segregation is perpetuated again and again, despite what White affluent parents say they want in their children’s schools (Diamond & Lewis, 2015; Roda & Wells, 2012; Sikkink & Emerson, 2008).

What this research also tells us is that the best way to counter this vicious cycle and reframe the definition of excellent schools is to champion the professional knowledge of principals through bold and meaning policy changes—like the District Diversity Lottery SAP—that eliminates the racialized hierarchy of school reputations by guaranteeing that every school in the district is seen as an acceptable choice for all students. My evidence is clear that when such policies are in place, principals have more agency to assert what they know to be true about good schools. Such student assignment policies shift the focus of school choice and school quality away from the race and ethnicity of the students because those variables become more constant across schools, thereby allowing the schools’ climate, curriculum, and pedagogy to determine its quality and align with the principals’ vision.

In this final chapter of my dissertation, I draw on the framing I presented in the first three chapters, the research methodology and the context of these principals described in Chapter 4, and the rich lessons learned from their insights in Chapters 5-7 to make research and policy recommendations to shift our public school system from a market-driven school choice and standardized-test-driven system toward a system that centers professional knowledge about

teaching, learning, and leading and the social, emotional, and cognitive value of diverse learning environments.

## **Research Implications**

For the last several decades, educational researchers have been studying the impact of free-market school choice policies and punitive, standardized-test-driven accountability policies. Much of this research was reviewed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. What we see in that evidence is that there is a strong correlation between deregulated, market-based school choice and racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic segregation of schools. What we also know is that measuring students, schools, and educators only according to students' standardized test scores is strongly correlated with growing segregation and inequality (Davis et al., 2015; Stiefel et al., 2007).

What my embedded case studies of middle school principals trying to address segregation and inequality in a school system rife with two factors that perpetuate both of them tell us are the *how and why* of these correlations. It is only from this understanding that we can move forward to think through *more* than correlations, but actual causations and the solutions and alternatives to regressive education policies that move our educational system in the wrong direction.

Seemingly, throughout decades of education policymakers' emphasis on testing, so-called accountability, and free-market school choice, education professionals were accumulating a completely different set of lessons about what makes a good school that refute the very indicators of quality—test scores and race—on which the market depended. Still, most SAPs in New York City and elsewhere around the country, following the wave of deregulated, free-market school choice policies—including open enrollment plans, charter schools, and tuition vouchers that have spread like wildfire over the last 30 years—cater to the market forces



allowing those parents with the most market resources to have the most choices (Bifulco et al., 2009; Corcoran & Levin, 2011; Holme, 2002; Jennings, 2010; Nathanson et al., 2013). In these instances, principals largely succumbed to those policy demands and abandoned their professional understanding. However, a small number of New York City policymakers have stepped in—even if they control just one of 32 community school districts in NYC—to enact a district-wide SAP that begins to challenge the influence of those reputations by guaranteeing that every school in the district serves both high-status White families and Black and Latino families. When this happens, principals follow their professional vision of schools that engage diverse learners and build community.

The significance of these findings in the historical and political context of schooling and SAPs cannot be overstated. What it suggests is that while public schooling, particularly in racially diverse urban and suburban centers, is vulnerable to criticism for failing to meet the needs of all children by catering to the demands of a select few (Abernathy, 2005; Asen, 2021), principals believe they would be *more* successful at meeting the needs of *all* children if policymakers would commit to more racial balance between schools. This finding holds forth the promise of better schools for all of our children—the very foundation of confidence in public schools.

Furthermore, my dissertation demonstrated the power of centering the knowledge of professional educators in our data collection and analysis. As the research cited in Chapter 3 helped us see, too often the research on school choice policies focuses on parents and the choices they make, particularly those parents most privileged in the educational marketplace. Looking at school choice policies and the educational accountability system through that lens blinds researchers to the knowledge base in the field of education that can help us better critique

existing policies that are based on faulty assumptions about the parallels between the free market and education as a profession.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Thus, this study provides powerful evidence that principals will assert their professional vision of a quality school—a vision that complements the goals of equity, diversity, and excellence—when SAPs create more racial balance among schools in racially diverse school districts. As a result, policymakers should work to create more racially diverse districts and should design SAPs that reduce the competition among schools for high-status students and utilize school choice as a tool to create racial balance, not segregation across each school building.

### ***Test Scores Should Be De-emphasized in the School Accountability and School Choice Process***

The idea of equity through accountability has proven to be a false promise. The testing and accountability measures of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), requiring yearly testing in Math and English Language Arts of all students in Grades 3-8 and holding schools individually responsible for the test scores of their students, should be repealed. Rather than leading to improved opportunities to learn (Ysseldyke et al., 1995), the testing and accountability measures of ESSA contribute to a racialized construction of school quality by imbuing specious measures of student learning with the authority of federal law.

Freeing schools of the state accountability requirements that are based on test scores eliminates the stigma associated with having even slightly lower test scores than other schools in their district. Such rankings by test scores lead schools with lower test scores to feel they must subject their students to mechanical, mind-numbing, test-prep instruction that focuses on narrow,

quantifiable skills—often limited to how to take a test and curriculum that seldom bears any intrinsic interest to the students (Kohn, 2002; Medina & Neill, 1988)—rather than the engaging, culturally relevant, and rigorous pedagogy and curriculum that build on students’ experience and knowledge to help them make meaning of the world. This, as well, is a vision that principals see for all students.

Rather than citing test scores as evidence of a school’s success, superintendents and the press could help the public learn principals’ professional vision by citing curricular and pedagogical developments. In a recent press release explaining the elimination of screens in most middle schools and the decision to renew the District Diversity Lottery SAP in District C, the District C superintendent was quoted as citing early signs of success of the plan “including project-based learning, school wide enrichment, dual language and advanced courses.”

***Student Assignment Policies That Eliminate Racial Isolation  
and Create Racial Diversity Should Be Implemented***

School districts everywhere, including in NYC, should embrace SAPs designed to eliminate racial isolation and create racial diversity and demographic balancing across schools. While it is no longer legal to consider the racial identity of an individual student in assigning that student to a particular school—even in the interest of racial diversity—SAPs designed to eliminate racial isolation and create racial diversity are permissible.

Some districts, like District C in NYC, give preference to student eligible for FRPL, ELLs, or STH as proxies for race. Other districts implement plans with a generalized use of race that gives preference, for example, to *any* student—regardless of the race of the individual student—who attends a predominantly Black or Latino elementary school or who lives in a predominantly Black and Latino neighborhood or zip code. Similar priorities could be based on

neighborhood or elementary school SES categories like income or educational attainment of parents.

The benefits of racial diversity on student outcomes and attitudes are well known (Linn & Welner, 2007; Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012; Orfield & Yun, 1999; Wells et al., 2009). Districts that have implemented controlled choice SAPs with the expressed purpose of racial diversity have not experienced the White flight that is so often referenced as a deterrent to integration (Frankenberg, 2017). This lends credence to the assertions of White middle-class parents that they value racial diversity in schools (Schneider & Buckley, 2002)—at least when diverse schools are seen as “excellent” as well.

### ***NYC Must Change the High School Choice Process***

Given the short 3-year time span of middle school, it is often viewed primarily as preparation for high school and, in choice districts, middle schools are often evaluated based on the high school acceptances of eighth grade graduates. Numerous principals in this study argued that as long as high school SAPs remained tied to the intense market competition of unrestrained choice, described below, it would be difficult to truly invest in non-competitive middle schools. Just as policymakers need to reconsider middle school SAPs that more evenly balance the racial composition of the student body, they need to do the same for high school.

Admission into NYC high schools is based on city-wide choice. Like middle schools, some high schools screen their applicants based on their performance in middle school. As a result, high schools in NYC are as segregated as the middle schools (Nathanson et al., 2013; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014). Calls to remove screens completely were rejected by the mayor and the Chancellor, even though their removal during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in more racial diversity in the city’s most selective high schools (Elsen-Rooney, 2022a). High school SAPs also

need to embrace the goal of racial diversity as well as standards of quality that are based not on the individual characteristics of the incoming students but on the curriculum, pedagogy, and climate that the school provides.

***Provide Schools Leaders with Preparation and Professional Development in Theory and Practice***

The principals in this study relied on their professional knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy in their opposition to tracking and in their promotion of culturally relevant and sustaining education. Some found courage in their convictions from an understanding of the history of how race and racism have been used to create and maintain inequality in education. As I described in Chapters 2 and 3, SAP implementation is not a purely technical process but a political process that requires understanding and agency on the part of principals to manage and negotiate the tension that will continue to exist between the individual choices of parents and the collective goals of equity-minded SAPs, as well as the micropolitical context of their individual school communities (Malen, 2006; Stone, 1980).

In recounting the story of detracking the schools in Rockville Center, New York, Burriss and Garrity (2008) argue that detracking is far from a technical curricular reform. They insist that it requires regular and repeated examination of and challenges to long-held, but erroneous, beliefs about intelligence, ability, and learning (Oakes et al., 1998). School leaders must constantly attend to their own racial literacy, i.e., their “ability to understand what race is, why it is, and how it is used to reproduce inequality and oppression” (Horsford, 2011, p. 96) so that they have the knowledge and confidence to lead even in the face of resistance.

Aspiring and current school principals should participate in mandated professional development on the history of education for all children in the United States; the theory and

practice of culturally relevant and sustaining curricula and pedagogy; the role of tracking, detracking, and the pseudoscience of “intelligence”; non-punitive approaches to student behavior; and the many ways that racism and inequality continue to impact the lives of students in and out of school. Principals who have knowledge of the deep political roots of the politics of education in the United States; the relationship between schools, White supremacy, and antiracist struggle; and the impact of these histories on our understandings of how students learn will be better prepared for their roles as at the nexus of policy and practice. They will more effectively give leadership to their faculty and parents, and they will more confidently engage with administrators and policymakers.

Aspiring principals would benefit from preparation that recognizes that the nexus of education policy and practice is a dynamic space, where school leaders are not only required to define abstract goals (Stone, 1980) like excellence, equity, and diversity; it is also a more complicated zone of mediation (Oakes et al., 1998), where *even with the support of policy and policymakers*, pursuing the professional vision described in Chapter 5 requires principals to defend equity and antiracism as essential to schooling in a multiracial democracy. Principals need to know the history of education, specifically as Anderson (1988) reminds us, that “both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education [that] occupied the same time and space [and] were fostered by the same governments” (p. 1), as well as the history of the Black-led struggle for a more abolitionist (Love, 2019) education.

Understanding the role that schools and education have played and continue to play in the larger politics of the country will help principals appreciate that managing conflict is a part of the job of school leadership and that contested issues—like what to teach, how to teach, whom to

teach what and in which schools—are integral to schools. Principals will be more effective when they are prepared to manage the specific manifestations of larger societal conflicts in their schools as opportunities for learning and change.

## **Conclusion**

When Horace Mann championed the formation of common schools in the United States in the 1840s, he acknowledged the need for a republic to guarantee a minimum of education to citizens in order to qualify them for a variety of civil and social duties. He also explicitly extolled their potential and value to “obliterate factitious distinctions in society” (Horace Mann, as quoted in Fraser, 2001, p. 44). In practice, access to schooling was prohibited for many and limited for most, but Mann recognized the crucial role that a public education system plays in maintaining a democratic republic.

Today, deep political divisions threaten the future of the republic and the strength of its institutions to inspire confidence in democracy. When schools are vulnerable to accusations that they fail to deliver on the promise of an education for all children, faith in public schools wanes. Throughout U.S. history, even as the goal of schools as progenitors of democratic equality was often eclipsed by the goals of social efficiency and social mobility (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003; Labaree, 1997), many civil rights activists seized upon the promise of democratic equality to demand desegregation. When, after World War II, “segregation posed a contradiction for the self-proclaimed exemplar of democracy and freedom” (Bell, 2004), the Court labored to deliver a unanimous decision condemning and prohibiting *de jure* segregation in order to deliver a message to the world and to the nation that American democracy was strong.

The kind of political unity that made the Court’s decision in *Brown* possible and that demanded its implementation despite fierce resistance is unimaginable today. What is more, the

use of education policy as a tool wielded by a variety of interest groups to increase their power to build a political base, win elections, or advance some other position (McGuinn, 2006) makes confidence in public schools even more important to maintain. If urban centers with increasing racial diversity are seen as unable or unwilling to provide a quality education for all children, public schooling as an institution will disappear.

In a sign of progress, the educators positioned to lead 21st century desegregated schools are not the school leaders of 20th century desegregated schools—White principals valued more for their managerial and bureaucratic skills than for their knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy, and students (Rousmaniere, 2013; Turnage, 1971)—but, rather, principal teachers schooled in the research and practice of *good* teaching and learning, featuring project-based learning, differentiation, social-emotional learning, and culturally relevant and sustaining education. These principals, still mainly though not exclusively, White are not perfect. While they have clearly been schooled in the most promising research and practice, leading a good school is hard work. Furthermore, if the best scientific research and knowledge were all we needed to combat racism and its devastating impact, the world would already be a better place. But this study has given educators the opportunity to tell policymakers, if one would create SAPs that, in turn, create more racial balance in schools, we would all be in a better position to serve all of our students.

This message from principals—that market competition, far from being an impetus to better schools, is in fact an obstacle to quality education—is the most significant policy implication of this study. This finding also implies that if policymakers relied on the professional expertise of educators to define school quality rather than the racialized reputations created by high-status consumers in the “free” market of school choice, not only would schools be more effective places of learning but they would also be racially diverse. But principals are not going



to lead this change. As the principal of Destinations MS conceded, “Educators generally are not huge risk/-takers or interested in blowing it up. Somebody else with more juice has to make it happen.”

The good news is that principals, the professional educators who run the nation’s schools, believe they could do a better job of educating all of our children—and of delivering on the promise of public education—if policymakers would recommit to desegregation.

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## Appendix A

### Principal Interview Protocol

Personal Background – state name and position

1. How did you become principal of this school?
  - a. How long and in what capacities have you worked in schools?
  - b. How long have you been Principal at this school?
  - c. How does this school compare to others you have worked in?
  - d. How did you decide to become a principal?
  - e. What were some of your goals as the Principal for this school when you first started?
  - f. Are those still your goals today? What drives you in your work? **PROBE ON WHAT MAKES AN EXCELLENT SCHOOL AND HOW DID YOU COME TO THAT ASSESSMENT**

Excellence, Equity and Diversity

2. The DOE's vision and mission statements include excellence as one of their most important goals. How do you think the DOE defines or identifies excellence? Are there any particular actions you think the DOE expects you to take to achieve excellence? In what ways do you share that goal
3. What are some of the ways that your school pursues and achieves excellence?
  - a. What are some of the challenges you face in pursuing and achieving excellence?
  - b. What are some of the supports that you rely on or that you wish you could rely on in pursuit of these goals?
  - c. Where do your ideas of excellence come from?
4. The DOE's vision and mission statements include equity as one of their most important goals. How do you think the DOE defines or identifies equity? Are there any particular actions you think the DOE expects you to take in the pursuit of equity?
5. What are some of the ways that your school pursues and achieves equity?
  - a. What are some of the challenges you face in pursuing and achieving equity?
  - b. What are some of the supports that you rely on or that you wish you could rely on in pursuit of equity?
  - c. Where do your ideas of equity come from?
6. The DOE's vision and mission statements include diversity as one of their most important goals. How do you think the DOE defines or identifies diversity in a school? Are there any particular actions you think the DOE expects you to take to achieve diversity?
7. What are some of the ways that your school pursues and achieves diversity?
  - a. What are some of the challenges to pursuing and achieving diversity?

- b. What are some of the supports that you rely on or that you wish you could rely on in pursuit of these goals?
  - c. Where do your ideas about diversity come from?
8. How would you describe the student population at (name of school)?
- a. Probe for racial breakdown, FRPL, special education
  - b. In what ways has it changed (or not) over the past couple of years?
9. Describe any changes in student demographics you would like to see at (school name).
- a. Probe on how changes in student demographics might impact (school name).

#### Student Assignment Policy

10. In this district, how is it decided which students go to which schools?
- a. How was this policy determined?
  - b. Do you have any choice?/influence? on which students attend (name of school)?
  - c. If the policy has changed prior to this year, probe on how the change has impacted the school
11. How would you describe the applicant pool at (name of school)?
- a. How many?
  - b. How does applicant pool demographic compare to the actual student demographic?
  - c. How many rank 1 or 2, 3-5, 6+
  - d. Which elementary schools are most represented
  - e. If policy has recently changed, probe on how the change has impacted the applicant pool or how they anticipate that the applicant pool will change
12. Describe the impact the new SAP/debate and SAP revisions have had on (name of school)? (How has the parent body and teachers responded to changes in SAP?)
13. What do you think would be the fairest way to assign students to MS in NYC?

#### Reputation and Recruitment

14. How would you describe the relationship between (name of school) and the other middle schools in the district?
- a. Which schools are most often ranked 1 or 2 by parents
  - b. What are some of the reasons for this?
  - c. In what ways does the racial make-up of the students matter?
15. How would you describe the outreach that you and other school personnel make to prospective families?
16. How do you think most people who live in the district would describe your school?
- a. How appropriate do you think are the descriptions of your school on sites like Inside Schools or Great Schools or the parent blogs?

#### School Level Decisions

17. How many classes do you have on each grade?
18. How would you describe the process of assigning students to classes?
- a. Probe about differences between 6th, 7th, and 8th grade

- b. Probe about different subjects (math/science, humanities, arts/electives)
  - c. Probe about parent involvement in this process
19. What are some of the most important decisions you have made for (name of school)?
20. Describe some of the ways (school name) responds to conflict between students or between students and staff.
- a. Probe about suspension and classroom removal
21. In what ways do you think a student's racial identity impacts their experience at (name of school)?

#### Parent Engagement (?)

22. How would you describe your PTA
- a. Demographics
  - b. Main activities
  - c. Your relationship with them
23. Who are the people in your school who have the most direct contact with parents? How would you describe those interactions

#### Big Picture

24. The DOE's vision and mission statements include equity, excellence and diversity among their most important goals. What are some of the policy decisions central has made in pursuit of these goals that impact what you do at your school?
25. Are there any policy decisions you have made as a principal in pursuit of these goals that you have not yet described to me?
26. How would you describe the relative responsibility of families, principals and central offices for the diversity, equity and excellence of schools?
27. Finally, is there anything more you want to add before we finish?