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Framing the Gap:  
*Education Reform and Conceptions of Racial Equity*

By  
Chela Myesha Delgado

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Committee in charge:

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Fall 2013



Abstract:  
 Framing the Gap:  
*Education Reform and Conceptions of Racial Equity*

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Berkeley

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During her 2006 speech to the American Educational Research Association, educational researcher and then-AERA president Gloria Ladson-Billings called into question “the wisdom of focusing on the achievement gap as a way of explaining and understanding the persistent inequality that exists (and has always existed) in our nation’s schools” (Ladson Billings 2006). What for so long had been considered a ‘gap’, Ladson-Billings posited, could be more accurately considered a **debt** owed to children of color by schools. Ladson-Billings’ reframing of the gap as a debt insisted on a recognition of the historical and contemporary institutional racism of schooling. Calls to re-frame the gap around the effects of structural racism and examine the culpability of schools and schooling systems as a factor of racial inequity, however, have gone largely unheeded. Instead, a majority of national education reform efforts insist on additional academic and behavioral effort on the part of teachers and students as the most effective means to raise the achievement of students of color (Apple 2001, Leonardo 2007, Darling-Hammond 2010, Tyack 1995, Valencia 1997 and 2010).

The disconnect between the marketized trend in national education reforms and grounded in a vision of racial justice begged the following research questions:

- **How does the public understand the achievement gap as a representation of racial inequity in education?**
- **How do frames of the achievement gap shape national perceptions of racial inequality?**
- **What are the possibilities and limitations of these frames for capturing the historical and contemporary roots of racial inequality in schools?**
- **Which frames have been most operationalized in education reform and why?**
- **What are the opportunities and limitations for parents and youth of color to critique and transform dominant frames of the achievement gap?**

I sought to answer these research questions through a combination of methods: the first was a critical discourse analysis of mainstream representations of the achievement gap. I read and synthesized over 600 articles, reports, policy briefs and speeches to assess the primary frames through which the achievement gap was discussed. To fully understand the ways in which education reform leaders discuss and understand the racial achievement gap, my

analytical method of analyzing frames was key. The second research method was a four year ethnography of the 2008-2012 “Voices of the Next Generation” campaign of the San Francisco-based Coleman Advocates, a membership-based community organization of Pacific Islander, Latino and African-American parents and students.<sup>1</sup> Coleman’s local organizing work stands in contrast to both mainstream education reform and the media-generated national picture of parents of color—and particularly Black parents—either supporting conservative trends in education or showing little interest in their children’s education (Pedroni 2007).

My findings show that education reforms intended to narrow or close the achievement gap are grounded in a wide spectrum of diagnostic frames (Goffman 1976, Snow & Benford 2000) --attempts to ‘diagnose’ or explain the achievement gap, and prognostic frames-- attempts to solve the gap. In my first chapter, I explain how the gap is measured framing theory as a method of discourse analysis I employ in order to understand dissonant approaches of education reformers in regard to the gap. Chapter two examines the history and origins of racialized education assessment and the phenomenon of the achievement gap, along with its concurrent diagnostic frames. In Chapter three, I write about the dominant frame in educational reforms designed to close the gap—that of the market. Chapter four details the civil rights and racial justice frames, which seek to recenter racism as an active cause of the gap, and chapter five examines Coleman Advocates’ on-the-ground attempt to implement an education campaign in San Francisco, California, using the racial justice lens.

Finally, I assessed the tensions of these frames. To gain credibility, market-based education reformers have sought to align themselves with parents of color (Hirsch 2007, Kumashiro 2008, Pedroni 2007, Stulberg 2008). Underneath the surface, however, it is clear that Black and Latino parents have been more concerned with racial equity in schooling than enamored with standardized tests or charter schools (Mediratta 2001, 2002, 2009; Oakes 2006; Research for Action 2002). As community-based education organization scholar Kavitta Mediratta finds, school reform in the hands of Black and Latino parents often includes demands for culturally relevant curriculum; an end to the system of tracking; mandatory parent communication protocols for teachers; increased teacher quality, improved access for newcomer and special education students to college prep courses; progressive discipline systems; and replacing standardized testing completely with culturally relevant, authentic assessments (field notes, February 7, 2009). Because Coleman is an organized vehicle through which the voices of those most affected by both the achievement gap and education reforms can be heard, the group’s work provides a unique opportunity to study and assess an “on the ground” effort to redefine the terms of the educational debate and to win concrete reforms. My research overall seeks to interrogate the commonsense term “achievement gap”; expose the racial framings that shape reform; reexamine the national forces of market-based education; and explore the complexities and challenges of promoting racial justice-based approaches to education reform.

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<sup>1</sup> The other chapters will focus on a more in-depth description of theory and methods; a historical overview of the phrase achievement gap, measures of student achievement, and racial inequities in schooling; and current discursive tensions within education reform.

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## Chapter I: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

In 2006, a group of Black, Latino and Pacific Islander parents and students living in Southeast San Francisco demanded that the San Francisco Unified School District close its achievement gap. The parents and youth were members of the community-based organization Coleman Advocates, and for them, the issue of the gap paralleled trends visible in the city's housing, detention, and services: one of the wealthiest cities in the world disregarding its struggling residents in favor of its privileged. The parents won the relatively brief battle with the district, and a "Closing the Achievement Gap" resolution was passed. It reads:

The San Francisco Unified School District formally adopts...a four-year district-wide equity goal...of increasing the academic achievement of underperforming groups such as African Americans, Latinos and Pacific Islander students so that at minimum, 60% of all students in all racial groups are at proficiency levels in English/Language Arts and math by 2011" (Resolution No. 82-26A1, Closing the Achievement Gap in the San Francisco Unified School District").

The efforts of the San Francisco-based community organization's struggle to address access to quality education for their children, was not unique in the state. With a high school graduation failure rate of 19.6% and 10.6% of the state's population failing to complete even the 9th grade, California has plummeted from the golden era of education in the 1960s and 70s to a state rank of 49th in spending and 32<sup>nd</sup> in high school graduation rates (Grant 2010).

For students of color in San Francisco the numbers were even worse: among San Francisco students in 2007, only 26.5% of African Americans; 36.2% of Latinos; 76.3% of Whites; 35.2% of Pacific Islanders; and 78.2% of other Asians (with significantly higher rates for Korean, Japanese and Chinese students compared with Filipino and Vietnamese) achieved proficiency on the California State Test math section (SFUSD data made available by Coleman Advocates). In 2006-2007 58.9% of Asians, 50.4% of Whites, 43.9% of Filipinos, 35.7% of American Indians, 23.5% of Pacific Islanders, 22.0% of Latinos, and 15.4% of African Americans completed college-preparation course requirements (CA Department of Education Data Quest, made available by Coleman Advocates). In 2008 San Francisco's Black students performed worse on state standardized tests than their counterparts in every other district in the state. Despite its reputation as a politically liberal mecca, San Francisco and its public schools have vied between dead last and second-to-last in common measures of educational achievement for African-American children. Coleman Advocates is a 35-year-old community-based organization located in the Southeast of San Francisco, the city's most racially diverse area and the neighborhood with the most children. In 1975, founder Jean Jacobs conceived of Coleman as a vehicle for supporting children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. In the mid-2000s, Coleman staff

shifted its model from policy advocacy to community organizing. Coleman is currently an organization of several hundred members with active campaigns focusing on both housing and education justice. Coleman members lead its program arms, YMAC (Youth Making A Change), SMAC at San Francisco State (Students Making A Change) and PMAC (Parents Making A Change).

The College and Careers for All campaign was one of the first initiated under Coleman's new member leadership model. African American and Latino parents began the campaign with concerns around lack of access to gifted and talented classes; unfair disciplinary actions against students of color; lack of current textbooks; and unclean and unsafe classrooms and bathrooms, but soon honed in on structural inequities. "The system was simply not set up to address the needs of African American and Latino children...we felt as if we didn't address the underlying structures of inequality, our kids would simply continue to fall behind", says Coleman director N'Tanya Lee (interview, May 2011). By February 7, 2009, the original campaign around the achievement gap had emerged into 12 "A-G Policy Demands", which in addition to closing the gap, also specifically included:

- Ending tracking;
- developing and implementing a multimedia, multi-lingual curriculum that includes the history of students and is relevant to their lives;
- improving and increasing access to support services at all school sites, specifically for African American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students and families;
- implementing a mandatory communication protocol plan and training for all teachers, principals, and staff in how to communicate with parents and students in their first language;
- increasing the number of counselors in our schools so that the student case load per counselor is 100:1;
- equalizing distribution of teacher quality throughout the district and within schools so that all schools can maintain a consistent rigor in implementing A-G successfully;
- providing an A-G opt-in option for current students, newcomer, continuation, special education and county school students in classes of 2011, 2012, and 2013;
- designing a new curriculum program for special education and newcomers that is equivalent to the rigor and course work of A-G, but that addresses the specific learning disabilities and language needs of the students;
- reforming and developing a testing and assessment system that is culturally relevant, assesses multi-learning styles, and supports students' and parents' understanding of areas for improvement; and
- reforming the discipline system to be preventative in nature and not punitive (field notes, 2.7.09).

Despite some overlap between the demands above and reforms advocated by policymakers and entrepreneurial reformers, a significant difference is the extent to which the Coleman demands address the roots of racial inequities in their focus on curriculum,

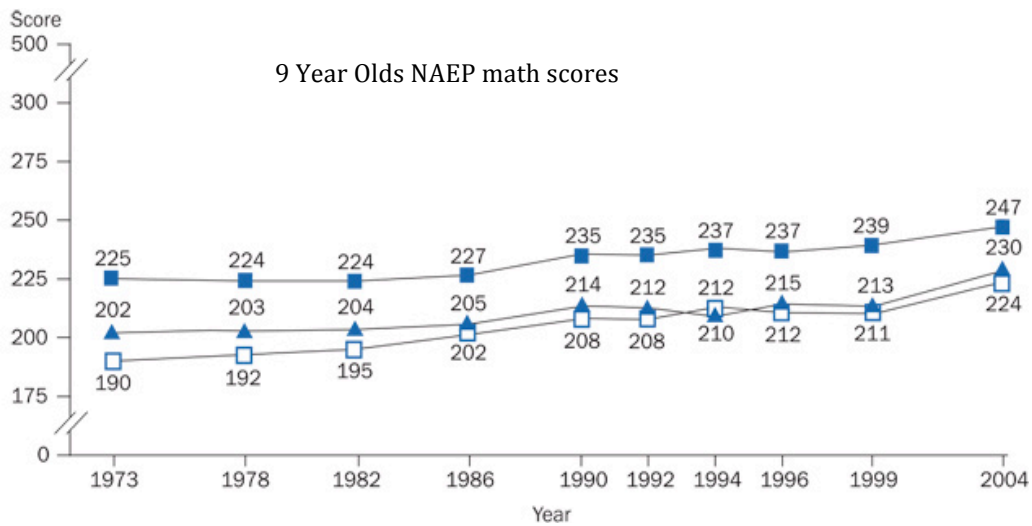
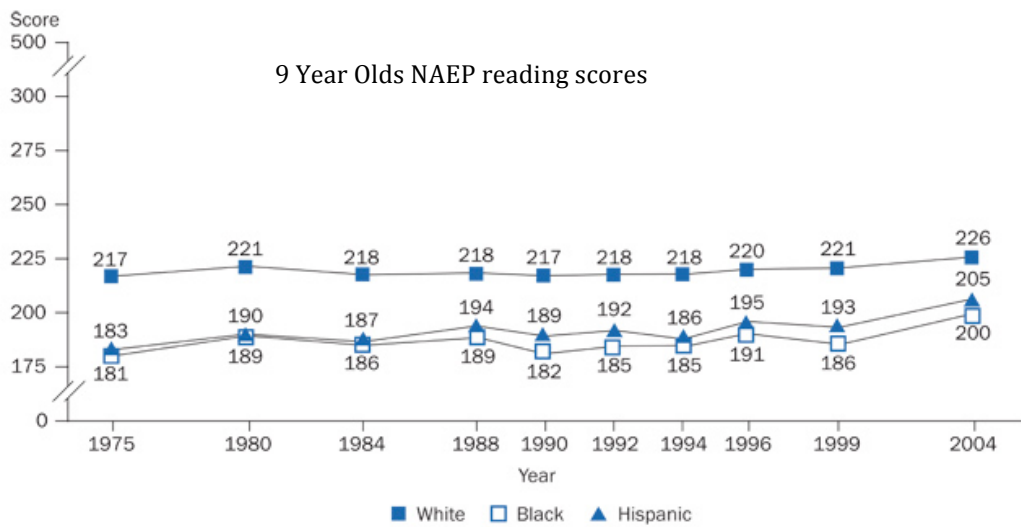
discipline and school organization. These demands from a group of African-American and Latino students and parents convey a holistic approach to racial inequity—one that assumes the achievement gap is not inherent in students, but reflects the racism built into the beliefs and practices of teachers, administrators, and the community at large.

This dissertation explores the significance of the achievement gap, different frames through which educational reformers view the gap, and the ways in which dissimilar groups of reformers engage with racial inequity and racism as they attempt to close the gap. My findings show that education reforms intended to narrow or close the achievement gap are grounded in a wide spectrum of diagnostic frames—attempts to “diagnose” or explain the achievement gap, and prognostic frames—attempts to solve the gap (Goffman 1976, Benford & Snow 2000). In this chapter, I explain why the gap is significant, introduce the frames that seek to capture the complexity of the achievement gap as a representation of racial inequity, and discuss my research methods. Chapter two examines the history and origins of racialized education assessment and the phenomenon of the achievement gap, along an empirical discourse analysis of its concurrent diagnostic frames in education discourse. Chapter three explores the overwhelming trend of market-based reform in the United States and how that trend delineates a particular political opportunity structure for discourse and action aimed at narrowing the gap. In chapter four, I explore the civil rights and racial justice frames as alternative understandings of the gap that engage with market-based reforms as racist practices. In chapter five I detail Coleman’s “College and Career for All” and “Voices of the Next Generation” campaigns and the ways in which the group’s efforts were successful or unsuccessful in shifting the discourse of the achievement gap toward a more comprehensive view of racial inequity. Finally, in chapter six, I conclude with some of the national areas of tension between frames and their framers and highlight opportunities for centering a racial justice approach to closing the gap.

Market-based education reform is the dominant trend in school change. Despite its clear origins in politically conservative think tanks and organizations, market-based reformers have gained credibility by aligning themselves with parents of color. However, there is a strong tension between the agenda espoused by market reformers on behalf of Black and Latino parents, and the school reform campaigns that Black and Latino parents engage in through local efforts. My research reflects the findings of community-based education organization scholar Kavitta Mediratta in her national study: school reform in the hands of Black and Latino parents often includes demands for culturally relevant curriculum; an end to the system of tracking; mandatory parent communication protocols for teachers; increased teacher quality, improved access for newcomer and special education students to college prep courses; progressive discipline systems; and replacing standardized testing completely with culturally relevant, authentic assessments (field notes, 2.7.09). Because Coleman is an organized vehicle through which the voices of those most affected by both the achievement gap and education reforms can be heard, the group’s work provides a unique opportunity to study and assess an “on-the-ground” effort to redefine the terms of the educational debate and to win concrete reforms. My research overall seeks to interrogate the commonsense term “achievement gap,” delineate the racial framings that shape reform, reexamine the national forces of market-based education, and explore the complexities and challenges of promoting racial justice-based approaches to

education reform.

*Significance of the problem: The shape, size & nature of the achievement gap*



Source: "Closing the Gap Data Points" report, Education Trust 200

The achievement gap is significant for two primary reasons. First, it is part of a strong indictment of the public school system and its failure as an engine of democratic equality. In addition to the historical realities of unequal school funding and the incomplete project of desegregation, most Americans hold a common-sense notion that the public school system is inherently broken (Hirsch 1996; Chubb & Moe 1990; Giroux 2008; Apple 2001). The achievement gap is one reason in a long list of why public schools are presumed to be sinking ships with indifferent teachers half-heartedly bailing water and incompetent administrators at the helm. Secondly, the achievement gap is a reminder that race, and not class alone, is still a strong predictor of student performance on standardized exams. While some racial inequities can be explained away by socio-economic status and culture/behavior—and how those differences manifest on standardized tests—there is an enduring and dramatic gap between the scores of African-American, Latino, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander and Native American students on standardized exams in comparison to their White counterparts. Politicians, principals and parents alike have insisted that this “achievement gap” can be closed by some combination of hard work, effective use of testing data, closing schools, and changing the faces of the schooling system (Ladson-Billings 2006; Leonardo 2007; Buras 2008). Reformers’ faith in closing the achievement gap, however, is contingent on the belief that any of these measures can outweigh racial inequities both within and outside of schools.

#### **The achievement gap by numbers**

The gap is quantified in a number of ways, but the most common measure is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a set of exams given to students in their fourth grade, eighth grade and high school years. Though the gap has narrowed since the first national assessment of student performance using NAEP in 1969, the fact that it exists at all given national strides toward racial equity is disturbing. As a broad generalization, the achievement gap between White students and Black and Latino students narrowed throughout the 1970s, and was at its smallest between 1986 and 1990. In the early 1990s, the gap again began to grow, but decreased again for the most part after 1996. Both African-American and Latino scores increased impressively between 1970 and the mid-1980s, while White student scores have remained more constant, with small increases in both English and Math in the early 2000s. Until the mid-1990s, African-American and Latino student scores on the NAEP roughly paralleled each other, but in the last decade Latino students have begun to outperform their African-American counterparts.

Also of interest in the data on the achievement gap is the fact that it persists across class divides. Controlling for socio-economic status, African-American children actually enter kindergarten with higher reading levels than those of their White counterparts (Education Trust 2006). After kindergarten, however, White students of every income level routinely outperform both low-income and wealthy Black and Latino students (McKinsey & Company 2009). While some reformers attempt to redirect the achievement gap conversation to center on class inequity, the reality is that even African-American and Latino students with middle-class resources are on the losing side of the “gap.”

Though racial equity in schools has long been a concern for communities of color, in the last decade the most significant education reforms have come from the federal

government and the private sector.

## Research Design & Theoretical Lenses

### *Positionality*

I come to this issue of the achievement gap with multiple identities. I grew up a middle-class biracial girl in Oakland, California, attending Oakland public schools. My parents were activists; my father a well-known community organizer and my mother an employee of the National Center for Youth Law. I benefitted from both class and light-skinned privilege in my schooling, and was often recognized as a strong student and a leader. I was, however, also intensely aware of the inequities within the schools I attended—disparate treatment, tracked classes, and inequitable access to college counselors, to name a few.

As a researcher and public high school teacher, I care deeply about the issue of the achievement gap. When I began my educational career in 2003, at a now-famous charter school in Philadelphia, it was the first year of reforms under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. In my interactions with students and parents as a teacher and in my graduate research, I have been struck at both the points of unity and the points of divergence in reformers' and parents' approach to the achievement gap. I currently work at a high school where the student population is majority African-American and Latino, and standardized tests scores are generally low—88% of our students come to us as 9<sup>th</sup> graders with below proficient scores on their 8<sup>th</sup> grade math California State Test (CST), and 74% with below proficient scores on the English CST. Though our students' work has been lauded by outside observers for its integration of analytical perspective and we have one of the highest college-going rates in San Francisco—and the highest for Black and Latino youth—we continually struggle with questions about the nature of the achievement gap. What does it mean that our alumni have consistently reported that their high school education prepared them for college, yet we continue to have some of the lowest test scores in the district?

According to a number of outside education reformers who would look at our test scores alone, our staff is at best underserving our students and at worst damning them to a life of failure. These same reformers would likely ignore our college-level curriculum; social justice and critical thinking emphases; our students' daily struggles; the poverty of our population; the fact that the San Francisco Unified School District ties with Compton as the worst district in California for Black students; the broader context of gentrification in San Francisco and resulting lack of African-American infrastructure; the language needs of our English Language Learners; and the fact that our students come to us in ninth grade with the lowest scores of any ninth grade class in the district. This is the complicated reality of racial inequity and education—a reality that the discourse on “achievement gap” only begins to capture.

### Research questions

I began doing ethnographic research at Coleman in 2008, having heard of its role in the passage of the San Francisco school board's resolution to close the achievement gap. I was excited by the organization's genuinely multiracial membership and its analysis of San Francisco schools and structural racism. It became clear that Coleman would be a

compelling site for dissertation research when I found I could not reconcile the members' outrage at the racial achievement gap in San Francisco and the organization's resulting campaign for increased access to college prep classes. Why, I wondered, did an organization with such a strong analysis of structural racism decide to focus on an input factor like access to college-prep classes, rather than a campaign that more directly confronted the nature of racism in San Francisco schools? In order to understand this local phenomenon, I broadened my scope to the following research questions:

- **How does the public understand the achievement gap as a representation of racial inequity in education?**
- **How do frames of the achievement gap shape national perceptions of racial inequality?**
- **What are the possibilities and limitations of these frames for capturing the historical and contemporary roots of racial inequality in schools?**
- **Which frames have been most operationalized in education reform and why?**
- **What are the opportunities and limitations for parents and youth of color to critique and transform dominant frames of the achievement gap?**

I sought to answer my research questions through parallel research at the national and local levels that employed different research methodologies. At the national level, I conducted a broad survey of popular media. As the achievement gap was a deeply political, strongly contested, and highly visible topic during my research period (2008-2012), I read and synthesized approximately 600 articles, reports, policy briefs and speeches to assess the primary frames through which the achievement gap was discussed. To fully understand the ways in which education reform leaders discuss and understand the racial achievement gap, my analytical method of analyzing frames was key. In order to discover texts that addressed the achievement gap, I spent several years identifying leading policymakers, organizations, and individuals who address the achievement gap. I gathered texts from these groups in the forms of newsletters, speeches, flyers, reports, and op-ed columns. I joined the email lists of the Center for Education Reform, StudentsFirst, Broad Bold Approach, Parents Across America, the NAACP, the Alliance for Educational Justice, and the Education for Liberation network. I also used the "alerts" function of google.com in order to receive daily emails of any news articles with the words "achievement gap"; "opportunity gap"; "charters"; "accountability" and "education" or "schools"; "choice" and "education" or "schools"; "civil rights" and "education" or "schools"; and "racial justice" or "community organizing" and "education" or "schools". When I found relevant texts, I coded for understanding of the frames employed and determined key words and actions associated with each frame.

After I had begun conducting a survey of prominent educational reforms/reformers within the U.S. and what frames they exemplify, I did an in-depth case study of Coleman Advocates, examining both the diagnostic and prognostic frames that members and staff brought to their education campaigns as well as the ways in which national discourses of the gap influenced the campaign's trajectory. Because Coleman is an organized vehicle through which the voices of those most affected by both the achievement gap and education reforms can be heard, the group's work offers a unique opportunity to study and assess an "on-the-ground" effort to redefine the terms of the educational debate and to win concrete reforms. While some members of the Coleman staff do traditional political

advocacy, four staff support the community organizing programs Youth Making A Change (YMAC) and Parents Making A Change (PMAC). YMAC works with several hundred youth in six schools across the city, and its primary membership is low-income African-American, Latino and Asian youth. PMAC is similar in size, though its members are primarily Latino parents. Coleman members employ aspects of both civil rights and racial justice prognostic frames, seeking to close the achievement gap by advocating for increased school funding, increasing student and parent voice in schools, and demanding student access to college-preparatory and culturally-relevant curriculum.

New parent members of Coleman frequently entered the organization with a civil rights frame. A parent may have been frustrated with the lack of resources at her child's school and desired to hold the school accountable for its miseducation of her child. As she spent time at Coleman, however, her frame often shifted to one of structural racism when she encountered large numbers of other parents—many of whom have children attending more resourced schools—who had the same problem.

In analytical case studies, the research does not merely describe, but rather seeks to interpret and analyze what she observes (Merriam 1998). I conducted ethnographic research at Coleman by attending campaign meetings with members and conducting interviews with key leaders and staff. I also reviewed the minutes, strategy documents and public outreach materials from the Educational Justice program over the course of five years, from 2006-2011, in order to fully understand the frames being employed in Coleman's education justice campaigns. This method was one of **purposeful sampling** (Merriam 1998)—I specifically spoke with staff and members who were leaders of the Close The Achievement Gap, A-G, and College and Careers for All.

Despite Coleman being a single organizational body, a number of different diagnostic and prognostic frames of the achievement gap are employed at any given time. My research sought to capture the complexity of when and how different frames manifested in the context of political and discursive opportunity structures.

## Critical Discourse Analysis

In the arena of education, language has the potential to result in tangible changes for students—new policies, new teaching methods, and new methods of school organization can all be enacted through language. In analyzing the discourses and framings of the achievement gap, I looked at what James Gee calls “capital D Discourse,” or “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (Gee 1999: 29). More simply, Discourse is an inseparable combination of language and actions that signals to an audience a particular connotation beyond the literal text. Sociolinguist Jan Blommaert (2005) argues that meaning construction doesn't happen in a vacuum, it occurs under rather strict conditions that are both linguistic and socio-cultural and this set of conditions cannot be exploited by everyone in the same way. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) in its very nature explores both text and context. Critical discourse analyst Norman Fairclough sets out three levels of CDA: 1) discourse as text, 2) discourse as discursive practice and 3) discourse-as-social-practice i.e. “the ideological effects and hegemonic processes in which discourse is seen to



operate” (Blommaert 2005: 29). For the purposes of this research, I will look specifically at discourse as social practice. Though I have researched academic works and reports that explore the topic of the racial gap, I am more interested in widely circulated and consumed discourses, which can most frequently be found in newspapers, newsmagazines, the media produced by advocacy organizations, and the practices that produce and are produced by these discourses. As a theory and method, CDA is fundamentally political in its orientation and is particularly concerned with the relationship between language and power (Blackledge 2005, Fairclough 2003). Though many critical discourse theorists differ on the ways in which they interpret the works of renowned philosopher Michel Foucault, the Critical Discourse of CDA parallels Foucault’s position that discourse is a culmination of language and power. Feminist theorist Chris Weedon posits that Foucault’s conception of discourse includes “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them” (Weedon 1987: 108). Within CDA, and as I analyze them here, discourses are mutually constitutive with the fields of meaning that surround them.

I take a critical stance in this discourse analysis as a researcher interested not only in the meanings of discourses as they are understood but in the motivations of discourse actors. Linguist Gee posits that critical discourse analysis requires not only deep explanations of discourse but a desire to speak to and intervene in the issues one is analyzing (1999: 9).

## Framing theory

Frame theory originates with Erving Goffman’s 1976 work *Frame Analysis*, in which he defines frames as schemata of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large (Goffman 21). Frame theory has primarily been the purview of sociology, but more recently George Lakoff uses the concept of framing to describe conflicts between political parties. Lakoff considers frames to be “mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions” (Lakoff xv). These frames then become the “bite-sized” pieces of a larger issue. Though relevant context might lie outside the frame, the more frames are used, the more difficult it becomes to complicate the picture inside.

Frames are informed by critical theorist Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony—a constantly-shifting combination of coercion and consent. In Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, written in the 1920s and edited and translated to English in 1971, he argued that hegemony begins to operate on individuals the moment they begin interacting with the world around him/her (essentially, then, from birth). It is the stories we tell about why things are the way they are. If hegemony is the water in which we are swimming, then frames would be our goggles. In the midst of an entire underwater world, goggles allow us to focus on and interpret a particular scene.

The manufacturer of these goggles, however, has a particular ideology. While Lakoff examines the power inherent in creating political frames, Adam Fairclough (2001) analyzes the power that frames can evoke. If the creator of a frame has a great deal of cultural capital, or is able to reference a commonly-held set of values, the frame becomes

more powerful and more likely to be interpreted as common sense (Fairclough 2001: 53, 66). Linguist Adrian Blackledge (2005) asserts that framing is about representation and the ways in which reports or authorial accounts are made sense of. For example, Myra Marx Ferree (2003) explores the power of framing in her work examining abortion discourses in the United States and Germany. In pro-choice dialogues in the United States, speakers are more likely to invoke frames of rights and access rather than frames of protectionism, the idea that women should be protected. By appealing to the common sense notions of rights, access, and the free market (e.g., "choice"), pro-choice advocates are able to create relevant frames on a field that is fraught with moral ambiguity for most Americans.

In their extensive study on framing theory, Snow & Benford (2000) offer three processes through which frames are created: discursive processes, strategic processes, and contested processes. In the discursive process, frames are articulated to connect events and experiences into a unified understanding. In strategic processes of frame development the frame articulator(s) create a frame toward a specific political end. Finally, contested processes occur when there is a framing contest either between oppositional frame articulators, or within one political body.

#### Processes of Frame Articulation (Snow & Benford 2000)

<i>Discursive process</i>	Frame articulation involves the connection and alignment of events and experiences so they coalesce in a relatively unified and compelling fashion.
<i>Strategic Process</i>	When frames are deliberately developed and deployed to achieve a specific purpose. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Frame bridging is the linking of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue of problem.</li> <li>b. Frame amplification involves the idealization, embellishment, clarification, or invigoration of existing values or beliefs.</li> <li>c. Frame extension entails depicting a social movement organization's interests and frame(s) as extending beyond its primary interests to include issues and concerns that are presumed to be of importance to potential adherents.</li> <li>d. Frame transformation is changing old understandings and meanings and/or generating new ones.</li> </ul>
<i>Contested Process</i>	Framing contest between or among frame articulators and movement opponents, bystanders, and/or the media. Framing contests can also occur internally. Further, the resonance of frames can be contested.

The achievement gap is a contested frame: frame articulators range in ideology from free market-advocating, "colorblind" business interests to community-based racial justice advocates. In his study of conflicts between Democrats and Republicans Lakoff describes how, if one creates a frame *solely in response* to a pre-existing contradictory frame, the possibility of making an argument on one's own terms is negated. Because the terms of the debate have been set, Democrats respond to Republican aggression again and again

within conservative frames, without creating frames of their own—thus ensuring that the argument will be lost.

In Ferree's 2003 study of anti- and pro-choice abortion movements, she explains that framing contests can occur among different political interests but frequently occur *within* a movement. In seeking to maximize *frame resonance*, appealing to the mainstream may obscure more radical voices within a movement. In the case of the abortion debate, Ferree remarks upon the framing of "choice" itself. As many feminists of color have long noted in critiques of the "pro-choice" position, given the disproportionate poverty and history of sexual assault and forced sterilization among African-American, Native, Latina and Asian women in the U.S., the idea of "choosing" whether to have children fails to resonate with many working-class women and women of color. Hence, while the choice frame is frequently embraced by visible liberal political actors in the pro-choice movement (i.e. educated White and middle-class feminists), it simultaneously excludes the possibility of a more complex understanding of what abortion means for women in different structural positions. When movements seek the advantages resonance offers, "*they also accept political costs, particularly in marginalizing alternative frames, the speakers who offer them, and the constituencies whose concerns they express*" (Ferree 306, my emphasis).

The framing of the achievement gap is similarly both resonant and limited. The language of the gap lends credibility to the schooling system and available data measurements, and it creates undue focus on the school and student. Though a powerful social institution, schools and their personnel have limited capacity to address that which is a product of structural racism.

#### *Gramsci and Ferree in conversation, or reconciling hegemony and framing*

The tension between Coleman's radical commitment to racial justice and its pragmatic need to mobilize a base and make concrete changes can be understood through Antonio Gramsci's "war of position" in critical theory literature and Myra Marx Ferree's notion of resonance in framing and discourse literature. Gramsci's concept of hegemony contradicts a state-centric understanding of power. When he wrote *Prison Notebooks* in the 1930s, Gramsci believed that power theorists over-emphasized the power of the state and coercive force. As Gramsci wrote from prison, he certainly understood the power of the state through direct experience. Gramsci's contribution to theoretical understandings of power, however, is his writing on hegemony—power that, in contrast to direct domination, is a combination of coercion and consent connected to the economic superstructure of society. Hegemony is the "cultural, moral and ideological" leadership over both groups allied with dominant power structures and subordinate groups, and is maintained through common sense, or the folklore of the culture that is a "relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given place and time" which is itself a "material force" (Hall 1986: 21).

Though framing theory has a lineage distinct from Marxist theory like that of Gramsci, framing theorist Myra Marx Ferree engages with the notion of hegemony in her discussions of framing and resonance. Ferree (2003) compares discursive opportunity structures to a hegemonic discourse but argues that discursive opportunity structures have a more structural and institutional character than hegemony. The discursive opportunity structure is a hybrid of the direct domination of formal and state-sanctioned discourses

(media, expert testimony, the structuring of research and data, etc.) and Gramsci's common sense created by more informally circulated hegemonic discourses (conversations, the shaping of school curriculum, funding trends, the values that inform actions). Discursive opportunity structures, then, are communal and limiting discourses of social events.

Following Gramsci, Coleman members should be considered organic intellectuals, engaged in challenging neoliberal discursive opportunity structures through a counter-hegemonic war of position. Coleman members spoke to the realities of structural racism while dominant discourses obscured the realities of poverty and racism under a rhetoric of choice. A war of position, however, is not a blatant attack—in order to counter hegemony in an impactful way, organic intellectuals must appeal to the “good sense” core of hegemony's common sense. What Gramsci calls good sense—the core truth within hegemony—is analogous to Ferree's concept of resonance, or the extent to which a frame is perceived to be legitimate by its audience. Ferree raises a number of concerns with the notion of resonance in social movement literature, where some authors characterize the success of a social movement by the resonance of its frames. Instead, Ferree argues that when movements become *too* concerned with resonance, “they also accept political costs, particularly in marginalizing alternative frames, the speakers who offer them, and the constituencies whose concerns they express” (Ferree 306). If a movement genuinely seeks a “restructuring of hegemonic ideas and the interests they express and support” it must consider resonance as one factor that should guide political action and the frames it shares with the public, but resonance cannot dominate the group's action or speech if it wishes to maintain a counter-hegemonic vision (Ferree 2003: 305).

Coleman members walked a fine line between bowing to existing hegemonic ideas surrounding the achievement gap and their desire to radically shift those ideas. While both the resolution to Close the Achievement Gap and subsequent campaign to secure access to A-G courses were civil rights-oriented (focus on inputs, distribution of resources), I argue that the way in which the Voices of the Next Generation campaign was executed and the supports it demanded nonetheless made it a counter-hegemonic racial justice campaign. Coleman members were acting as Gramscian intellectuals, engaging with people's good sense in order to become “constructor[s], organiser[s], and ‘permanent persuader[s]” (Gramsci, 1971: 10). Former Coleman Executive Director NTanya Lee explains this strategy:

So how do you strategically use the dominant frame in a way that could accomplish a much deeper kind of change? In the context of the current debate, on a staff level, I think we felt like it was the most strategic way to use some of the dominant language of the day around standards—not testing-based standards, but standards—that we could use that language to demand other things that wouldn't by themselves be compelling (interview 7.10.12).

In running a campaign that enjoyed popular support, Coleman members crafted an in-depth series of “implementation demands” that spoke to the district's inadequacies with regard to its African-American, Latino and Pacific Islander populations. The opening created by Coleman's temporary strategic alliance with board of education members and

other politicians provided opportunities to push for other meaningful changes like ethnic studies courses, restorative justice discipline programs, and expanded credit recovery that would directly benefit African-American, Latino and Pacific Islander students in the district.

*Framing and Discursive Opportunity structures*

Two categories of frames are relevant to an analysis of the policies and language that emerge from the achievement gap: diagnostic and prognostic. Diagnostic frames attempt to identify the etiology of a problem; in the case of the achievement gap, diagnostic frames seek to analyze and explain the gap in a discursive manner that resonates with the target audience. Diagnostic frames of the achievement gap include individual failure/meritocracy; cultural deficiency; stereotype-responsive performance; cultural mismatch between students and teachers; nature of curriculum; unequal access and lack of civil rights enforcement; low expectations from teachers/incompetent teachers; systemic inadequacies (bureaucracy and other factors); and structural racism. Prognostic frames attempt to offer solutions to, or remediation of the problem. Prognostic frames include market-based reforms; racial liberalism advocating for civil rights and access in education; and racial justice-based systemic change.

In addition to examining the frames themselves I will use the analytical tool of *opportunity structures* (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996, Snow & Benford 2000, McAdam, Tilly and Tarrow 2001) to further explore achievement gap frames. Opportunity structures can best be described as the playing field on which framing contests takes place. Different players posit distinct discourses. While each player or group determines the discourses they create, the discourses are structured by the lines of the field. One might think of the sidelines of this discourse-field as hegemonic tropes within a given society. The opportunity structure field is similar to Pierre Bourdieu's conception of fields, which refer to the spheres of social relations within which individual agents act, governed by their own habitus and doxa. Habitus organizes the agents' practices and perception of practices, while doxa is the "universe of tacit assumptions that organize action within the field" (Bourdieu 1993). Within the field of opportunity structures, discourses-as-agents, rather than individuals-as-agents, compete for dominant consumption in a contest governed by resonance (Ferree 2003), which is similar to doxa. Players may try to alter the rules of the game in their favor, but success in this endeavor is contingent on the extent to which their fellow players and game viewers accept the change. Within the world of education reform, for example, a number of market-based education reformers have begun to claim their policies fall under the banner of civil rights. Reformers more firmly positioned within the civil rights political legacy have questioned this discursive use; resulting in an uneasy and evolving shift of the field's sidelines. The architect of a discourse has agency over her creation, but only within certain limits of acceptability and resonance.

Structures shape frames because they shape conditions—a diagnostic frame of closing the achievement gap by doing away with standardized tests, for example, would have little resonance with the public, because people would wonder how students and teachers would then be held accountable and because of a strong sense in the national imagination that the tests are inherently legitimate. Opportunity structures are what shape a frame's

potential resonance—its salience and credibility to the targets of mobilization.

Although the political science view of political opportunity structures out forth by MaAdam, Tilly and Tarrow (2001) is highly tangible and state-based, I employ an analysis of **discursive** opportunity structures grounded in critical discourse analysis, in the vein of Myra Marx Ferree (2003) and Herbert Kitschelt (1986). My examination focuses on discursive opportunity structures as forces that shape and are shaped by hegemony (Blommaert 2005), language ideologies (Blackledge 2005) and power. This study explores how discursive opportunity structures, or “institutionally anchored ways of thinking that provide a gradient of relative political acceptability to specific packages of ideas,” (Ferree et al. 2002) restrict or expand potential framings of the achievement gap. The analytical lens of the discursive opportunity structure is a theoretical attempt to combine the epistemologies of framing theory and political opportunity structure theory in social movement in literature. Social movement scholar Doug McAdam defines political opportunity as the following elements:

- 1) The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system
- 2) The stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity
- 3) The presence or absence of elite allies, and
- 4) The state’s capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam 1996)

Though the political opportunity model is still widely used in the analysis of social movements (Goodwin and Jasper 1999), it has also been critiqued for over-emphasizing structure and under-emphasizing the less tangible nature of social change, such as the emotions and agency of movement actors (Goodwin & Jasper 1999, Gamson & Meyer 1996). More broadly, Goodwin and Jasper accuse the political opportunity model of making an unnecessary bifurcation between structure and culture.

Framing theory, in contrast, is much less grounded in tangible structures. As Erving Goffman originally described, frames are a “schemata of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large”; and can therefore be created by anyone (Goffman 1976: 21). Benford & Snow (2000) claim in their review of framing theory that frames are created through either a discursive process (in which a frame is simply articulated), a strategic process (in which a frame is developed with the express purpose of appealing to a particular group), or a contested process (between or among frame articulators and movement opponents, bystanders, and/or the media) (625).

Most simply, in explorations of political movements, political opportunity structure theory emphasizes structures; framing theory emphasizes agency. Ruud Koopmans and Jan Duyvendak, however, attempt to combine the framing and political opportunity perspective by offering the theoretical concept of discursive opportunity structures, which combine structure with agency by examining “the political conditions under which specific discourse become imaginable” (Koopmans and Duyvendak 1995: 249). Myra Marx Ferree (2003) offers in her analysis of pro-choice movement in the U.S. and Germany that framing language alone sometimes explores a controversial issue through frames of

different groups as if each group had an equal amount of power. Rather, researchers must remember that:

[P]ower relations shape the dominant discourses and through them affect movement speech, channeling what challengers will attempt to say and how they say it, as well as affecting how they are heard (Steinberg 1999; Ellingson 1995). Certain ideas are likely to be structurally disadvantaged by the terms of the dominant discourse (305).

Ferree makes a strong and cogent point when she argues that frames are not created in isolation from the power structures and dynamics that surround them. While many social movement and community organizations frame demands so that they resonate with intended targets of mobilization, to examine movement frames in terms of cultural resonance alone risks excluding a movement's more radical analysis. "Analyzing the framing process as if it were merely the search for cultural resonance" Ferree submits, "reduces it to a marketing process rather than one in which principles and ideological considerations play a significant role (Oliver and Johnston 2000)".

While political opportunity theory has generally been used to analyze social movement alone, framing theory has been used to interpret a wide variety of social phenomena. While I am not arguing that school reform is a social movement, I do contend that discursive opportunity structures—a concept born of both social movement and discourse theory—is the most useful lens through which to examine the phenomenon of discourses surrounding the achievement gap. In the discourse frames of the achievement gap I explore, I also seek to understand the relationship between the frame, the frame advocates, and the conceptions of racism underlying that frame. Of the prognostic frames that attempt to solve the achievement gap, the one put forth by market-based reformers has the weakest indictment of racism as a contributor to the gap, while racial justice, the frame most closely associated with community-based organizations of parents and youth of color, views racism as the leading cause of the gap.

## Efforts to Close the Gap

*Efforts to close the achievement gap through federal policy: No Child Left Behind*

Today, one might argue that private reformers hold more sway over the trajectory of public schools than the government. While the roots of market-based reform harken back to economist Milton Friedman, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 provided private interests with a clear invitation to involve themselves in the education game. Congress approved No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, with broad bipartisan support. As a policy, the legislation addressed the issues of school and student failure. Both the text and broader social conception of NCLB position the legislation as an attempt to close the achievement gap. According to the NCLB website,

No Child Left Behind is designed to change the culture of America's schools by closing the achievement gap, offering more flexibility, giving parents **more options**, and teaching students based on what works.

Under the act's accountability provisions, states must describe how they will close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency.

Under No Child Left Behind, data—specifically test scores—became a political tool with which communities could (in theory) hold districts and schools accountable for student performance.

In contrast to the findings of the 1983 federal report *A Nation At Risk*, which claimed that school curricula were a veritable “cafeteria” of seemingly random options, NCLB called for common content standards measured on a yearly basis (aka AYP). The standards threshold required schools to allocate sufficient resources to enable students to succeed in the national educational system. With data as a measuring stick, underperforming schools have been forced to adhere more closely to testing guidelines as a first measure of improvement and to close if initial changes fail to result in “adequate yearly progress”.

The architects of NCLB present school choice as an element of school improvement that can occur simultaneously with the other elements. Linked to the NCLB “parents” section is the School Matters website, where parents may compare schools to each other on the basis of test scores and class size. Another link encourages parents to choose schools based on curriculum, safety, etc. Parents have the “right” to choose the environment in which their children should learn. These reforms represent a market-oriented approach to school improvement.

Though implementing market-based strategies for school reform is not a completely new approach, the uncritical embrace of schools as marketplaces espoused in NCLB was certainly noteworthy. Richard Hunter and Rosusan Bartee (2003) argue that this framework of “choice and competition” can be traced to conservative Milton Freedman, who claimed that public education should be a free marketplace for the consumer. NCLB’s policies emphasize “individual merit and strict accountability, enduring ideals in America that most burden those groups of students who have historically been depicted as low achieving” (Koyama 2010:26). This notion of the public education marketplace was taken up and elaborated by many conservative pundits who hypothesized that the interests of educational stakeholders could be achieved “through practices of bureaucratic freedom in schools and parental autonomy” (Hunter and Bartee 2003: 153).

In fact, a number of critics of neoliberalism argue that NCLB laid the foundation for private entities to enter the world of education reform. Lee & Wong (2004) document the emphasis on standards and accountability as a shift in focus from inputs to outcomes in education. The very language of NCLB emphasizes holding schools, teachers, and politicians accountable for helping students, while the legislation’s emphasis on data disaggregated by race made the achievement gap more significant, urgent, and accessible than ever before.

#### *Efforts to close the gap through Civil Rights enforcement*

Though federal funding ensures some uniformity among schools across the nation, students in different districts have vastly different levels of access to educational resources like small class sizes, experienced teachers, after school tutoring, test preparation, and class



materials (textbooks, computers, athletic space, potable drinking water, science equipment, etc.). Civil rights advocates highlight that unequal access is a clear cause of the gap, as children's failure to achieve can be linked to inadequate learning environments (Campaign for High School Equity 2012, Civil Rights Coalition 2010, Schott Foundation 2010). Advocates of the civil rights approach to closing the achievement gap have primarily focused on lawsuits and measures to ensure funding equity as reform strategies. In the last decade, there have been strong movements in both New York and California to equalize resource access in schools, exemplified by the Alliance for Quality Education in New York and the *Williams vs. California* case filed by a coalition of civil rights law organizations in California (Rosenbaum et. al. 2002). In both cases, the fact that students with *unequal* access to qualified teachers, textbooks, and adequate facilities were held to the same standard was the source of legal complaint.

During discussions about the potential reauthorization of No Child Left Behind in July of 2010, a Civil Rights coalition<sup>2</sup> released a statement declaring that access to a high-quality education is a civil right. They further recommended that in order for all students to receive an equitable education, access to quality teachers and achievement data is imperative, and that civil rights safeguards be strengthened and enforced.<sup>3</sup> The language of civil rights has a powerful resonance, as it draws on the moral legitimacy of the Civil Rights Movement. Despite the prevalence of civil rights language in education reform, however, only a small number of education reformers have followed the tradition of civil rights organizing by focusing seeking legal means to remedy resource inequities.

#### *Efforts to close the achievement gap through entrepreneurial innovations*

As Alex Molnar writes in *School Commercialism* (2005), the standards movement found its footing in the 1980s as it amplified the conclusion of *A Nation At Risk* that American schools were significantly underperforming in comparison to their European and Asian competitors. Business interests, the standards movement, and academics like John Chubb and Terry Moe coalesced to lead the way toward market-based solutions that would penetrate the monopoly of public education (Molnar 2005: 11). Within the logic of the market, social inequalities are not injustices but rather the inevitable outcomes of a free market (Baptiste 2001: 195). In this worldview, the problem of the achievement gap does not lie outside the frame of the market; the problem exists *because the school is not a market*. Within the logic of the market, if parents and students were able to operate as consumers of education, and school personnel were treated like managers of products, not only would the achievement gap close but schools overall would be more efficient in producing educated, workplace-ready students.

In spite of—or perhaps because of—the fact that the internal logic of the free market fails to account for the achievement gap (here understood as a racial gap), the market offers

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<sup>2</sup> Coalition members included the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights under Law, the National Action Network, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., the National Council for Educating Black Children, the National Urban League, the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, and the Schott Foundation for Public Education.

<sup>3</sup> “Framework for Providing All Students an Opportunity to Learn through Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.”

a solution in the only framework it knows: that of choice and competition. Free market theories generally advance the notion that equality of opportunity is a complete toolkit for level playing field competition in the marketplace, but they do not address structural inequities such as racism (Apple 1999).

In the decade since NCLB passed, individual and foundation-initiated private sector school reforms have proliferated. Though technically non-profit, many of the entities promoting these reforms have significant ties to for-profit education companies (Burch 2010). Michael Apple (2001) identifies four main components of entrepreneurial, or neoliberal education reform:

1. Proposals for “choice” such as voucher plans and tax credits.
2. Establishing national performance standards for both teachers and students and high-stakes assessments.
3. Attacks on school curriculum and attempt to establish a curriculum reflecting White, male, middle class American identity.
4. Growing pressure to align the goals of education with the needs of the economy.

Though Apple wrote this assessment over a decade ago, each of these reforms has come to pass. In the next chapters, I will more thoroughly explore the frame of market-based education as proposed solution to the achievement gap.

#### *Efforts to close the achievement gap through community-led reforms*

In contrast to many of the measures undertaken by federal policy and education entrepreneurs, community-based educational groups overwhelmingly focus on representation and racial equity (Mediratta 2009, Oakes 2006, Warren 2011, Research for Action 2002). As Dingerson et al. (2004) wrote in their 2004 report about community organizing in response to NCLB, grassroots organizations are most heavily invested in the least powerful stakeholders. Consequently, community groups use a different lens in understanding a phenomenon like the achievement gap.

Though Coleman, the group described in the opening of this chapter, is unique among community-based educational organizations in its longevity and its numerous successes, its size and political focus are fairly typical. Nationally, community-based groups do education-focused community organizing around issues such as accountability of schools and administrators to parents and students; equity (racially equitable schooling outcomes, closing the achievement gap, culturally relevant curriculum, etc.); quality teaching (including campaigns to increase or improve professional development for teachers, or recruiting local teachers and/or teachers of color); and increased transparency and democracy in decision-making (such as creating or strengthening channels for student and parent voices). In a 2002 profile of education groups overall, 42 percent were addressing issues of accountability, and a sometimes-overlapping 39 percent were addressing of racial, geographic, and income equity (National Center for Schools and Communities 2002: 5-6). Of the group members interviewed, 53 percent mentioned issues of race consciousness, cultural competency, or institutional racism (*ibid* 7). In a 2004 study of community organizing and education, 88 percent of the groups profiled were working on ‘equity issues’, especially as related to racism (Dingerson et. al. 2004: 19).

The local organizing work that these groups take on stands in contrast to the national picture of parents of color, and particularly Black parents, supporting conservative trends in education. Both the high-stakes testing movement and choice-based education reform efforts have sought to align themselves with parents of color (Hirsch 2007, Pedroni 2007). City policies in favor of vouchers, which claimed to be a school accountability mechanism, were most publicly associated with African-American parents in cities like Milwaukee. Rod Paige, former President George W. Bush's secretary of education and one of Bush's first African-American cabinet appointees, claimed that the No Child Left Behind Act carried on the legacy of civil rights—a branding that other policymakers and privatizers have been quick to use, as well.

Underneath the surface, however, it is clear that Black and Latino parents have been more concerned with issues of racial equity in schooling than they have been enamored with standardized tests or traditional grading. The same inequity that systematically disadvantages low-income students and students of color conversely *advantages* White students. In the face of rhetoric about choice, accountability, and expectations; research shows that low-income Black and Latino parents continue to focus on structural inequities (Mediratta 2001, 2002, 2009, Oakes 2006, Warren 2011, Research for Action 2002).

## Framing the Gap

Education policymakers, entrepreneurial bodies, and community-based groups bring an array of approaches to education reform. The differences among these approaches are indicative of deeply different interpretations of race, racial inequity, and the achievement gap phenomenon itself.

A number of educational theorists have explored and theorized about the meaning of the “gap” language: controversial standards advocate E.D. Hirsch (1996) focuses more on the *knowledge gap* than the achievement gap, arguing that students lack a common American content knowledge; educational researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that the achievement gap is more accurately described as an *educational debt* owed by the American school system to students of color; while critical race theorist Zeus Leonardo (2007) suggests that the notion of the gap holds students of color to an invisible marker of Whiteness—that reforms aimed at closing the gap also reinforce White supremacy in the U.S.

Given that the concept of the achievement gap first gained national traction during the civil rights movement (Salmonowicz 2009), the phrase is pregnant with racial meaning. However, as race theorists Omi and Winant point out, the meaning of race and racism—which they describe as an “*unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle*”—has changed significantly since 1966 and perhaps even more dramatically since the election of African-American president Barack Obama and the ensuing claim by political pundits that his election is evidence of America's post-racial status (Dickerson 2009).

However, attempts to close the achievement gap have met only marginal success. Simply stated, in a society that congratulates itself on having embraced civil rights and in an era in which many Americans would purport to be “post-racial”, the achievement gap

compels us to reexamine claims of the post-racial society. While most “reforms” aimed at closing the gap at best extend the assault on public schools and at worst reinforce racism, I hypothesize that the achievement gap is a discursive construct resulting from both material circumstances and social framing and seek here to explore the achievement gap as a powerful frame for understanding the emerging theoretical and on-the-ground dynamics of racial inequity.

## Chapter Two: HISTORY, ORIGINS AND FRAMING OF THE GAP

*The presumption that undergirds much of this conversation about the achievement gap is that equal educational opportunity now exists; therefore, continued low levels of achievement on the part of students of color must be intrinsic to them, their families, or their communities.*

—Linda Darling Hammond, *The Flat World and Education*

### **Schools and the construction of inequity**

The phrase “achievement gap” echoes in the halls of Congress, in the classrooms of teacher education programs, and in the homes of students. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the phrase is significant because it captures an enduring and powerful representation of racism and racial inequity in the United States. The achievement gap as an idea has captured the American imagination—the achievement gap discourse drives some of the most significant education reforms in the country, underlies the applications to Teach for America from thousands of college students, moves millions of dollars from private foundations to the next “it” solution, is the continued focus of civil rights organizations around the country, and continues to be invoked as the rationale for an unprecedented move toward high-stakes testing in education. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the achievement gap, however, is that the same reformers who devote so much time and energy to closing the gap willfully refuse to acknowledge its underpinnings in structural racism.

#### *Overview of the gap*

The phrase achievement gap originated in response to the 1956 hearings held by a small Congressional subcommittee on the performance of students in recently-integrated Washington DC schools. The hearings were convened in response to the first achievement tests ever to have been implemented in the district, and despite having no prior comparison data, segregationists suggested that White student performance had dropped as a result of integration. A report about the hearings was published in the September 27, 1956 edition of the Washington DC *Evening Star*, entitled “School Probers Told of Lag in Negro Learning: D.C. Survey Shows Achievement Gap in Senior Highs” (Jones 2013). Historian Laura Jones notes that the phrase “achievement gap” was used interchangeably with “Negro lag” in these initial media discussions of disaggregated student performance. Framing the performance difference as a “lag” for Black students and an integration-related drawback for White students laid the foundation for later discussions of the gap that blamed students of color for their poor performance (Jones 2013). The use of the term ‘lag’ in reference to Black students also created a justification for the assumption that Whites were academically superior to their peers of color.

Discussions of racial disparities in student performance occurred sporadically over the next half-century, frequently mirroring discourses of racial disparities in other areas. As children of color and their parents undertook the difficult battle of school integration in the 1960s, a national debate about the nature of poverty and the poor was also taking

place. Though War on Poverty and Great Society programs directly benefitted poor Americans in certain respects, the programs were also based on scholarship that raised questions about the inherent inferiority of poor Black families.

Building on Oscar Lewis' anthropological work on generational poverty, in 1965 Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan published *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, commonly referred to as simply "The Moynihan Report". Contrary to its contemporary representation, Moynihan's report *did* acknowledge the structural discrimination and history of slavery that manifested in the Black poverty of the 1960s. Unfortunately, the author also argued that Black families had internalized external discrimination, resulting in a "tangle of pathologies" in the Black community. Jerome Coleman's 1966 report (the "Coleman report"), in many ways a school-based version of the Moynihan Report, emphasized external, home-based factors as those most critical to student success.

Coleman's main conclusion was that home environment and the social capital with which students entered school both had a far greater impact on student achievement than any school-based factor (Coleman 1966).<sup>4</sup> In later works, Coleman decried the lack of parent involvement in schools but made no mention of the economic demands that parents might face.<sup>5</sup> If a price must be paid for the tension brought by racial integration, these works demanded that students of color, and not the schools, pay said price. Both reports, as well as other scholarship of the era, made the case for "cultural compensation"—that the federal government was obligated to provide poor and Black families both services and opportunities to improve their cultural values in relation to hard work and education (Tyack 1974). As the chairman of the Boston school board claimed in 1971, "[w]e do not have inferior schools; we have been getting an inferior type of student" (Tyack 1974: 282).

Under the mantle of cultural compensation, educational programs aimed at both pre-school children and undereducated adults began. Schools became a central tool in the war on poverty (Katz 1987, Tyack 1974). The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act coincided with other employment and welfare supports (like the expansion of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or AFDC, and legal challenges to employment discrimination) that reduced childhood poverty to levels about 60% of what they are today. By the mid-1970s, "urban schools spent as much as suburban schools, and paid their teachers as well; perennial teacher shortages had nearly ended; and gaps in educational attainment closed substantially" (Darling-Hammond 2010: 18). A number of educational historians, including Linda Darling Hammond and Diane Ravitch, credit the combination

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Coleman Report suggests that school funding and other school factors have almost no impact on students. Berliner & Biddle's 1995 *Manufactured Crisis* strongly criticizes the Coleman Report's methodology and its conclusion about school-based factors' lack of import.

<sup>5</sup> A significant but important distinction *was* made in 1960s literature between the "deserving poor" and the fatalistic, unmotivated, undeserving welfare poor and Blacks. Discussion of 1960s welfare policy was very much concerned with this "deserving" population, but in the end the poor were deemed an illegitimate portion of the U.S. population who would have to prove their worthiness in order receive even a basic level of aid, regardless of fluctuation of economic opportunities or institutional disadvantage (Abramovitz 1996, Valentine 1971).

of poverty reduction programs and increased school spending with the resulting narrowing of the achievement gap.<sup>6</sup>

Darling-Hammond details:

In reading, large gains in Black students' performance throughout the 1970s and early 1980s reduced the achievement gap considerably, cutting it nearly in half in just 15 years...The achievement gap in mathematics also narrowed sharply between 1973 and 1986" (2010: 18).

Under the administration of President Ronald Reagan, the gap began to widen again. Federal programs were cut and the gains of the 1960s and 1970s declined to pre-civil rights levels. Childhood poverty rates, the increased prison population, homelessness, and lack of access to health care all reached crisis levels (Gilmore 2007, Parenti 1999).

In 1983, the publication of *A Nation At Risk* spurred national dialogue about the "failure" of schools, while citing little evidence for the massive failure it claimed other than diminished test scores (Berliner & Biddle 1995; Darling Hammond 2001; Katz 1987). As Berliner and Biddle have shown, these claims were invalid; average scores declined due to a larger pool of students taking standardized exams. Prior to the 1970s, only a small number of elite students took the SAT. As college demand rose, however, that number rose. In contrast, student scores on the PSAT— taken by high school juniors regardless of their intent to attend college—remained constant (Berliner and Biddle 1995:25). Despite the misrepresentations that characterized the *Risk* report, the mainstream media reported its conclusions as gospel and the story of failing schools slowly became a truism. The *Risk* report helped to set a standard in which student performance is frequently reported as an isolated factor, attributable only to levels of teacher effort and the strength of family values, rather than a proxy for poverty, racism and community trauma. Within the narrow scope of *A Nation at Risk* lie the origins of the market-based frame of the achievement gap.

By the mid-1980s, racial inequity in education had grabbed the attention of educational researchers. When the National Council on Educating Black Children was founded in 1986, Arnold Cooper, one of its leaders, claimed that "[t]he African-American community must ultimately rely on itself to reinforce a substantive and relevant education for its children" (Wells et. al. 2004). Schools had once again become a racial battleground— though one much different from the desegregation battles of the 1960s and 1970s.

#### *Evolution of school assessment*

Historically, public schools were "run by professionals called teachers who decided within sketchy limits, based on professional and local traditions, how to teach and what achievement seemed to be sufficient" (Hopmann 2011: 424). There was little external evaluation except for extraordinary cases of failure. Students were assessed more often than teachers and an unsuccessful student was simply considered a dunce, with the teachers' methods rarely questioned. The civil rights movement had renewed the idea that schools

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the 1970s was also the era of 'open' or progressive schooling. Open schools eschewed rote learning and traditional schooling routines. Though always a minority, open and alternative schools decreased greatly in the 1980s, at least in part as a result of a national emphasis on 'effective' schools and a return to teacher-centered instruction (Cuban 1993: 229-232).

could bring about social and racial equality, so after the long struggle for desegregation, the conclusion of *Risk*—that schools were failing in their basic mission of education, much less promoting racial unity—made national headlines.

The scores of students of color increased in the brief period of desegregation and strong social supports that characterized the late 1960s and 1970s, but SAT scores overall began to decline. An SAT commission investigated the falling scores in 1977 and concluded that the decrease in scores was “due to the increased numbers of minority students taking the test, large social forces (such as increased television viewing and rising divorce rate), political upheavals (like the Vietnam War and Watergate) and changes in school practices, including curriculum alteration” (Ravitch 2010: 23-24; see also Berliner and Biddle 1995). Although alarming, this drop in scores was predictable. As a result of desegregation struggles and an unequivocal desegregation order from the U.S. Supreme Court in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, the early 1970s was the height of the expectation that U.S. schools would educate *all* students. Though testing as a school accountability mechanism had been in effect since the 1920s (Cuban 1993), the potential for realizing the liberal ideal of education as a vehicle for socio-economic equity, mobility, and democratization was effectively absent until the desegregation and equalization of school funds processes of the 1970s.

Publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, then, both made bold statement and confirmed what the majority of teachers, parents, and students of color already knew—that students were achieving at low rates. Though the report did not specifically mention an achievement gap, it did claim that also at risk was the promise that all students, “regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance...” (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). A great deal of the report’s critique of schooling was rooted in the core curriculum movement—that students and schools needed to return to basics, rather than be confused by the “cafeteria smorgasboard” of choices available to them (Ravitch 2010: 25). Throughout the 1980s, additional research built on the notion that U.S. schools were failing and laid the foundation for a national focus on school evaluation and “accountability.”

With the clarion call of *Risk* having made a national splash, educational administrators renewed their commitment to standards and assessment. On the level of schools and classrooms, the 1980s was the decade of the ‘culture wars’—debates among self-proclaimed education experts about the extent to which school curriculum should be multicultural (Zimmerman 2002). In the federal policy arena, however, the 1980s saw a national shift from tracking educational *inputs* as indicators of educational performance (e.g., curriculum) to an emphasis on *outputs*, specifically in the form of test scores (Supovitz 2009), which would hold schools accountable for the job they were supposed to do. Despite evidence that federal poverty programs both bolstered student achievement and directly addressed one of the most significant factors in student achievement—socio-economic status—President Reagan’s policies reduced federal school funding and other supports while simultaneously demanding higher performance. The standards movement that emerged held students of color at the center of its focus—any school worth supporting would be expected to produce achieving students. Or, as Dylan Wiliam writes,

The logic of accountability testing is deceptively simple. Students attending higher quality schools will (by definition) have higher achievement than those attending lower quality



schools, so that differences in the quality of schooling will result in systematic differences in achievement between schools (Wiliam 2010: 110).

Once the differences in school quality could be identified through testing data, those schools' shortcomings could—in theory—be addressed.

As business interests and politicians began to collude around testing, progressive teachers and academics simultaneously began to build a case for alternative assessments. A landslide of scholarship about the gender, socioeconomic and ethnic bias of standardized exams, the narrowing of curriculum, and the use of extrinsic incentives to spur test score increases was published in the first half of the 1990s (Banks & Banks 1994; Banks 1996; Greene 1993; Nieto 2004). Marshall Smith and Jennifer O'Day introduced the idea of standards-based reform in the early 1990s as an effort to mobilize schools toward accurate assessment. A number of teachers and schools explored alternative assessments from written portfolios to verbal performance. Most of the assessments inspired by this work were comprehensive portfolios, designed to display higher-order thinking. Students in these programs were shown to have improved in both higher-order thinking and basic testing skills (Darling Hammond 2010: 68). Non-test-based reforms were popular among teachers and academics but were neglected by policymakers and never took root systemically. The lack of system-wide implementation and tension among the elements of limited data, high cost, and the elusive notion of accountability led to the demise of alternative assessments.<sup>7</sup>

The question of accountability lies at the heart of the standards and assessment movement. Dylan Wiliam argues that the accountability discourse seems to assume that schools are accountable to those (taxpayers) who pay for the provision of the service and to those who consume the service (parents and students); employers and the educational institutions students attend are additional stakeholders.

Schools have historically been viewed as engines of social equity while undisputedly underserving low-income students and students of color. The 1980s shift from inputs to outcomes as measures of school success meant a relatively sudden, and certainly unprecedented, focus on measureable outcomes, with accountability as the linchpin. Despite spotty evidence of high-stakes testing as a measure of school quality and an unclear implementation plan, by the time NCLB was passed in 2001, an overwhelming majority of Americans—80%—supported the notion of test-based accountability (Supovitz 2009: 219). The liberal project of schooling was called into question in the name of children of color as politicians and parents joined forces in a complicated united front demanding that children of color succeed in public schools.

#### *Meritocracy, liberalism and the purposes of schooling*

Different historical voices claim the purposes of schooling for often-conflicting goals. The progressive era of education lasted from 1890-1930 (Bowles and Gintis 1976)

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<sup>7</sup> While some alternative assessments were found to produce gains in the achievements of African American and Latino students, consistent data was hard to come by. One study (Supovitz and Brennan 1997) even found that one set of portfolio assessments reduced the ethnic achievement gap but widened gender disparities (Supovitz 2009: 217).

and was primarily represented by two famous theorists: Horace Mann and John Dewey. Common school advocate Horace Mann, often considered the father of modern education, believed that a school common to all people would provide a unifying experience for the children of the nation. John Dewey advocated for public schools as an engine of democracy—students with common experiences, a common body of knowledge, and a basic level of literacy would be primed for civic engagement. Not all theories of education were so idealistic, however: Theodore Schultz argued in 1959 that schools were to be incubators of human capital and should be viewed in relation to economic development.

The tension over whether the primary function of schools is to acculturate students, democratize society, or prepare workers, endured throughout the century. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis' seminal 1976 work *Schooling in Capitalist America* found that despite intentions toward democracy and social mobility, schools instead manifested *social reproduction*. They elaborate: “the failure of progressive educational reforms stems from the contradictory nature of the objectives of its integrative, egalitarian and developmental functions in a society whose economic life is governed by the institutions of corporate capitalism” (Bowles and Gintis 1976: 45). In order to generate real school reform, Bowles and Gintis argued that the dominance of business must be superseded by a commitment to economic equity.

David Labaree's 1997 article “Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals” summarizes the complexities of these conflicting goals. The same schools that would purport to educate and prepare all students for citizenry frequently justified the failure of low-income students and students of color through mechanisms of testing and evaluation. While evaluation in early common schools was as simple as the symbolic dunce cap, by the 1920s schools had developed more sophisticated assessment—and sorting—systems: “scientific’ ways of measuring inputs and outputs in school systems as a tool of management” (Tyack & Cuban 1995: 136).

A belief in the fairness of testing depends on a belief in meritocracy, and belief in meritocracy subsequently depends on the belief that racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of discrimination do not interfere with teaching and learning. Meritocracy is an integral aspect of American mythology, and discrimination is, Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller write in *The Meritocracy Myth*, “the antithesis of merit.” They continue, “Where there is discrimination, there is no meritocracy because discriminatory allocations of opportunity and rewards discount or ignore merit and instead replace it with nonmerit criteria...[D]iscrimination creates a terrible irony: the very discrimination that invalidates the American Dream for many Americans creates conditions that seem to validate it for others, enabling them to embrace it so fervently (McNamee and Miller 2009: 20).

The illusion of meritocracy would lead us to believe that students who perform well on tests are simply more intelligent than students who struggle with standardized testing. The perpetuation of the myth of meritocracy in relation to race “offers whites the belief not only that America is a level playing field but also that the success that whites enjoy relative to minorities of color is largely due to individual determination, a strong work ethic, high moral values, and a sound investment in education” (Giroux 2008: 69-70). In arenas outside of education, McNamee and Miller also submit that “[i]f merit were the sole cause of achievement, one would wonder why the vast amount of raw talent is found in white

males, who clearly dominate leadership positions in key institutions in society” (McNamee and Miller 2009: 43). As neoliberalism takes hold in the global arena, theorists Philip Brown and Stuart Tannock argue that meritocracy has been replaced with a “global war for talent”, which is governed by a “hyper-meritocracy”:

In the fields of primary and secondary education, past commitments to comprehensive schooling have been abandoned as middle and upper class families seek to position their children in the most desirable and prestigious schools and programs, to become one of the select members of the internationally sought after, high skill elite (Ball 2003; Brown 2000; Tomlinson 2007)...the global war for talent...rejects a model of universal meritocracy, in which the talent and educational achievements of all are incrementally rewarded. Alternatively, it promotes a form of ‘hyper-meritocracy’, characterised by ‘winner-takes-all’ markets (Frank and Cook 1995)...(Brown and Tannock 2009: 384).

As the global “hyper-meritocracy” increases global inequity, within the United States the meritocratic ideology contributes to a specific racial inequity. Belief in meritocracy insulates Americans from understanding institutional racism—if powerful people all earn their status, the educational system is lent credibility. As Beth Johnson writes in *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth*, “[t]he ideology of the American Dream, perhaps strongest around the arena of education, legitimizes race and class inequality by presenting these not as structures but as the inconsequential ramifications of meritocracy” (quoted in *ibid* 121). Schools are the most significant engine in the meritocracy machine.

Close examinations of schooling challenge the mythological meritocratic roots of education. Some students transcend their socio-economic origins, but in general, class is much more deterministic than Americans believe. In 1966, the Coleman Report found that “schools can bring little influence to bear on a child’s achievement that is independent of his background and general social context.” Subsequent scholarship confirms that no matter how intelligent or hard-working an individual child, or how high-quality his or her school; race and socio-economic status not only matter to student achievement; these factors are often the strongest in determining a student’s *opportunity to learn* (U.S. Department of Education 2001). On the SAT, student scores rise an average of 30 points per \$10,000 in family income. In one California study, parent education levels accounted for 50% of variation in student SAT scores (Sacks 1999). When class is held constant, race continues to be a factor—White students of every income level routinely outperform both low-income and wealthy Black and Latino students (“The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America’s Schools” 2009).

Opportunity to Learn factors include a student’s race, socio-economic status, and the schools and teachers to which s/he has access. In discussions of the achievement gap, while the underperformance of students of color is clear, opportunity to learn factors are obscured. Achievement gap frames are primarily distinguished by their approach to these elements—the factors that most directly shape students’ worlds with such intensity, but are nearly impossible to quantify.

## **Diagnostic Frames of the Achievement Gap**

In the literature surrounding the achievement gap, despite the commonality of the

term, authors invoke distinctly different understandings of the gap's origin. Many of these frames overlap but contain their own keywords, canons, advocates, and resulting reforms. In keeping with my methodology, each frame below is *diagnostic*, meaning it attempts to “diagnose” or explain the achievement gap. In contrast to the prognostic frames I will discuss in later chapters, here I synthesized these diagnostic frames from education literature, which seeks to provide an in-depth account of the phenomenon of the gap.

Diagnostic frames are the foundation of contemporary education reform and so are widely circulated in mainstream media and discourse. They are organized in order from diagnoses contingent on individual student failure to cultural failure to systemic failure, and finally to structural and societal failure. The chart below provides a brief summary of each, followed by more thorough descriptions.

*Diagnostic Frames of the Achievement Gap chart*

<b>Diagnostic Frame</b>	<b>Key Assumptions</b>
<b>Individual failure/meritocracy</b>	<b>Level playing field.</b> The system itself is sound, and barring extreme circumstances any child who exerts some effort should be able to succeed in school and on standardized tests. Students who fail to meet standards should be penalized; schools that fail to meet standards should be closed.
<b>Systemic failure of schools and school workers</b>	<b>Schools not competent to serve student needs-</b> either the achievement gap exists because the bureaucracy prevents school systems from meeting student needs and/or school workers are unable to meet student needs.
<b>Cultural deficiency</b>	The <b>culture of poor people and people of color undervalues education;</b> schools should be culturally compensatory and teach how to “act like a student.”
<b>Cultural adaptation/mismatch</b>	<b>The middle class and White culture of schools and teachers are a mismatch with low-income students and students of color.</b> As a result, poor students and students of color may consciously or subconsciously resist by underperforming; teachers are unable to bridge cultural gaps to connect with their students; and curriculum may not reflect the experiences of the most marginalized students.
<b>Unequal access &amp; lack of civil rights enforcement</b>	<b>Students with <i>unequal</i> access</b> to qualified teachers, textbooks, and adequate facilities will be less successful academically than students with ample access to these resources.
<b>Structural racism</b>	<b>Public Schools are part of a web</b> of “historical legacies, individuals, structures, and institutions that work interactively to distribute material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages racially” (Kirwan Institute).

*Individual failure/meritocracy*

Perhaps the simplest diagnostic frame is the one that assigns fault to individual students. This frame assumes that the system itself is sound—perhaps not perfect, but, barring extreme circumstances, any child who exerts a modicum of effort should be able to succeed in school and on standardized tests (Katz 1987).

The idea of meritocracy challenges traditional Marxist interpretations of schooling. Marxist scholars Bowles and Gintis (1976) are perhaps the best-known proponents of schools as sites of social reproduction, but a number of authors (Anyon 2005, Laureau 2003, McNamee & Miller 2009) have written more recently about the salience of their premise. In these writings, schools serve to prepare students for low-, middle- or elite-level jobs based on their family's socio-economic status. For example, students who come from working poor families attend schools in which they are taught to follow directions, rather than think critically—that skill is reserved for students in elite schools.

Meritocracy, on the other hand, maps fits comfortably into the major American ideologies of individualism and the free market. Proponents of the meritocracy frame advocate the reforms already in existence: that students, parents, and teachers work harder to meet current standards. Because meritocracy is closely linked with capitalist ideology, some proponents of this frame are the same parties calling for increased “choice” and other market-based practices within education. An individualist/meritocratic interpretation also leads to increased focus on standards and accountability. Within the framework of meritocracy, schools that fail to meet standards should be closed, and students who fail to meet such standards should not achieve educational milestones such as grade promotion or high school graduation. While individual student experiences certainly bear on their standardized assessment results, the race- and socioeconomic patterns within test score data diminish the credibility of this frame.

*Systemic Failure*

Those who attribute the achievement gap to a systemic failure diagnostic frame fall across a wide political spectrum. Scholars of alternative and free schooling systems (Gatto 2001, Miller 2002) argue that schools have never been able to—and perhaps were never meant to—serve the diverse needs of individual students. The free school critique essentially argues that schools are factories and are harmful to the true spirit of education. Therefore, the achievement gap exists simply because there is no “one size fits all” education.

Among other school system critics are free market advocates, whose more-prevalent critique is that bureaucracy prevents school systems from meeting students' needs. Many reformers in this camp advocate a market orientation, in which school administrators are “managers” (Apple 1999). Free market advocates John Chubb and Terry Moe argue that if “Americans want effective schools, it appears they must first create new institutions that... naturally function to promote rather than inhibit the right kinds of organizations” (1990: 21). Chubb and Moe's assertion that bureaucracy of schooling systems inhibits the natural flexibility inherent in free market enterprise is now widely-circulated among market-based school reformers. Many reformers who subscribe to the systemic failure diagnosis of the gap support the creation of any and all alternative pathways within and around schools—

charters, alternative teacher certification programs, and private education leadership training programs.

Charter school advocates believe that charters give school leaders more autonomy and offer more accountability to parents and students. Though charter schools serve a range of student populations, most are either community-based, or business-based. The term charter in relation to education reform was first used in 1988 in *Education by Charter*, in which Ray Buddee wrote that, “[f]ashioned loosely after the contracts granted to early explorers by treading companies and monarchies, these charters would add elements of exploration, risk-taking, and competition to the educational system” (Kane and Lauricella in Levin ed. 2001: 204). Despite a general incongruence between the self-reported accountability and parental satisfaction levels of charter schools (Center for Research on Educational Outcomes 2009, Fuller 2000), they nonetheless symbolize the outside-of-the-system flexibility that Chubb and Moe envisioned.

Another attempt to avoid the failure inherent to traditional schooling is to bring in non-traditional teachers. Despite having little authority over school organization or bureaucracy, the symbolic gatekeepers of this system are teachers, and that alternative teacher certification programs offer relief from the bureaucracy of traditional teacher education. These alternative programs often reflect both a disdain for traditional teacher certification pathways and pitying stance toward students of color. Teach for America, perhaps the best-known alternative certification program, recruits exclusively from elite colleges. TFA’s assessment of educational inequity, titled “The Challenge”, lists three contributors to educational inequity: poverty, lack of school and district capacity, and “prevailing beliefs” that children in low-income communities cannot overcome the obstacles they face. These “prevailing beliefs”, of course, are alleged to be held by teachers in high-poverty schools, who purportedly expect little of themselves or their students. Ironically, although a push for increased and alternative teacher preparation means some teachers are better prepared than ever, the growth of TFA may also have contributed to “a growing number (of teachers) who serve the most vulnerable students enter teaching before they have been prepared to teach and are increasingly ill prepared for what they must accomplish” (Darling-Hammond 2006). Alternative certification programs have grown exponentially since their beginnings in the early 1980s (National Center for Education Information), and in 2010 Teach for America won \$50 million in a federal grant competition known as Investing in Innovation (Dillon 2010). Both charters and alternative pathways of certification receive huge amounts of funding from market-based reformers.

#### *Cultural deficiency*

Sociological scholarship has long debated the validity of Oscar Lewis’ 1959 “culture of poverty” theory, in which Lewis argued that “the most difficult and significant problems associated with poverty exist with poor people themselves” (Lewis 1966, quoted in Valentine 1971). The culture of poverty theory implicitly legitimized the notion of an undeserving poor, as it exclusively blamed the poor for their continued condition. As Lewis writes in *La Vida*, “The culture of poverty is not only an adaptation to a set of objective conditions in the larger society. Once it comes into existence it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation...” (Lewis 1966). For Lewis, the self-

defeating behavior of the poor became a self-perpetuating phenomenon that existed independently of structural factors, rather than being a logical response to structures. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley reminds would-be advocates of self-help as a solution to poverty that “all the self-help in the world will not eliminate poverty or create the number of good jobs needed to employ the African-American community”, as the economy is organized along racial lines, and real wages have fallen significantly in the last few decades (Kelley 1997).

While mentioning structural aspects of poverty in passing, the culture of poverty concept as constructed by both liberal and conservative 1960s studies continued to focus on the pathology of the Black community. The single most influential document produced by “new poverty” scholarship of the 1960s was the Moynihan Report, presenting the historical reality of racism without examining the mechanisms that allow it to perpetuate itself. “What then,” he posed, “is the problem? We feel the answer is clear enough. Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American” (Moynihan 1965: 47). By structural distortions, however, Moynihan referred to the alleged personal and psychological “pathology” of the Black family, as opposed to structural racism. This thesis was met with a barrage of criticism from several areas—progressive White scholars, women, and people of color involved with social movements, and perhaps most scathingly, from Black feminists. Black feminist scholar and activist Angela Davis’ 1981 publication *Women, Race and Class* sarcastically reflects:

According to the [Moynihan] report’s thesis, the source of oppression was deeper than the racial discrimination that produced unemployment, shoddy housing, inadequate education and substandard medical care. The root of oppression was described as a ‘tangle of pathology’ created by the absence of male authority among Black people!’ (Davis 1981: 13).

Culture of poverty scholarship most immediately served as justification for the reduction of social services and welfare and education programs.

The culture of poverty theory has a specifically racial manifestation within education. In a profession of racial extremes, in which an almost 90% White teaching population seeks to educate an almost 50% minority student population (with the percentage of Black and Latino students closer to 80% in urban districts) (National Center for Education Statistics Table 44: 2009), many teachers have internalized a belief in the culture of poverty with regard to their students of color, regardless of how many may actually be in poverty. Studies of White teachers have found that they tend to view their students and their students’ parents through a lens of *deficit*—i.e., teachers view a student’s failure as a deficit in the student’s person or background (Case 2005, Downey & Pribesh 2004, Gordon 2005, Hemmings 2005, Kailin 1995, Marx 2008, Pennington 2007, Solórzano 1997, Swartz 2003). White teachers are also more likely than teachers of color to excessively discipline and/or have low expectations of their students of color. (Darkenwald 1975, Beady & Hansell 1981, Ehrenberg, Goldhaber & Brewer 1995, Tettegah 1996, Rong 1996). This differential treatment of students of color is a relatively subtle process that in which White teachers do not deliberately discriminate, but often misread Black students’ behavior as defiance (Downey and Pribesh 2004: 268).

Though related to the contemporary idea of low expectations, cultural deficiency theories specifically argue that class and race cause low-income and/or black students to “valu[e] education less than white students because a discriminatory labor market has not historically rewarded black workers for their education” (Rothstein 2004). As a result of

this cultural deficiency, education must be culturally compensatory. As Gloria Ladson Billings wrote with prescience in 1998,

Current instructional strategies presume that African American students are deficient. As a consequence, classroom teachers are engaged in a never-ending quest for “the right strategy technique” to deal with (read: control) “at-risk” (read: African American) students. Cast in a language of failure, instructional approaches for African American students typically involve some aspect of remediation. This race-neutral perspective purports to see deficiency as an individual phenomenon. Thus, instruction is conceived as a generic set of teaching skills that should work for all students. *When these strategies or skills fail to achieve desired results, the students, not the techniques, are found to be lacking* (Ladson-Billings 1998: 19, my emphasis).

Local educational reforms also favor equipping students with the prescribed skills, knowledge, and behavior sets needed to gain access to college and middle-class lives. These reforms are almost always aimed at low-income communities of color.

The most touted charter schools that operate in poor urban areas advocate longer school days to allow students the time necessary to gain the skills and attitudes they “need.” Attitude and behavior are seen as integral to student success; equal in importance to academic skills. A 2006 *New York Times* article about the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools was subtitled, “Can teaching poor children to act more like middle-class children help close the education gap?” (Tough 2006).

Entrepreneur Ruby Payne earns millions of dollars training teachers and administrators about their students’ “generational poverty,” the characteristics of which include:

- Survival orientation—there is little room for abstract, jobs are not about careers, but rather about survival
- Ownership of people—people are possessions; there is a great deal of fear about going above one’s raisings
- Polarized thinking—options are not examined, but rather seen in extremes.
- Time –focus on the present—the future is too abstract (Payne 2003: 68-69)

Students who have been inculcated with this culture do not do homework, are physically aggressive, cannot monitor their own behavior, and “[d]on’t know or use middle-class courtesies” (79). Payne places herself within the legacy of the culture of poverty by quoting Oscar Lewis in her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Payne’s popularity is troubling particularly because both academic scholarship and (one would think) teachers’ and administrators’ own experiences with students and their families demand a nuanced understanding of culture and agency within a structure of poverty. Payne critic Paul Gorski writes, “By portraying economically disadvantaged people and people of color as morally, intellectually, and spiritually inadequate, then teaching predominantly white, middle-class teachers how to fix them, Payne (2005) peddles a particularly oppressive form of classist paternalism (Osei- Kofi, 2005; Smiley & Helfenbein, 2006)” (Gorski 2008: 142). Indeed, Payne is an extreme representation of a broader ideological trend: that schools must train their students culturally, since the students’ home cultures do not value education or student-like behavior. Though few, if any, schools speak about cultural deficit explicitly, the conclusion that teaching middle-class behaviors is an implicit goal would be difficult to dispute. As evidenced by the growth of culturally compensatory education models, this frame has strong historical and contemporary resonance. While some reformers may



possess legitimate concerns about the behavior of poor students and students of color, unless those concerns are understood within the realities of poverty and racism, any reforms they attempt will fall short at addressing educational inequity.

*Cultural adaptation and mismatch: students, teachers and curriculum*

Cultural adaptation scholarship is distinct from cultural deficiency scholarship in considering structural factors to be inherently important elements that shape the behavior and culture of low-income students and students of color (rather than imagining that poor people might underperform academically simply because that is their culture). While each of these explanations accounts for some degree of structural poverty and racism, they vary a great deal in their interpretations of student agency—that is, the extent to which students make conscious choices to underperform. William Julius Wilson (1987) and John Ogbu (1987) mention little about the agency of poor people and people of color as actors, while Claude Steele (1995) discusses a subconscious agency in his theory of stereotype threat and Prudence Carter’s work (2005) presents students as conscious and active agents who make choices about their schooling identities.

Wilson and Ogbu seek to explain both the performance and behavior of Black adolescents. Both argue that much of the seemingly pathological behavior of low-income African-Americans is “ghetto-specific culture” (Wilson 1987). This argument attempts to account for the depth of structural racism and poverty but maintains an echo of Moynihan’s original “tangle of pathologies” argument. Wilson’s work is distinct from prior culture-of-poverty theories that would claim this culture is self-perpetuating; rather, emphasizing the social circumstances that produce such culture rather than the culture itself.

Ogbu argues that the behavior of Black students in schools is consciously *oppositional identity*, and that Black students sometimes act against their own student interests as a result of their status as caste-like minorities (Ogbu 1987). Lower performance on standardized tests and other assessments is, Ogbu asserts “an adaptation to their lower social and occupational positions in adult life, which do not require high educational qualifications” (Ogbu 1987: 213). In addition to arguing that such culture is an adaptation, however, he writes,

On the one hand, the dominant white caste maintains the adaptation by providing blacks with inferior education and then channeling them mainly to inferior jobs after they finish school. On the other hand, the adaptation is also maintained by certain structural and cultural features of the black environment which have evolved under the caste system” (Ogbu 1987: 213).

While Wilson and Ogbu both critique the structure that creates self-defeating academic performance, they underemphasize student agency.

Psychologist Claude Steele offers “stereotype threat” as an explanation of the achievement gap. According to Steele’s studies, African-American students perform poorly on standardized tests not merely because they lack skills, but in reaction to the pervasiveness of racism. In Steele’s research, Black students repeatedly underperformed on tests that they were told measured intelligence, but performed significantly better on the same assessments when not told what the test purported to measure (Steele 1995). White test-takers performed about the same in each case. Steele argues that Black students are

keenly aware of the low expectations held of them and, consequently, subconsciously perform at this lower level. A study during the election of President Barack Obama concluded that African-American student scores improved due to what they termed “the Obama effect”: “a performance gap between African-Americans and whites on a 20-question test administered before Mr. Obama’s nomination all but disappeared when the exam was administered after his acceptance speech and again after the presidential election” (Dillon 2009). Though Steele’s research has been used primarily with students in higher education, stereotype threat is another explanation of the achievement gap. Ogbu’s and Steele’s theories can be distinguished primarily by the different accounts of student agency in each—Ogbu claims that students underperform of their own choice, while Steele’s studies suggest that students respond to stereotypes unconsciously.

Prudence Carter contributes to the question of oppositional identity in her 2005 work *Keepin’ It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White*. In this study of a New York school, Carter finds that nearly all of her African American students express similar views about schools and education as a vehicle for upward mobility. However, based on the patterns of students’ attitudes and success in schools, she divides them into three groups:

- **cultural mainstreamers:** students who generally espouse assimilationist beliefs about attaining educational success.
- **noncompliant believers:** students who, “while understanding what cultural behaviors lead to academic, social, and economic success, favor their own cultural presentations (for example ‘black’ or ‘Puerto Rican’) and exert little effort to adapt to the cultural prescriptions of the school and White society” (Carter 29).
- **cultural straddlers:** students who are codeswitchers and “strategic movers” across cultural spheres (30). These students manage to succeed in school while maintaining the acceptance of their peer groups, and articulating the value of their own racial culture.

Carter’s more complex notion of structure and agency create a more thorough frame of stereotype-responsive performance. Each of Carter’s groups is aware of the racial structures that govern much of their lives. Even the ‘mainstreamer’ group members are generally able to articulate their behavior as a conscious willingness to follow prescribed behaviors. Furthermore, Carter’s ‘noncompliant believers’ are also agents in their own right, rather than tragic victims of circumstance. Few works on race and academic performance manage to strike a balance between accounting for the severity of racism while still treating subjects as decision-makers in their own lives.

Though articulated from markedly different ideologies and understandings of agency, these theories nonetheless fall into the frame of stereotype-responsive performance. In this frame, the achievement gap exists because racism is real and shapes student performance—whether conscious or not.

### *Unequal Access & Lack of Civil Rights Enforcement*

Though federal funding ensures some uniformity among schools across the nation, students in different districts have vastly different access to educational resources like small class sizes, experienced teachers, after school tutoring, test preparation, class materials (textbooks, computers, science equipment, etc.), and school facilities (athletic space, potable drinking water, etc.). Hence, unequal access is another diagnostic frame for

understanding the achievement gap. Advocates of this frame have primarily used their analysis as a basis for lawsuits. In the last decade, strong movements in both New York and California have sought to equalize resource access in schools, exemplified by the Alliance for Quality Education in New York and *Williams v. California*, court cases filed by a coalition of civil rights legal organizations. In both cases, the fact that students with *unequal* access to qualified teachers, textbooks, and adequate facilities were held to the same standard was the basis for the litigation.

During discussions about the potential reauthorization of No Child Left Behind in July of 2010, a national Civil Rights Coalition<sup>8</sup> released a statement declaring that access to a high-quality education is a civil right. They further contended that access to quality teachers and achievement data is essential if all students are to receive an equitable education, and that civil rights safeguards should be strengthened and enforced (Civil Rights Coalition 2010). The language of civil rights has a powerful resonance, as it draws on the moral legitimacy of the civil rights movement. In fact, despite the prevalence of civil rights language, only a small number of education reformers have followed the tradition of civil rights organizing by seeking legal remedies for resource inequities. Michael Apple (2001) details the strange alliance among civil rights organizations and neoliberal education reformers. Though many civil rights advocates possess a diagnostic frame aligned with a civil rights ideology, leaders like Al Sharpton who received a \$500,000 donation from a pro-charter school Hedge fund joined forces with New York School Chancellor Joel Klein, Newt Gingrich and Education Secretary Arnie Duncan to support school closures and charter school expansions—practices that have ultimately harmed students of color (Apple 2001, Tarleton 2010).

### *Structural Racism*

The diagnostic frame of structural racism expands the focus of student achievement beyond the educational system. Those who see the achievement gap through this lens examine the racial organization of society as a whole (Ladson Billings 2006, Leonardo 2007, Payne 2008). In this schema, schools are part of the picture but the unit of measurement is broader. Historian James Anderson notes in “The Historical Context for Understanding the Test-Score Gap” (in press) that for the first half of the twentieth century, taxes supported White schools almost exclusively, while Black schools “were largely dependent on private philanthropy and what African-Americans called ‘double taxation’, the practice of paying for their schools through voluntary contributions of land, labor and money” (in press: 6). Given such recent historical inequity in funding, not to mention the subsequent struggle of desegregation and de facto reality of resegregation, that inequities persist in the performance of racial subgroups is not surprising.

The structural racism frame posits an understanding of racism as (1) inherent in both U.S. institutions and society overall and (2) historically-based, *in addition to the*

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<sup>8</sup> Coalition members included the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights under Law, the National Action Network, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., the National Council for Educating Black Children, the National Urban League, the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, and the Schott Foundation for Public Education.

*contemporary* unconscious behaviors that uphold these structures. The Kirwan Institute for the Study for Race and Ethnicity explains structural racism as follows:

The word “racism” is commonly understood to refer to instances in which one individual intentionally or unintentionally targets others for negative treatment because of their skin color or other group-based physical characteristics. This individualistic conceptualization is too limited. Racialized outcomes do not require racist actors. Structural racism refers to a system of social structures that produces cumulative, durable, race-based inequalities. It is also a method of analysis that is used to examine how historical legacies, individuals, structures, and institutions work interactively to distribute material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages along racial lines.<sup>9</sup>

As critical race theorists like Zeus Leonardo (2007) point out:

Defining racism as fundamentally a problem of attitude and prejudice fails to account for the material consequences of institutional racism, behaviors that produce unequal outcomes despite the transformation of racial attitudes, and the creation of policies, such as NCLB [No Child Left Behind], which refuse to acknowledge the causal link between academic achievement and the racial organization of society (265).

Clearly, locating the problem primarily in individuals’ attitudes fails to capture racism’s insidious and systemic nature. A structural reading of racism demands that one account for racism on two levels. One level is that of belief and prejudice, which sometimes manifest in form of racial microaggressions. Critical race theorists Daniel Solórzano, Miguel Ceja and Tara Yosso define racial microaggressions as subtle insults (both verbal and non-verbal) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously (Solórzano et. al. 2000). The second level is the way in which such beliefs are codified into policies and cultural norms that punish and marginalize people of color while affirming the material, social and cultural superiority of Whites. The alternative discourses below attempt to integrate a structural reading of racism into public understanding of the achievement gap.

## **Alternative Discourses of the Achievement Gap**

The frames I outline above all attempt to explain the differences in performance of White students and Black, Latino, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American students on standardized tests. Many of these explanations, however, do not align with the term achievement gap. Using pieces of different prognostic frames, the authors below have offered an alternative discourse to the achievement gap. Below, I briefly describe their theories and discuss whether the theories have entered circulation in either academic publications or reform treatises.

### *Educational Debt*

In 2006, Gloria Ladson-Billings gave a presidential address to the American Educational Research Association entitled “From the Achievement Gap to the Educational Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools.” In the speech, Ladson Billings rejected the “achievement gap” frame in favor of a more accurate one: that of the debt owed by the educational system to students of color. In defining the educational debt,

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<sup>9</sup> “Structural Racism” on the Kirwan Institute website. Retrieved November 18, 2008, from <http://kirwaninstitute.org/>.

Ladson-Billings cited an ongoing conversation between herself and economist Robert Havemen, in which Havemen wrote:

The education debt is the foregone schooling resources that we could have (should have) been investing in (primarily) low income kids, which deficit leads to a variety of social problems (e.g. crime, low productivity, low wages, low labor force participation) that require on-going public investment...

Ladson-Billings goes on to explain that a historic, economic, sociopolitical and moral debt is owed to students of color. The historical debt is the sum of the legacy of educational inequities in the United States. The economic debt is the funding disparities between schools based on race—“[e]ven if we cannot prove that schools are poorly funded *because* Black and Latina/o students attend them, we can demonstrate that the amount of funding rises with the rise in White students.” Drawing on the prognostic frames of unequal access & lack of civil rights enforcement, systemic failure and structural racism Ladson-Billings concludes that the sociopolitical debt reflects the degree to which communities of color are excluded from the civic process, and the moral debt reflects the “disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do” (Ladson Billings 2006). Though her remarks have been quoted extensively in other educational publications, and she remains well-respected in education, the language of “educational debt” has not gained significant traction.

#### *Opportunity to Learn Gap (“Opportunity Gap”)*

The late educator Asa Hilliard is credited with coining the phrase “opportunity gap,” shorthand for the gap in opportunity to learn about which he wrote about in 2003’s *Young, Gifted and Black*: “Nothing is more peculiar than the continuing seeming inability of our leading educators to acknowledge these well-documented savage inequalities and to use them as the basis for explaining the academic, social and cultural achievements of students” (Perry 2003: 140). Rather than emphasizing testing outputs, opportunity gap advocates would encourage reformers to focus on school inputs—including a student’s individual opportunity-to-learn factors in his/her home, but also school-related factors such as funding, the number of highly qualified teachers, the state of school facilities, etc. Though some academics mobilized for opportunity to learn factors to be included in national assessments in the early 1990s, state legislators did not exercise sufficient political will to demand such an enormous undertaking (Schwartz 1995). The Schott Foundation recently launched a national Opportunity to Learn campaign for “resource accountability,” but the campaign has received significantly less publicity than other types of education reform.

The opportunity gap discourse again draws on the unequal access & lack of civil rights enforcement and structural racism diagnostic frames. Hilliard’s alternative discourse enjoys relative popularity; a number of progressive educators and academics intentionally use the phrase “opportunity gap” rather than the more commonly used “achievement gap.”

#### *Diversity Penalty/Whiteness Reward*

A third alternative discourse has been put forward under No Child Left Behind in reference to the achievement gap’s impact on students of color and the schools they attend. In general, “the fewer the [racial] subgroups, the easier it is to make adequate progress”

under No Child Left Behind (Fusarelli 2004: 87). Most failing schools have majority student-of-color populations. These schools receive diminished funding, and the stigmatization of a “failure” label. John Novak and Bruce Fuller frame this phenomenon as NCLB’s “diversity penalty” in their policy brief “Penalizing diverse schools?”, while Zeus Leonardo terms it a “whiteness reward” (Darling Hammond 2007: 247; Leonardo 2007: 271). Individual students who continually fail to meet testing standards are left behind, and the schools’ curriculum is narrowed to focus on test-preparation skills. The cruelty of the testing situation is perhaps most apparent for English language learners. Because ELL students are counted as a discrete group, their low scores do not “hurt” the rest of the school, but they are expected to achieve the same standard on the English state test as their native English-speaking counterparts. As students become proficient in English, however, they move out of ELL programs. The situation is thus engineered for ELL programs *never* to meet proficiency; by definition, they must always fail (Lapayese 2007).<sup>10</sup>

The sanctions imposed on schools that primarily serve students of color threaten to increase dropout and pushout rates for these students, ultimately reducing their access to education (Darling-Hammond 2007: 246). Schools with students who have improved most markedly do not have a magic formula—most are located in states that have lowered their definitions of “proficiency” (Darling-Hammond 2007, Holland 2007: 55, Hursch 2007). NCLB’s standards-based “solution” has only solidified the failures of students of color, justifying said failings by claiming to use “objective” and “universal” measurements, standards, and accountability. In this framing of the achievement gap, students of color themselves, and not racism, are the problem.

As the cultures of students of color become the focus of educational inequity, the culture of White dominance is obscured. NCLB as a specific policy “contains within it the absent marker of whiteness that defines the Standards Movement” (Leonardo 2007: 263). The standard to which children of color must rise is a standard of Whiteness, both because testing content is explicitly geared toward Whiteness and because White students, regardless of socio-economic status, outperform students of color from the same class. After the passage of NCLB, the New York State Department of Education removed all overt references to race from its literary passages (Hursch 2007: 300). Though the department was criticized for the action, removing explicit references to race follows NCLB’s logic: an ostensibly universal curriculum for universal achievement. NCLB’s “inability to locate educational disparities within larger relations of power does not just betray its color-blind ideology, but its *reinforcement of whiteness*” (Leonardo 2007: 270). As a solution to the achievement gap, NCLB not only pathologizes students of color, but validates Whiteness.

This alternative discourse, unsurprisingly, has been circulated even less than the previous two. Beyond seeking to contextualize the achievement gap within the broader context of structural racism, the phrases “diversity penalty” and “Whiteness reward” both illuminate the fact that high-stakes testing education reforms—changes made in the name of racial equity—only preserve the privilege of White students and negatively affect students of color.

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<sup>10</sup> See the work of James Crawford of ELL Advocates for more on this.

## Conclusion

To truly understand the circumstances surrounding the achievement gap, any responsible scholar must concern herself with researching the broader context of racial inequity in the United States. As Linda Darling-Hammond insists,

The presumption that undergirds much of this conversation about the achievement gap is that equal educational opportunity now exists; therefore, continued low levels of achievement on the part of students of color must be intrinsic to them, their families, or their communities. Yet, when the evidence is examined, it is clear that educational outcomes for these students are at least as much a function of their unequal access to key educational resources, both inside and outside of school, as they are a function of race, class, or culture (Darling Hammond 2010: 30).

The factors of these unequal educational outcomes are the same factors that diminish a student's Opportunity to Learn. According to a number of scholars (Berliner & Biddle 1995; Darling-Hammond 1994 and 2010; Oakes & Guiton 1995; Perry, Steele and Hilliard 2003; Schwartz 1995; Kozol 1991; Gay 2000; McNamee & Miller 2009; Rothstein, Jacobsen & Wilder 2008; Thompson 2007, Villegas and Lucas 2002), these factors include:

- 1: **The high level of poverty and low level of social supports** for low-income children's health and welfare, including their early learning opportunities;
- 2: The **unequal allocation of school resources**, made politically easier by the increasing **resegregation** of schools;
- 3: **Inadequate systems for providing high-quality teachers** and teaching to all children in all communities.
4. **Rationing of high-quality curriculum** through tracking and interschool disparities
5. **Factory-model** school designs that have created **dysfunctional learning environments** for students and **unsupportive** settings for strong teaching (Darling Hammond 2010).

Theresa Perry submits in *Young, Gifted and Black* (2005) that “[t]he conversation about African-American achievement is problematic because it fails to begin with a careful examination of all aspects of the school, with an eye to understanding *how* the school's day-to-day practices participate in the creation of underachievement” (9). Many representations of the achievement gap fail to examine not only the school's complicity in a culture of underachievement for students of color, but the complicity of the broader educational system, and the very nature of racism and racial inequity in the country. The achievement gap is a specific manifestation of racism as it relates to education, but racial inequity is not limited to standardized tests. The achievement gap is linked to the structural racism that constructs housing segregation, overrepresentation of people of color in poverty and in prison, and the continued concentration of white men in positions of power. In the next

chapters, I will explore how different understandings of racism and diagnostic frames of the achievement gap inform discrete, and often conflicting, attempts to close the gap.



## Chapter Three: THE CONTESTED FIELD OF REFORM

Our system of public education is a complex institution. Although most of us at one time or another spent at least half, and sometimes the majority, of our waking hours in a public school, the inner workings of teacher education, discipline systems, class tracking, and the more recent phenomenon of high-stakes testing remain a mystery to most people. As linguist George Lakoff (2004) posits, many Americans interact with complex issues like equity and schooling through *frames*. While the framing concept has been applied most extensively to the study of social movements and collective action (Benford & Snow 2000), framing contests also occur across education-based political ideologies and formations. The frames of the achievement gap articulated by education reformers are essentially a contest—the frame that wins dictates the educational fate of millions of students and, perhaps more dangerously, forms a blueprint for responses to racial inequity in public institutions.

Frame theory is widely used in examinations of social movements (Oliver & Johnston 2000, McAdam et. al 2001), though Lakoff (2004) uses the concept of “frames” in examining how the Democratic and Republic parties market issues in the United States and researcher Kevin Kumashiro (2008) writes of the ways in which the political right wing frames education-related issues. For my purposes, frames are, as originally described by framing theory founder Erving Goffman, a “schemata of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large” (Goffman 1976: 21). I use the term “frames” here as social movement theorists use it: while ultimately calculated and strategic representations of an issue, frames are also genuinely informed by the ideology of the framers. Frames are not the same as ideology—as Pamela Oliver and Hank Kohnston (2000) distinguish, frames lack the “elaborate social theory and normative and value systems that characterize a full-blown ideology.” Rather, a frame is a “signifier that points to a general category of socially-recognized instances. In this sense, the ‘rights frame’ is not an ideology, but an angle or perspective on a problem” (13). Where ideology is deliberate and complex, a frame is more a recognizable signifier or shorthand. For example, many advocates of the market-based frame of education probably do not consider themselves to be capitalist ideologues, a la Milton Friedman. Instead, they are people who care about education and who live in a world where choice and capitalist logic are common sense.

Discourse theorist Adam Fairclough (2001) and sociologist Myra Marx Ferree (2003) remind us, however, that frames are not neutral. While frames are deployed in the interest of accruing more advocates of a particular interpretation of or solution to an issue, their potential for resonance depends on the political and social context surrounding the issue.

In the contest over framing education, racial justice and civil rights frames compete against the dominant frame of neoliberalism, with all frames situated within the larger system of meaning that constitutes ideology. Steinberg (1999) refers to this broader cultural milieu as a “discursive field” within which certain hegemonic discourses (or salient beliefs and values) reign. Hence, the discursive opportunity structure bordering education reform shapes the possibility of a frame’s popularity (McCammon et. al. 2007: 731). The most acceptable frames are usually ideas that are perceived to be “sensible,” “realistic,” or

“legitimate.” Calling on the common logic that we should run schools like businesses because businesses are successful and schools are not becomes an approach that resonates within the dominant neoliberal opportunity structure.

As the achievement gap was a very political, strongly contested, and highly visible topic during my research period (2008-2012), I read and synthesized over 600 articles, reports, policy briefs, and speeches to assess the primary frames through which the achievement gap was discussed. In order to assess texts that addressed the achievement gap, I identified leading policymakers, organizations, and individuals who focus on this topic, gathering texts from these groups in the forms of newsletters, speeches, flyers, reports, and op-ed columns. When I found relevant texts, I coded for understanding of the frames being employed and determined key words and actions associated with each frame.

In this chapter, I examine the prognostic frames evident in on-the-ground attempts to close the gap, specifically the history, advocates, discursive traits, and limitations of each frame. Interestingly, most diagnostic frames of the achievement gap appear in academic education literature (e.g., academic journals, texts often found on the syllabi of teacher education classes), while I most frequently found prognostic frames—the plans of action that would purport to close the gap—in widely-circulated mainstream media like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time Magazine*, etc. Beginning in 2009, the first sets of articles I read all contained the phrase “achievement gap.” These articles fairly quickly fell into identifiable categories of either being informational (e.g., specifying the problem of the gap with little analysis or suggestion for remedy), or having some diagnostic or prognostic framing. Of the latter category, articles could be divided into attempts to close the gap through the works of an individual reformer, charter school, or other program; or attempts to close the gap through a redistribution of resources.

Reform based on mechanisms of privatization, or what I refer to as *market-based reform*, is dominant. Nationally, this approach has trended toward the marketization of schooling (Apple 2001, Darling Hammond 2010, Lipman 2011, Molnar 2005, Ravitch 2011), and has done so by professing to center the needs of children of color and the schooling inequities they face. These reform efforts tend to privilege reforms based on either mechanisms of privatization or demands for equal resources. A secondary trend is that of *civil rights reform*, or reforms rooted in the historical legacy of civil rights and the struggles of communities of color for equal access to institutional resources. A third and much less prevalent trend is one based on a commitment to racially just outcomes. This *racial justice reform* manifests primarily in the campaigns of non-profit community organizations and parent and youth groups, and I will explore it further in chapters four and five. In this chapter, the market-based frame is examined in full.

## The Market-based frame

*When they talk about choice, they mean more charter schools or vouchers to attend private schools. When they talk about competition, they mean forcing schools to compete against each other for who can perform the best in standardized test scores. Competition also refers to companies competing to run schools or groups of schools. When they talk about data-driven decisions, they mean that the futures of schools—whether schools remain open or get closed or chartered—are determined based on test scores. And when they say accountability they mean that if schools do not have high standardized test scores then there are harsh consequences, like closing schools or turning them into charters—Philadelphia High School Student Shania Morris*

The market-based frame dominates the field of educational change (Apple 2001, Weiss and Long 2013, Lipman 2011). Linked intractably to an ever-rising tide of economic neoliberalism and backed by money and media, it draws on commonsense American understandings of racism, schools, and the way in which change occurs. As a reform approach, the market-based frame implicitly attacks public education. Market-based reformers view education as a system broken beyond repair and hence seek to circumvent said system through private strategies: charter schools, voucher programs, alternative teacher certification and principal training, public school closures, and a number of private-public partnerships that undermine the authority of school districts. Through these strategies neoliberal reformers commodify education as they claim to align themselves with those at the losing end of the achievement gap—low-income students of color (Buras 2008, Darling Hammond 2007, Lipman 2011, Saltman 2012).

In order to keep the education market strong, Alex Molnar suggests that “schools must inevitably be seen and portrayed as failing. The nature of the market is to promote dissatisfaction: corporations create the itch, then collect money from us to scratch it” (2005 12). Patricia Burch similarly argues in her 2009 text *Hidden Markets* that the growth of the education market depends on the perpetuation of the achievement gap (Burch 2009: 29). The encroachment of the market into education is just one element of a rising tide of neoliberalism. Within education, this neoliberalism has accelerated at a breakneck speed:

Education is rapidly becoming a \$1 trillion industry, representing 10% of America’s GNP and second in size only to the health care industry. Federal and State expenditures on education exceed \$750 billion. Education companies, with over \$80 billion in annual revenues, already constitute a large sector in the education arena. ~Education Industry Association report, 2008, quoted in Burch 2009: 21.

Along with the money being poured into and profits derived from education, significant resources are devoted to the image management of market reforms (Burch 2009, Molnar 2005). While public education has received little positive publicity in the last decade, a sophisticated media machine promotes the education reform efforts of the Bill & Melinda Gates, Broad, and Walton Family Foundations;<sup>11</sup> celebrates the charitable education contributions of wealthy individuals and entrepreneurs like Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg; and produces Hollywood films (“The Lottery” 2010, “Waiting for Superman” 2010, “Won’t Back Down” 2012) that depict the horror and heartbreak of the broken public education system.

The market-based frame is the result of the amalgamation of the real crisis in American education and an unshakeable faith in the market as a remedy. Market-based reformers are perhaps categorized more easily by their omissions than their platform. The platform is simple—if the problem is underperforming children, the solution is to increase the influence and strategies of private entities within education; diminish the authority of

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<sup>11</sup> “Mark Zuckerberg makes massive donation to Newark schools”, *Christian Science Monitor*, September 23, 2010; “Facebook Founder to Donate \$100 Million to Help Remake Newark’s Schools”, *New York Times*, September 22, 2010; “Charter schools get boost” (regarding Eli Broad’s \$2.5 million donation), *Los Angeles Times*, January 17, 2008; “A \$2.5 million donation to help charter schools”, *New York Times*, April 9, 2009; “How to Fix America’s Schools”, *Time Magazine*, December 8, 2008; “Michelle Rhee: Champion of Students”, *Time Magazine*, April 21, 2011.

the state in the organization of schools; increase accountability through the use of quantifiable measures (e.g., standardized exams); and provide choice for students and parents—the “consumers” of this re-imagined system. The omissions, however, are glaring: by measuring outputs (test performance) as opposed to inputs (school resources, race and class backgrounds of students, etc.), market-based reformers envisage schools as vacuums, divorced from the social, political, economic and racial contexts of their students.

#### *History of the Market-Based Frame*

Milton Friedman laid the foundation for the market-based frame of education reform when he argued in *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) that “our present school system, far from equalizing opportunity, very likely does the opposite. It makes it all the harder for the exceptional few—and it is they who are the hope of the future—to rise above the poverty of their initial state” (93). Friedman made a case for two key elements of market-based reform: charter schools and merit pay for teachers. He also established a blueprint for school vouchers and charter schools, in what he calls a combination of public and private schools that would “permit competition to develop” (93); the resulting diversity among schools would meet students’ needs. Friedman further suggested the beginnings of a merit-pay scheme for teachers, because “poor teachers are grossly overpaid and good teachers grossly underpaid” (95). At its heart, Friedman’s ideology equated freedom with choice and privileged freedom above all other values, including equity.

Friedman’s voucher experiment was attempted first in Chile in 1973, before any implementation in the United States. After a U.S. government-supported military coup in Chile overthrew democratically-elected socialist President Salvador Allende, schools were remodeled along with other Chilean social institutions. The military dictatorship disbanded the teachers’ union and fired teachers with leftist views (Carnoy & McEwan in Ed. Levin 2001).

In the United States few education policymakers took action toward Friedman’s goals in the desegregation era of the 1960s and 1970s, but 1983’s *A Nation at Risk*, which argued that the American educational system was failing to meet the need for a competitive workforce, brought the topics of school failure and choice back into the national spotlight. The alleged failure of public schools to adequately prepare students for global competition provided an opening for corporate reformers to gain footing in the education world. Americans became disillusioned with the public school system, and business interests promoted the idea that a corporate choice model could potentially rescue the education system.

Free market expansion found champions in Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. The latter’s administration founded the New American School Development Corporation to raise private money for school reform and supported the Business Roundtable, a 1989 coalition of approximately 200 major U.S. corporations. The Business Roundtable expanded Friedman’s vision with its “Essential Components of a Successful Education System”: standards, assessments, accountability, professional development, school autonomy, parent involvement, learning readiness, technology, and safety and discipline. Although these nine components appear relatively neutral, the Roundtable’s commitment to standards, assessments, and school autonomy facilitated the

implementation of two of the most far-reaching structural changes in school reform in the last two decades: high-stakes tests and charter schools (Jani 2010).

In 1990, John E. Chubb and Terry Moe's book *Politics, Markets & America's Schools* echoed the priorities of the Business Roundtable. They argued that private schools, and privatization of education generally, would endow parents and students with a superior educational experience because:

- 1) Privatized schools have incentive to please the clientele [parents and students].
- 2) Parents and students have freedom to move to other schools.
- 3) Natural selection would drive schools that fail to please out of business (32).

Current market-based reformers in the U.S. view the school system as a government monopoly in which parents and students have little choice to move among schools or opt out. Creating the possibility for choice, market-based reformers have argued, gives a kind of agency to parents and students that is not available in the current system. Embedded within pushes for market-based reform is a critique of the paternalism of the public school system. Friedman, along with Chubb and Moe, argued against a schooling system that privileged the authority of the government as a body that “knew best what kind of education people needed and how it could be provided most effectively” (Chubb & Moe 1990: 4). Chubb and Moe's echoing of Friedman's 1962 choice-as-freedom assertion brought focus to parents and students as active agents who had the right to choose schooling experiences.

Market-based reform is premised on the idea that businesses are more functional than public institutions. In this frame, public schools are constrained by bureaucracy, unable to adapt to meeting student needs, and less able to prepare students for global citizenry than their market-oriented counterparts would be. Think tanks like the Heritage Foundation continue to publish findings about the effectiveness of private educational interventions, but their contemporary reports simply reiterate Chubb and Moe's claim that “[i]f Americans want effective schools, it appears they must first create new institutions that, in their effects on the choices of individuals, naturally function to promote rather than inhibit the right kinds of organizations” (21).

Chubb and Moe's three general findings to support their conclusions about privatization were:

- 1) Schools perform better to the extent that they have strong organization—clear goals, an ambitious academic program, strong educational leadership, and high levels of teacher professionalism.
- 2) The most important prerequisite for the emergence of effective school characteristics is school autonomy, especially from external bureaucratic influence.
- 3) America's existing system of public education inhibits the emergence of effective organizations (23).

During his 1989-1993 White House term, President George H.W. Bush called for privatization, deregulation, and competition among schools, ideally through national voucher legislation. Though his voucher proposal failed, Bush did create the federal program Goals 2000, which “included increased standardized assessment of students, schools, districts, and states and provided for extensive private-sector involvement” (Bartlett

et. al 2002: 6). Goals 2000 set the stage for charter schools, which began to grow in earnest during President Bill Clinton's administration. Clinton frequently conflated charter schools with "world class public schools," and his administration sought not only to allow, but to promote, charter expansion (Clinton 1996: 44).

Charter schools have been key to the maintenance of corporate influence in the educational arena; numerous charter schools have corporate ties either as for-profit corporations themselves, through the business connections of their board members, or as direct business partnerships. Since the first charter school was established in Minnesota in 1992, the number of such schools has grown exponentially. By 2010 over 5,000 charter schools were operating in 39 states, primarily in urban areas. Though charter schools' effectiveness in terms of student achievement is ambiguous (CREDO 2009), the media reinforces the notion of charter schools as the manifestation of choice for parents who are frustrated by their local public schools (Mitgang and Connell in Levin 2001). A June 2013 *Los Angeles Daily News* article entitled "California Charter Schools Can't Keep Up With Demand" quotes Corri Ravare, managing regional director of the California Charter Schools Association, as saying "'Charter' has become a brand ~ a sign that something different and special is going on at a school... 'Charter' has become synonymous with quality" (Jones 2013).

In Chapter 2, I argued that the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 launched the current era of school reform, in which outcomes are privileged over inputs as an educational yardstick. President George W. Bush signed the bill in Hamilton, Ohio, the home district of John A. Boehner, the bill's leading Republican supporter. Photographs of the event depict President Bush surrounded by cabinet members and seated behind a desk on the front of which "No Child Behind" is written on a faux blackboard in mock childish scrawl. A smiling African-American boy, standing closest to Bush, looks on. The discursive suggestion of this image was clear—that President George W. Bush and the Republican Party of the era, rather than liberals, were the champions of children of color.

Though a market-based strategy for school reform was not a completely new approach in 2001, NCLB was notable as a national policy that uncritically embraced school-as-marketplace. With strong federal standards but local control, individual schools would be free to design unique programs that nonetheless met a threshold of rigor (although approved-vendor lists allocated most supplemental services to specific for-profit companies). (Darling Hammond 2007). The notion that the means of obtaining excellence lay in market competition appealed to business interests and soon-to-be reformers. If parents were allowed to choose, schools would surely be forced to compete to best serve the child. Just as they selected a particular brand from a wide array of choices at the supermarket, families would pick a school that fit their children's social and academic needs. Schools would improve or die through Darwinian competition.

NCLB signified a shift in national orientation toward the phenomenon of the achievement gap because of its strategic wording and presentation. Rather than focusing directly on the values or behavior of families of color or the context of poverty or racism, NCLB addressed the performance gap through the language of accountability. The text of the bill presented an accountability discourse within a framework of both standards and

choice. According to the NCLB website,

No Child Left Behind is designed to change the culture of America's schools by closing the achievement gap, offering more flexibility, giving parents **more options**, and teaching students based on what works.

Under the act's accountability provisions, states must describe how they will close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency (Department of Education 2001).

Accountability in this conception meant 1) making plans and establishing standards to ensure that all children succeed, and 2) providing alternative choices (read: charter schools) and supplementary programming for families who chose to utilize them.

More than a decade later, market-based reforms dominate discussions of educational change to the extent that they are the new status quo. In a 2012 op-ed entitled “Vouchers Can Level the Playing Field,” education reformer and former Washington, D.C. schools chancellor Michelle Rhee wrote, “My job is to make sure that all kids in the city are getting a great education. I am agnostic to the delivery method, as long as they are learning what they need. At the end of the day, that is the way we have to think” (Rhee 2012). Rhee’s insistence that her method of delivery is “agnostic” cuts to the heart of the education reform challenge—in a neoliberal era, market-based reforms are simply part of a broader tide. Rather than being seen as radical changes that reflect a particular educational agenda, corporate reformers claim they are doing what needs to be done in the most effective way possible. Indeed, Rhee’s tone in her op-ed is one of righteous resentment that any critic would object to the way in which she seeks to obtain her results, despite data which suggests that a market-based system has had mediocre-to-negative results for low-income students and students of color (Buras 2008, Weiss and Long 2013, Darling Hammond 2007, Fusarelli 2004, Hursch 2007, Lapayese 2007, Lipman 2011, Noguera 2008, Tierney 2013, Wallis and Steptoe 2007).

#### *Discursive Traits of the Market-Based Frame*

The discursive traits of each frame were simply particular words, phrases or motifs that were consistently referenced in publications and speeches of frame advocates. Below, I identify discursive traits evident in the market-based frame; I also synthesize them in the chart following this section.

##### **i. No Excuses**

In promoting No Child Left Behind, President George W. Bush often accused teachers and others of supporting the status quo in education and thus being guilty of the “soft bigotry of low expectations”. This assigning of blame for the achievement gap to individual school employees was a particularly powerful discursive reframe. Essentially, the president implied that the passive racism of liberals who made “excuses” for poor-performing students was doing more harm than good.

Though Bush’s “soft bigotry of low expectations” quote received much attention at the time, Secretary of Education Rod Paige did even more to further the discursive tool of no excuses. Paige was a conservative African-American and former football coach who

previously had been superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, where he claimed that his tough, no-nonsense approach had achieved success by raising test scores. As the second prominent African-American appointee to the Bush cabinet, Paige's presence and his actions lent credibility to Bush's rhetoric of compassionate conservatism despite findings by prominent education researchers who uncovered and published evidence suggesting that the rise in Houston's test scores was due more to Paige's successful efforts to drive underperforming students out of the school system than to improvements in the public schools (Darling Hammond 2010: 87-95, Hursch 2007, Steinberg 2000). In early interviews, Paige emphasized his tough approach as one that met with success in Houston. Of his seven years of experience in Houston, Paige told the Lehrer Newshour that "most would say these students had all the at-risk characteristics associated with failure and they shouldn't grow. In fact they did." Where liberals attempted to complicate the picture of education with structural barriers to student achievement, Paige-as-compassionate-conservative objected to such criticisms:

...I think it's time now for us to reject the argument that we can't teach children because of some circumstances outside of the classroom. Although these are important circumstances and they do have impact, it is still our responsibility to cause students to learn (Lehrer News Hour 2001).

Dismissing structural barriers of race and class, Paige cast standards and high expectations as the cure for student and school failure. As the no-nonsense champion of standards, Paige strengthened the tacit moral claim of the Bush education agenda: that the strong demands of Republicans served the agenda of racial equality, not the "soft bigotry" of liberals who excused the failure of children of color with vague and complex references to institutional discrimination.

Michelle Rhee reiterated the "no excuses" refrain on a *Frontline* special, remarking "You can't teach in a vacuum. You have to know where your kids— you've got to meet them where they are. But you can never, ever, ever let that be an excuse for the kids not achieving at the highest levels" (Frontline 2013).

## ii. Urgency

A second discursive trait of the market-based frame is urgency. Reformers who question market strategies are cast as defenders of the status quo (Rhee, *Parent Revolution* 2010), while market-based reformers continually reiterate the need for immediate change (their way). In their 2010 "manifesto" for fixing schools, then-New York City Department of Education Chancellor Joel Klein and Rhee wrote,

Until we fix our schools, the gap between the haves and the have-nots will only grow wider and the United States will fall further behind the rest of the industrialized world in education, rendering the American dream a distant, elusive memory." (Klein and Rhee et. al. 2010).

Similarly, the Heritage Foundation wrote in its 2010 report that too many liberal reformers viewed the conditions of the achievement gap as intractable, rather than "fixable":



A problem is something one is still trying to fix. A condition is something on which one has given up and simply grown to accept, however uncomfortably. The good news is that racial achievement gaps are a problem to solve, not a condition to accept. In addition, commonsense conservative policies have shown the ability to address the problem—in stark contrast to the failed efforts of previous decades” (13).

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan also took up the language of urgency: “We need to approach this with a tremendous sense of urgency. While there are many individual success stories, we really have a crisis on our hands,” (Williams 2012). Defining the situation as urgent does two things: First, it opens the door for rapid and radical solutions. Second, it adds to the sentiment that educational institutions should be organized and run by people who are competent and successful: businesses.

### **iii. Choice as freedom**

Former New York City Department of Education Chancellor Joel Klein writes that “Low-income families deserve the ability to make the best choices for their kids, as more financially secure families always have” (Klein 2010). In the new discursive opportunity structure, democracy has been transformed from a political to an economic concept (Lipman 2011: 62). Market-based “choice” replaces government-assured “rights”.

In neoliberal education reform, the American values of freedom and democracy are aligned with individual interest—public good is at best absent and at worst conjures the inefficient and meddling state. Critical theorist Henry Giroux writes that under neoliberalism,

...freedom becomes an exercise in self-development rather than social responsibility, reducing politics to either the celebration of consumerism or the privileging of a market-based notion of agency and choice that appears quite indifferent to how power, equity, and justice offer the enabling conditions for real and collective choices to be both made and acted upon (Giroux 2008: 67).

Neoliberal reforms present choice as an inevitably positive concept, a democratic imperative, strategically isolated from the structural trappings of poverty and inequity that limit the educational choices of low-income families and families of color in the first place.

### **iv. Human Capital**

The quantitative language of capital, investments, and returns is quite evident in new educational discourses, and is especially notable in the international arena. The World Bank’s website, for example, advertised its educational programs in terms of “investment” and “returns” in 2007: “Investment in girls’ education yields some of the highest returns of all development investments” (World Bank 2007). In the United States, language that casts students as human capital has been more nuanced but remains a key aspect of domestic education reform.

The domestic use of the language of human capital hearkens back to the Cold War, an era in which the purpose of education was reconceptualized as being primarily to prepare American students to compete intellectually and economically with the rest of the

world (Apple 2001). The neoliberal turn has meant a shift in education to “human capital development as the primary goal. In this framework, education is a private good, an investment one makes in one’s child or oneself to better compete in the labor market, not a social good for development of individuals and society as a whole” (Lipman 2011: 14-15). This emphasis on schools as sites of human capital development aligns with the ideology of neoliberalism, where choice and competition become the hallmarks of education. As Klein and Rhee write, “Until we fix our schools, the gap between the haves and the have-nots will only grow wider and the United States will fall further behind the rest of the industrialized world in education, rendering the American dream a distant, elusive memory” (Klein and Rhee 2010). From this perspective, closing the achievement gap benefits not only students but is for the good of the country.

#### v. Maverick reformers

The discursive tool of the cowboy reformer has also been a useful tool in the expansion of market-based reform. Biographies of maverick reformers like the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) network’s David Levin and Michael Feinberg, Geoffrey Canada and his Harlem Children’s Zone, Teach for America founder Wendy Kopp, and of course Michelle Rhee all celebrate the narrative of the individual reformer who cared too much about children to bother with changing a broken system. Instead, these reformers went around the system, using ingenuity and nepotism to pioneer a different kind of education.

Rhee was a Teach for America teacher in Baltimore for a mere three years before founding the New Teacher Project in 1997 and eventually being appointed chancellor of Washington, D.C. public schools in 2007, where she was known for her opposition to teachers’ unions.

Michelle Rhee is the perfect image of the cowboy—she is brash and an unabashed critic of “going with the flow”. Rhee commented in her recent *Frontline* special: “I’m living what I think education reformers and parents throughout this country have long hoped for, which is somebody will just come in and do the things that they felt was right, and everything else be damned” (Frontline 2013). Rhee, long a controversial figure in education, received a great deal of criticism when evidence surfaced that she had taped students’ mouths shut in the classroom and had apparently exaggerated the degree to which in her students’ test scores increased (Anderson 2011, Zucker 2010). Though these controversies were widely reported in alternative media predisposed to be critical of neoliberal reforms, mainstream media representations of these reformers has continued to be overwhelmingly celebratory and uncomplicated.

Another set of celebrated maverick reformers are Dave Levin and Mike Feinberg, the founders of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). Levin and Feinberg based the KIPP network’s pedagogy on the instruction of Harriet Ball, an African-American teacher in the public school where Levin was placed as a first year Teach for America teacher. Though Ball had taught successfully for many years in her public school, Levin and Feinberg could not imagine how they would implement her pedagogy in the traditional public system and so did not try to do so, choosing instead to launch their charter school network (Mathews 2010).

These maverick reformers are representative of the new politics of education. As former New York City Chancellor Joel Klein declared, “[w]e will take on laws, contracts, and other barriers to successfully educating our children.” Because their stories are told in isolation from the history of education activism, the role of education in the civil rights movement, and the present-day efforts of parent, student, and community to improve their local schools and districts, cowboy neoliberal reforms have become the default representation of how to “fix” schools. What is perhaps most troubling about this trend is its ability to force a racial justice critique of the education system to the periphery of the education reform discourse.

vi. **The construction of consumer agency**

Within the market frame, parents and students are designated as active consumers. As several scholars who critique neoliberalism caution, agency and choice are essentially conflated when reforms cast education as a product. Agency is conceived very differently within the market frame vs. those of civil rights or racial justice. In the market, agency is the ability to choose. In the civil rights frame, agency is the ability to ensure equal resources and make curricular demands. In the racial justice frame, agency is the ability to rebuild and activate an educational system that prioritizes equity in outcomes.

ACHIEVEMENT GAP	MARKET-BASED FRAME
Assumptions about the cause of the gap	The Choice Gap—the achievement gap is a problem to be solved; it is the result of dysfunctional school bureaucracy and union protection of bad teachers.
Perspective on Racism	Racism is in the past, but still has some impact today. (ie colorblind racism)
Approach	Expanded choice (eg charters), standards and accountability, and human capital development approaches for change. Non-racial mechanisms to address racial disparities.
Strategic remedies	School choice, charter schools, performance pay. For teachers and accountability through standardized testing (for students) and regular evaluation of schools and allocation of resources to schools with successful test results.
Anticipated Outcome	Privatization strategies result in better meeting of student needs and higher student performance.

*Advocates of the Market-Based Frame*

Beginning with the work of Milton Friedman and Chubb and Moe, and examining the writing, speeches and reports of a wide swath of advocates, I was able to distill three primary characteristics present in almost all of their work:

- A focus on choice and privatization strategies as a means of closing the gap
- A consistent omission of the context of poverty and racism

- An avoidance of formal mechanisms for making change within education (laws, democratic political processes, curriculum, the field of formal teacher education, etc.)

Overall, the most prominent and consistent advocates of market-based reforms were a combination of think tanks, advocacy groups, foundations, and individuals, including:

- The Heritage Foundation
- The Center for Education Reform
- The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- The Broad Foundation
- The Walton Family Foundation
- Professor Stephen Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, vice-chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and former senior fellow of the Manhattan Institute
- Former New York City Department of Education Chancellor Joel Klein
- Former Washington D.C. Public Schools Chancellor and founder of Students First Michelle Rhee

Each of these reformers uses the legitimacy of his or her institutional affiliation, coupled with access to financial capital, to widen the market frame's sphere of influence. Their use of market frame rhetoric in research publications, media, funding reports, and promotional literature strengthens the frame's discursive traits.

## The Framing Contest

The term achievement gap is a particular frame on inequity. As offered in the previous chapter, the achievement gap could have been assigned different labels, e.g., the opportunity gap or the educational debt. Neither of those phrases has caught on, however, because neither resonates as strongly with the underlying ideological power of the term achievement gap, which suggests a disparity in the standard measures of academic success. The phrase “achievement gap” has been in circulation since the 1960s but became widely used in the 1990s as the standards movement gained ground. “Achievement” in achievement gap is by and large a proxy for both *intelligence* (given history of testing as means of intelligence evaluation in schools), and for *success* (drawing on idea that school achievement is a necessary prerequisite for academic success, leading to economic success).

The power of market-based reformers to frame the issue of racial inequity in schools is two-pronged—they are increasingly called upon both to diagnose and to solve the problem of racial inequity. Political strategist and framing analyst George Lakoff reminds us that “frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions” (Lakoff xv). The ability to re-define school achievement as a problem of neoliberalism is indicative of the market frame's hegemonic hold. Rather than interrogating the meaning of “achievement” itself and the dubious standard of performing on par with White students, the problem of the gap is “solved” through economic means—either through choice (market-based frame) or by redistribution of resources (civil rights frame).

Though tangible actions accompany each of these reform frames (the founding of charter schools, the funding of high-stakes assessments, and lawsuits, to name a few), discourse is the unit of analysis through which we can best understand the breadth of these changes. Market-based reformers clearly feel ownership over the educational arena. So complete is the common-sense understanding that schools are in shambles and traditional school leaders are incompetent that the details of these sweeping statements are rarely interrogated.

The discursive process of market-based forces re-framing and indeed re-defining schooling in the modern age is what discourse analyst Jam Bommaert (2005) would call *entextualization*, in which discourses are first decontextualized and then “metadiscursively recontextualized” so that they become a new discourse with a “preferred reading” of its context. It is this In this chameleon-like characteristic , the ability to decontextualize the dynamics undergirding a similar situations and repurpose their meaning to support market-based solutions that I explore in the case below.

*Case Study: The Cost of the market frame*

In 2009, two Black women were arrested for enrolling their children in “good” (majority White) school districts. In November 2009, Kelly Williams-Bolar, an Ohio mother of two, was indicted for “stealing” her children’s education from the Copley-Fairlawn school district. Williams-Bolar lived in Akron, in a significantly lower-performing district (St. Clair 2011, Canning and Tanglao 2011, Hing 2012, Strauss 2011). Williams-Bolar’s case was particularly bizarre in that she used her father’s Copley-Fairlawn address, not that of a stranger, and when initially alerted by the district she petitioned to have her father appointed the children’s guardian—a petition that was denied in court. Of 48 investigations of parents “illegally” enrolling their children in Copley-Fairlawn schools between 2005 and 2011, Williams-Bolar’s case was the only one to make it to court (Hing 2012, Strauss 2011).

Just a few months after Williams-Bolar’s case broke, a similar story occurred in Connecticut: another Black single mother was accused of “stealing” education for her child by lying about her address in order to enroll a child in a wealthier—and whiter—district. Tanya McDowell was living in a homeless shelter in Bridgeport, Connecticut and used a friend’s address to send her son to Norwalk public schools. McDowell was convicted of “stealing” over \$15,000 worth of education from Norwalk and sentenced to twelve years in prison, of which she will likely serve five, with another five years of probation.

When Williams-Bolar’s case was reported on in 2009, she was heralded as the “Rosa Parks of education.” Civil rights organizations like Al Sharpton’s National Action Network, colorofchange.org, and charter advocates like Students First championed Williams-Bolar’s story (Barr 2011, Color of Change 2011). She received national coverage on CNN, the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, and in a *Washington Post* op-ed (Kavanaugh 2011, Huffman 2011, Williams 2011). Independent bloggers urged the public to rally around Williams-Bolar by examining issues of racial inequity in education, and a change.org petition to pardon her received over 100,000 signatures. Her felony was reduced to a misdemeanor, and she had to spend nine days in jail. Eventually, Williams-Bolar was forced to withdraw her daughters from the Copley-Fairlawn district, but she

accessed a voucher program for one daughter to finish high school and a private donor gave her funds to send her second daughter to private school.

While Williams-Bolar's story could have been read through the lens of historic segregation and redlining in Ohio or the underfunding of the Akron school district where she lived (and of which she was an employee), market reformers seized upon the Rosa Parks comparison and used Williams-Bolar's story as a rallying cry (Bernard 2012). By 2012, she had become a speaker on behalf of parent choice. In an interview with Roland Martin, Williams-Bolar reiterated the image of parents as empowered consumers:

We have more power, and more rights than we will ever recognize. You have to go into the school and demand what you need and want for your child. Every parent has rights. You take your child out, then they'll be figuring out what they need to do to get your child back in (Williams-Bolar quoted in Martin 2012).

In an interview with ColorLines' Julianne Hing, Williams-Bolar asserted that "Akron Public Schools wants to keep us all here so we can suffer while they get it right...My daughters don't have a second chance at their education." In a press release supporting the release of the film "Won't Back Down," a fictional treatment of the fight to pass the parent trigger law in California, Williams-Bolar writes,

I founded the Ohio Parents Union, an organization tasked with empowering parents throughout the state and providing families with resources to effectively advocate for the rights of their children. No longer should parents with children be trapped in failing schools be left without rational options (Williams-Bolar 2012).

In the space of a single sentence, Williams-Bolar conflates empowerment with rational choice. In the equation that she describes, the only rational means of empowerment is choice.

Tanya McDowell, on the other hand, enjoyed little of the celebrity that Williams-Bolar was granted. As a Black woman with criminal convictions who was homeless during the period when she sent her son to a wealthier district, McDowell was criminalized by the media. A handful of comments on the pages of newspaper websites accused Williams-Bolar of being a liar, and nearly every headline about McDowell mentioned her homeless status. Most news stories reported on her prior convictions despite their irrelevance to her case, and the education blog Dropout Nation emphasized twice in a single article that McDowell "is no saint" (Biddle 2012). McDowell did no television spots, and her change.org petition received only slightly more than a quarter of than those garnered for Williams-Bolar—27,000 as opposed to 101,000.

The Williams-Bolar and McDowell cases symbolize the limitations of the discursive opportunity structure surrounding the achievement gap—and racial inequities overall—in education. Both had the potential to be symbols of choice, as both took risks to educate her child in a 'better' district. Though both mothers were single, Black and poor, only one met the criteria for being a strong moral symbol. Williams-Bolar and McDowell represent two poles of a deserving/undeserving poor dichotomy (Katz 1989). Media treatment of and public response to each woman's story belies a deep moralistic desire to symbolically withhold the right to a quality education from one woman's child while offering it to

another. The market-based reformer response to these two women signifies the conditions of market reform in regard to parents of color. Parents of color who meet criteria of respectability can engage in a tacit deal with market reformers: to serve as a legitimizing face of market-based education reform in exchange for receiving access to potentially higher-quality education for their own child. For McDowell, however, such a deal is off the table.

While a racial justice analysis might provide context for McDowell's prior jail time and the ways in which Black people are forced to interact with the prison industrial complex, within a marketized "choice" frame, McDowell becomes simply an unworthy cause. Thus, although racial justice is the only conceptual frame that addresses contextual variables, because it contradicts the more accepted neoliberal constructs of post racialism and colorblindness, it is less likely to resonate in the sphere of public discourse.

Although for many years the market-based frame was not taken seriously as an approach to educational reform, as the \$80 billion dollars flowing to private educational companies makes clear, the approach is a publically dominant and growing phenomenon. Where market-based reformers viewed the deterioration of schools as the result of state interference "stifling initiative and talent" (Lauder & Hughes 1999), the racial justice reformers of community-based organizations hold an entirely different view of history—summarily, that the state did not go far *enough* in its efforts to secure equality of opportunity. How do educational reform efforts that are grounded in a different analysis of race and racism fare in an arena dominated by this behemoth? In the next chapter, I will explore the contours of the civil rights and racial justice frames and examine how they interact with education reform efforts.

## Chapter four:

### CIVIL RIGHTS AND RACIAL JUSTICE AS FRAMES FOR EDUCATION REFORM

In this chapter I will explore the historical roots and current application of two approaches that challenge a number of the most closely held assumptions and premises of the market-based frame: the civil rights frame and the racial justice frame. Although the roots of both can be found in the civil rights movement, their differences may be traced to the infamous 1968 struggle for community control in the Ocean-Hill Brownsville schools in New York City. The year 1968 represents a symbolic shift in civil rights politics toward the political era of the New Left and Black Power movements. Within the span of that single year, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated; 50,000 people participated in the Poor People's March on Washington, DC; hundreds of protesters descended on the Democratic National Convention during the "Days of Rage" in Chicago; and the Kerner Commission released their best-selling report that concluded that the series of major riots by Black residents in Los Angeles, Chicago and Newark were the result of "the racial attitude and behavior of white Americans toward black Americans" (Kerner Commission 1968).

### Ocean-hills Brownsville: Racial Self-Determination and Community Control

No other historical moment captures the tensions of race, school bureaucracy, and parent empowerment like the Ocean-Hills Brownsville strikes of 1968. The conflict had many dimensions, the most fundamental being a fight over decentralization of power. The New York City Board of Education controlled schools from the top and the Ford Foundation, responding to complaints about the poor quality of education, funded an experiment giving parents real power in school governance and decision-making in the district of Ocean Hill-Brownsville. The neighborhood of Ocean Hill-Brownsville was home to a strong Jewish progressive community from 1880 until 1960, when large numbers of Jewish residents began to leave, citing rising crime and decreasing property values in the area. African-Americans and some Latinos quickly replaced the Jewish population, and were the neighborhood's new majority at the time of the strike. The teaching staff in the neighborhood schools, however, remained majority White and Jewish.

The racial dimension of the fight for control was amplified over three critical incidents:

- 1) Ocean Hill-Brownsville schools' local governing board refused to support a teacher strike at the beginning of the 1967-1968 school year. Teachers believed that their "demands coincided with the interests of New York's students," while the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board saw the walkout as a potential threat to its still-tenuous experiment (Perlstein 2004: 5).
- 2) The new board selected a Black district administrator, Rhody McCoy, who in turn recommended five new principals—three Black, and the first Puerto Rican, and Chinese principals in the city (Fantini and Gittell 1969). Because these principals were not at the top of the city's eligibility list, some members of the teachers union perceived the principal appointments as a slight, concluding that "race had replaced merit in hiring" (*ibid* 5). Teachers began to transfer out of the district *en masse*.



- 3) On May 9, 1968, 19 White teachers (and one Black teacher, whose notice was later withdrawn) received mandatory transfer notices. Some attempted to return to their schools, only to find hundreds of protesters blocking their entrance (Perlstein 2004).

As the teachers' union protested the transfers, the two sides traded harsh accusations of racism and anti-Semitism. The conflict finally ended when the Board of Education agreed to set up local school boards throughout the city (Kifner 2006).

Ocean Hill-Brownsville was emblematic of the frames of civil rights and racial justice. In 1968, the language of the achievement gap had not entered common parlance, but it was nonetheless at the center of what Black activists and their White supporters were trying to address through community control. On the one hand, parents were using a civil rights frame to define the source of racial inequity as an institutional inequitable distribution of resources and power, while on the other they were using a racial justice frame and community organizing strategies and tactics to fight for “the legitimacy of cultural forms associated with different groups, competing forms of pluralism” and strategies to “boost the self-image of black and Hispanic students, bring more minority students into the schools, make the curriculum more relevant to minority students” (Podiar 2004 and Hampton, 2006). These overlapping trends that included the recognition of contextual variables as factors in the educational success of students of color, the question of agency for students and parents, the barriers confronting teachers of color (and later for multilingual teachers), and the distribution of power and financial resources were all present in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflict. Over the next 40 years, these concerns would evolve into the two related, and occasionally competing, frames for addressing issues of racial equality and equity in the arena of education reform: the civil rights and racial justice frames.

## The Civil Rights Frame

Although the civil rights frame is rooted in desegregation efforts characterized in the foundational 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling, the current iteration of the civil rights frame emphasizes equal opportunity, distribution of resources, and court enforcement of racial equality. The spirit of famous Supreme Court cases *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* has been reignited in struggles to close the achievement gap through these same means—equal opportunity and resources and enforcement of equality. According to this frame, the achievement gap can be closed through a redistribution of funding and other resources.

In the national fervor over No Child Left Behind, few critics remember its origins: NCLB's first iteration was the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), part of President Lyndon Johnson's package of civil rights titles. In the early 2000s, when the achievement gap was just gaining traction as an issue, policymakers unaffiliated with civil rights politics began to use civil rights language, and civil rights groups devised various strategies of participation in the new educational arena. The civil rights-inspired phrase “equality of opportunity” began to proliferate in discussions of education reform.

Proponents of the civil rights achievement gap frame believe that students of color have had neither teachers who held them to a high standard of achievement nor adequate

access to the curriculum, quality teachers, and other resources necessary to succeed. In this frame there is a clear tension over market-based education solutions, but the rhetoric of civil rights is expansive. For this group, closing the achievement gap entails higher expectations from teachers and increased access to schooling resources. More recently, former New York City Chancellor Joel Klein; Reverend Al Sharpton; President Barack Obama; the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; John Payton of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund; Harlem Children's Zone founder Geoffrey Canada; former Washington, D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee; former Secretary of Education Rod Paige and current Secretary of Education Arne Duncan; and 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney have all declared that education is the "civil rights issue of our time" (Campaign for High School Equity 2011, Resmovitz 2013, Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003).

The civil rights prognostic frame (see chart on page 33) sees the achievement gap fundamentally as a lack of *opportunity*. It contends not that students lack innate intelligence, that their cultures are inferior, that private management of schools would improve them, or that we must attend to racial inequity in society before we look to schools, but that *with access to equal educational resources all students can succeed*. This emphasis on opportunity and access is inherent in the historical tradition of civil rights, a movement in which people of color demanded access to and equal participation in social and economic institutions.

Under the logic of this frame, the achievement gap exists because resources are distributed unequally among schools, with so-called "majority-minority" schools having less funding, more underqualified teachers, and less access to classroom resources like up-to-date textbooks, science equipment and technology.

#### *History of the Civil Rights Frame*

Questions of access and assimilation have a long history in the African-American community, especially as they relate to education. Though Audre Lorde (1984) declared with finality that "the master's tools will never destroy the master's house," groups marginalized by racism, colonialism, and gender oppression continue to seek use of the master's tools—at least partially because we can rarely imagine our own tools being as effective as those of the master. Within the civil rights movement, questions of structural racism as they relate to education were sometimes reduced to campaigns for "access": give us the same resources you have and we can do just as well. While access to resources is no small matter to those who lack them, from the historical moments of Reconstruction to *Brown v. Board of Education* to the present-day, a number of Black activists have critiqued the access frame (Bell, Rountree 2004, Lyons and Chesley 2004). Several historians of segregated African American schools argue that both African American children and the surrounding communities benefitted from Black schools—Black teachers shared racial and geographic identities with their students, schools served as the cultural center of Black communities (Siddle Walker 2000), and in some cases the schools received additional resources from state governments as an incentive to refrain from integration (Harris and Herrington 2006: 212). As Adam Fairclough points out in his history of Black teachers, flaws were apparent in the access strategy as early as the 1960s: "even when blacks improved their position relative to whites, educational gains did not lead to commensurate

economic and political gains” (Fairclough 2000: 70). The same could be said today with regard to test scores: improvements in performance on state tests certainly do not translate into equity in college admissions or income.

Regardless, attempting to legislate equity in schools continued through the 1960s and 1970s and into the present. In California, the *Serrano v. Priest* lawsuit (1971) was a case in which the plaintiffs sought to reduce the disparities in school funding that stemmed from reliance on local property taxes. Elmore & McLaughlin (1982) argue that *Serrano* drew on legal scholarship of the 1960s that established three main proposals for evaluating educational equity: educational need, equality of outcomes, and fiscal neutrality (Elmore & McLaughlin 1982). More specifically, *educational needs* proposed that systems of school financing should be evaluated on the basis of how well they met the needs of individual children; *equality of outcomes* proposed that state financing systems should not ensure not simply equal funding, but equal outcomes; and *fiscal neutrality* proposed that districts with the same tax rates should have the same amount of money to spend on education regardless of the districts’ overall wealth (Powers 2004: 766-767). Rather than using the data of high-stakes test scores to assess school quality, as the market frame does, the civil rights frame lends its focus to inputs, or opportunity to learn factors.

Attempts to equalize funding and resources in school districts have had mixed results in terms of measurable gains for students of color. One of the most famous court cases that addressed funding equity was *Abbott v. Burke*. In 1981, the Education Law Center filed a complaint in Superior Court on behalf of 20 children attending public schools in the cities of Camden, East Orange, Irvington, and Jersey City. The lawsuit “challenged New Jersey’s system of financing public education under the Public School Education Act of 1975 (Chapter 212)” (Education Law Center 2013). In 1990, the New Jersey Supreme Court issued a ruling that funding must be guaranteed for low-income urban districts. The ruling was based in part on testimony from Dr. Steven Barnett of Rutgers University, who testified that disadvantaged children often enter school lacking the language and literacy skills that are prerequisites to literacy and that high quality pre-kindergarten can help close school readiness gaps. Barnett’s testimony was based on the long-term Perry Preschool and Abecedarian studies, in which low-income children were enrolled in high-quality preschools, and were found to later have “fewer referrals to special education, increased high school graduation rates, more economic success as adults, less involvement in delinquency and crime...and even greater gains in achievement and social behavior, but also permanent gains in IQ scores when compared to non-participants” (Boylan 2007). The *Abbott* decision was implemented in 1991, but equalized funding on the state level failed to recreate the positive results of the studies that were the basis of the *Abbott* decision. Students of color in the targeted districts outperformed their counterparts in districts not affected by the *Abbott* decision (44% proficiency for Black students in Camden county compared to 35% statewide), but were significantly outperformed by White and Asian students, who had statewide proficiency rates of 78% and 85%, respectively (Burney et. al. 2002).

In California, the case of *Williams v. California* was an effort to reframe the issue of school financing around the conditions of education rather than funding. Plaintiffs asked the court to order the state to “develop a system that prevents, detects, and cures unequal

access to basic educational necessities” (Rosenbaum et. al. 2002: 324). Rather than focusing on levels and patterns of spending, the *Williams* case examined “how dollars are actually used within classrooms and schools to produce desirable educational outcomes” (*ibid* 769). The 2004 settlement of *Williams* emphasized access to resources; implementing legislation established new standards and accountability mechanisms to ensure that all California public school students had “qualified teachers, textbooks and instructional material and safe, clean and functional schools” (IDEA 2013). Civil rights framers have been able to mobilize groups for short periods of time around specific lawsuits, but have not had an enduring presence in the field of reform, particularly given the meteoric rise of market-based initiatives.

#### *Discursive Traits of the Civil Rights Frame*

##### **i. Equality of Opportunity**

“...[T]he right to an Opportunity to Learn is undeniably distributed by race, ethnicity and neighborhood.” –Schott Foundation 2012

Equality of opportunity runs the gamut from funding equity through teacher training and a number of the opportunity to learn factors detailed in chapter two. Viewed through the civil rights frame, the achievement gap stems from an *opportunity gap*, rather than a choice gap. Wade Henderson of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights opines in the 2011 report “A Plan for Success: Communities of Color Define Priorities for Education Reform”:

Quality education is a civil right. However, many of our nation’s children, overwhelmingly those of color from low-income backgrounds, are being denied the education they deserve, trapped in under-performing, under-funded, and often segregated schools. It is both a moral and economic imperative that we close the opportunity gap and ensure that all children have access to the high quality education they will need to succeed in life (Campaign for High School Equity 2012).

This opportunity gap is one that civil rights organizations are uniquely positioned to address. In addition to the direct connection between civil rights and school desegregation, the ideas of access and equality of opportunity are clearly legacies of civil rights in the United States.

Overall, civil rights advocates have called for a return to measuring accountability and equity in the form of “Common Resource Opportunity Standards” (not unlike the “Opportunity to Learn” standards of a decade prior), in which districts would be held accountable for providing high quality early childhood education, highly effective teachers, a broad college-bound curriculum, and equitable instructional resources. The NAACP and Civil Rights Coalition (who authored the 2010 “Framework for Providing All Students an Opportunity to Learn...” report) are at the forefront of demands for equality of opportunity, but the American Civil Liberties Union, Schott Foundation, and a number of other groups use equality as a discursive tool in reference to the achievement gap. Specifically, these groups posit that if school funding and resources were equal, student performance outcomes would be equal.

## ii. Diversity and Cultural Relevance

In many ways, the civil rights frame is still seeking to implement the unfinished project of desegregation. Both the Schott Foundation and the Civil Rights Coalition point out in recent reports (2012 and 2010, respectively) that schools have reseggregated to pre-civil rights levels. In recent years, civil rights frame advocates have backed closing the achievement gap by means of “linguistically appropriate and culturally relevant methods and content” (Civil Rights Coalition 2010), demanding that the country tackle “extremely high levels of segregation by race and class in the city’s neighborhoods and schools” (Schott 2012) and supporting “diverse, inclusive schools and classrooms whenever possible” (Parents Across America mission statement, accessed February 9, 2013). Much as it did prior to school integration, funding follows White students. Therefore, funding equity requires school integration. Unlike the market-based frame, the civil rights frame attempts to account for the import of racial segregation on the achievement gap.

## iii. Quality Teachers, Quality Schools

In many publications, “quality” stands as a proxy for equity. The civil rights coalition declares, “[a]s a community of civil rights organizations, we believe that access to a high-quality education is a fundamental civil right.” High quality education includes:

1. Equitable opportunities for all;
2. Utilization of systematically proven and effective educational methods;
3. Public and community engagement in education reforms;
4. Safe and educationally sound learning environments;
5. Diverse learning environments; and
6. Comprehensive and substantive accountability systems to maintain equitable opportunities and high outcomes (Civil Rights Coalition 2010).

All the other civil rights frame advocates reviewed for this research refer to either quality teachers or quality education in their publications. In the rapidly changing context of education reform, the signifier of *quality* for these organizations is a protest against the rapid expansion of charter schools. Both Parents Across America and the Schott Foundation specifically highlight the existence of uncelebrated high-quality public schools in the midst of rapidly expanding charter school networks.

### *Advocates of the Civil Rights Frame*

Given its long history as the flagship civil rights organization in the United States, I looked to the NAACP’s work on the achievement gap under the political umbrella of civil rights to delineate my academic understanding of the civil rights frame. Drawing largely from a 2010 “Framework for Providing All Students an Opportunity to Learn through Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act,” published by a coalition of civil rights organizations—among them the NAACP, National Action Network, Urban League, and Rainbow PUSH Coalition—I determined that civil rights frame advocates are characterized by focus on opportunity to learn/equality of opportunity factors; caution about, though not avoidance of, privatization; and focus on government as a mechanism of enacting educational change. Overall, a handful of traditional civil rights groups and several newer education advocacy groups run by academics and parent activists characterize

the civil rights framers: the NAACP Legal Defense Fund; Civil Rights Coalition; Parents Across America; Broader, Bolder Approach; The Schott Foundation; and the Civil Rights Project at UCLA. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund and Civil Rights Coalition provide one of the few visible examples of a Black education agenda that eschews privatization. Rather, the NAACP LDF highlights the work of exemplary public non-charter schools and attempts to expand access to those schools for Black children. The Civil Rights Coalition, Schott Foundation, Parents Across America and Broad, Bold Approach provide coherent, critiques of market-based reform strategies, and emphasize the impact of these strategies on students of color. Concurrently, the Civil Rights Coalition and Schott Foundation continue to advocate for the more holistic assessment approach of measuring Opportunity to Learn Factors. These organizations have created the civil rights frame through both legal advocacy and their use of the discursive traits discussed above: equality of opportunity, diversity and cultural relevance; and quality teachers and schools.

#### *Limitations of Civil Rights and Access as an Equity Strategy*

The legacy of civil rights as both strategy and rhetoric retains great power in education, and it is a legacy from which all students of color benefit. The limitations of the civil rights and access frame as a means to close the achievement gap, however, are formidable. The civil rights frame requires understanding racism as a phenomenon bound by tangible policy- and resource-related inequality, rather than one that, while related to policy and resources, is also carried out by abstractions like language, behavior and attitude. As Brayboy et al. elaborate,

The hope that material equality could be achieved and that it would rectify the inequities of educational and other societal structures has not proven to be the case...Equity in this case would mean that every student has access to all the resources that they need in light of persisting historical inequalities, and it would ensure commensurate educational opportunity and true integration” (Brayboy et al. 2007: 168).

While the evolution of *Brown v. Board* to *Williams* has produced legislation that tackles ever more aspects of *inequality*, only the racial justice frame addresses racial *inequity* and the reality that legislation and resource redistribution, while useful tools, will never fully close the gap.

The limitations of an “equality” strategy in the civil rights movement are relevant lessons not only to the arena of education. Queer theorist Kenyon Farrow writes about his frustration with the emphasis on equality in some lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organizations: “Equality is a frame that many of us understand as leaving the most marginal queer identities vulnerable to other forms of state and interpersonal violence—particularly where race, class, gender identity, disability, immigration, and criminal status mark the ways in which they experience their queerness—an experience that doesn’t necessarily mean circuit parties and softball teams” (Farrow 2013). When asked to elaborate on the limits of equality, Farrow responded that the priorities of the mainstream gay movement—inclusion in the military, marriage, etc.—serve primarily as policies that will help White gay men truly become White men, and will have little or negative impact on the lives of gay men of color,

lesbians, and transgender people, whose struggles as queers are bound up with other parts of their identities.

Farrow's analysis of the limits of equality is shared by critical race theorist Derrick Bell (2004), who questioned the notions of both equality and integration as school-based equity strategies. In regard to schooling, equality of funding or an equal distribution of "highly-qualified" teachers would most benefit students of color for whom race is the central organizer of their experience in schools. For students with other marginalized identities—poor children of color, girls of color, immigrant children of color, queer students of color—formal equality only begins to deal with the complex of formal and informal practices that lead to school failure.

When I explain the difference between equality and equity to my high school students, I use an analogy first explained to me by a colleague—that of bathrooms. Women's and men's restrooms frequently hold the same number of stalls, despite the fact that it takes most female-bodied people longer to use the restroom, given the process of pulling down pants or pulling up skirts to park oneself on the toilet. "Have you ever noticed," I ask, "long lines outside of women's rooms at the movies when there's no line at all at the men's room?" Equality, I explain, is having the same number of stalls while equity would be having more stalls in women's rooms. Equality means everyone gets the same thing; equity means everyone gets what they need.

### Comparison of Civil Rights and Racial Justice Approaches to the Achievement Gap

ACHIEVEMENT GAP	CIVIL RIGHTS FRAME	RACIAL JUSTICE FRAME
<i>Assumptions about the cause of the gap</i>	Inequitable resource distribution	Structural racism, including external variables like housing segregation and poverty.
<i>Perspective on Racism</i>	Racism continues to persist through institutions (institutional racism).	Racism is active and systemic (structural racism)
<i>Approach</i>	Predominantly Legal- Funding equity, legal protections, limited school choice, more in-depth teacher training and parental involvement .	Community Organizing- Focus on causes of racial inequity in schools (eg, neighborhood segregation,) discipline and testing policies, increased student and parent voice in school decision-making, etc.)
<i>Strategic remedies</i>	Funding equity, legal protections, limited school choice, more in-depth teacher training and parental involvement.	-Mobilization, education and empowerment of parents and students of color in various political campaigns (eg college preparatory classes, restorative justice practices, curricular reform, more democratic channels of school governance)
<i>Anticipated Outcome</i>	Increased access to resources resulting in higher performance of students of color	Specific policy and program reforms including such as testing policies, tracking, racialized discipline procedures. increased student and parent voice in school decision-making.

### The Racial Justice Frame

In his 1965 speech advocating affirmative action President Lyndon B. Johnson used the analogy of an athletic race:

You do not take a person who for years has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'you're free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely



fair. Thus it is not enough just to open the gates or opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates .... We seek not...just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result (Johnson 1965). In this analogy, the legacy of Jim Crow racism was clear: regardless of political stance, most white Americans could acknowledge that a formal, legal racial equality would fail to result in racial equality in practice. In his 2006 book *Racism Without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva distinguishes the older, more obvious era of Jim Crow racism from contemporary colorblind racism, in which people of color are perceived to be responsible for racial inequities. Specifically, colorblind racism is racism “in which whites rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (Bonilla-Silva 2).

This view enables many education reformers to hold the contradictory views that, on the one hand, the vast racial inequity in this country is the product of historical (not contemporary) racism, cultural deficiency, and general laziness on the part of Black and Latino students, while on the other, the right “choice” will moderate or even eradicate these undesirable characteristics. Contemporary racism is an elusive phenomenon because of most Americans’ resistance to understanding that racist outcomes can occur regardless of conscious intent and that denial of these inequitable outcomes is common. As Tim Wise observes, even during the civil rights era, when Jim Crow practices were both common and blatant, between two-thirds and 90 percent of whites said that Blacks were treated equally with regard to jobs, schooling, and housing opportunities (Wise 2010: 65). More recently, while the material inequities students of color face in schools has been well documented (Kozol 2005, Darling-Hammond 2010), the array of inequities caused by attitudes and beliefs are much more challenging to capture. For instance, in one study of race and the media, participants were shown news stories about crime in which the person committing the crime was not shown, and the alleged criminal’s race was not mentioned. Almost half of the participants remembered seeing a perpetrator, and of those two-thirds remembered the perpetrator as Black (Wise 2010: 85). When racism manifests in situations like this, it has tangible impacts (the participants’ racist perceptions of who commits crime are heightened; if they were selected as jurors they could potentially convict someone on the basis of race) but is not quantifiable and allows people to maintain their self-perception as non-racists.

The understanding of racism I employ here is one that assumes racism to be normal, systemic, and active (Mills 1997). In contrast to the popular notion of racism as conscious individual acts of prejudice, structural racism is both *active* and *systemic* but, because it is so commonplace, is frequently invisible. I use the term active because racism and those who perpetuate it continually reinvent themselves and their sustaining logic to fit into and define commonsense notions around race. Racism is *systemic* in both the sense that it is an organized phenomenon *and* the rules, regulations, and common practices of society’s institutions are infused with racism. Thus, even if the individual behavior of actors were to change, the everyday practices of institutions can maintain racism. The Ohio-based Kirwan Institute for the Study for Race and Ethnicity explains structural racism as the following:

The word “racism” is commonly understood to refer to instances in which one individual intentionally or unintentionally targets others for negative treatment because of their skin

color or other group-based physical characteristics. This individualistic conceptualization is too limited. Racialized outcomes do not require racist actors. Structural racism refers to a system of social structures that produces cumulative, durable, race-based inequalities. It is also a method of analysis that is used to examine how historical legacies, individuals, structures, and institutions work interactively to distribute material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages along racial lines (Kirwan Institute 2008).

Within this framework, racism is not a problem of attitude alone; it is a problem of the rules and institutions we inherit and the unconscious behaviors that fortify these structures. In short, if the problem is structural racism, the achievement gap is a misdiagnosis of the problem. As Zeus Leonardo (2007) points out:

Defining racism as fundamentally a problem of attitude and prejudice fails to account for the material consequences of institutional racism, behaviors that produce unequal outcomes despite the transformation of racial attitudes, and the creation of policies, such as NCLB, which refuse to acknowledge the causal link between academic achievement and the racial organization of society (265)

Thus, locating the problem of racism in individual attitudes fails to capture racism's insidious and structural nature. The facts surrounding the Black/White divide include both qualitative and quantitative measures: Blacks with bachelors' degrees are twice as likely to be unemployed as Whites (Wise 2010: 66); six in ten Whites admit to believing at least one racist stereotype (78); one in four Whites describes the ideal neighborhood as being devoid of Blacks (79); more than a hundred studies have found a relationship between racial discrimination and negative health impacts; and Blacks are three times more likely than Whites to be poor and three and a half times more likely to be extremely poor (66). The challenge for racial justice advocates, then, is to continually highlight not only the realities of racial but the seemingly neutral processes and actors that produce racist outcomes. The racial justice frame is fundamentally different from the civil rights frame in that it seeks to arrest the reproduction of racial inequity through demanding equality of *outcome* (whatever measures need to be taken to guarantee just outcomes for people of color), while the civil rights frame attempts to secure equality of *inputs*.

#### *Limitations of the Racial Justice Frame*

Racial justice frame advocates might attempt to address the achievement gap through a number of different campaigns, because a school's discipline policy is as much a part of the achievement gap as a student's actual performance on standardized exams. Both an expansive approach to education reform and the process of community organizing itself distinguish the racial justice frame—the understanding of racism as a pervasive entity and the insistence on shifting power to those most affected by the gap characterize the racial justice frame. However, the potential strength of this more analytically comprehensive approach can be a weakness when attempting to implement reforms. The comprehensive analysis that the racial justice frame brings to the arena of education reform has generated three types of limitations when advocates have attempted to apply it and initiate reforms:

1. Racial justice education reforms lack a national platform. Because the reform efforts focus on a variety of sub-issues—culturally biased tests, training of teachers of color and the availability of bilingual teachers, racial profiling of students in disciplinary actions, racially and culturally accurate curricula—in addition to struggles to stop the advance of

privatized charter schools, even when these reforms are implemented they have little impact on the overall field of education reform. They are simply too scattered. And without the ability to mount a national media campaign, reporting on school reform tends to reference the success of reform in terms of quantitative outcomes and to remain localized, with few links to other trends. Unlike the resonance of charters, a one-note, easily remembered refrain, the cacophony of melodies these racial justice reforms play in their local communities fall nationally on deaf ears.

2. Racial justice organizations and advocates have limited resources to monitor and hold reform efforts accountable. As I explore in the case study in the next chapter, organizations that attempt to push forward a racial justice frame not only have to compete ideologically with both the civil rights and market oriented frames to put a different set of ideas, they also have to push for passage of new policies and practices and monitor their implementation. Very few organizations can handle all these tasks, and unless groups obtain additional resources or forge coalitions to allow a division of labor that covers all these functions, a group can succeed with the first task—winning the policy—and flounder at the monitoring stage and in the ongoing fight to keep the racial justice frame in contention with the more dominant frames.
3. The racial justice frame faces the danger of cooptation. The first two limitations are more integrally related to the resources of the organizations advocating the frame, but in the next section my brief examination of the conflict between the Success-Charter Network and the NAACP and Compton parents use of the “parent trigger” will illustrate how market-oriented efforts parrot the values of the racial justice frame, the civil rights frame—or both.

### **Frame Cooptation and Battles for Legitimacy in School Reform**

In May of 2012, Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney claimed that “education was the civil rights issue of our era.” Romney’s invocation of the legacy of civil rights has been a common rhetorical device from neoliberal education reformers. Conservative scholars Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom were among the first school reform advocates to link civil rights and school choice, coupling their argument that the racial achievement gap in education was one of the most important civil rights issues of our time with an agenda for increased school choice and promotion of charter schools. Though many market reformers may believe that their approach is truly the most effective for students of color, their use of civil rights language and imagery borrows unearned legitimacy from the legacy of the civil rights struggle in the United States.

Though Romney’s declaration met with a good measure of skepticism from long-time education advocates (including the rebuttal that *civil rights* was the civil rights issue of his generation), the phenomenon of conservative politicians attempting to position themselves as civil rights champions has generally been uncritically embraced (Emdin 2012, Levinson 2011, Ravitch 2012). The notion of education as today’s civil rights issue has been claimed by President Barack Obama, Teach for America, former Washington D.C.

chancellor Michelle Rhee, and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, among others. In fact, the association of schools, and specifically school *choice*, with civil rights has been an inescapable discourse pattern among politicians and in the media.

So why do mainstream reformers who are bent on privatization claim allegiance to this legacy? This frame cooptation has been a deliberate strategy on the part of market-based reformers (Jani 2010), most of whom have no ties to historical or current civil rights struggles but nonetheless co-opt the terminology of civil rights to advance an agenda of privatization. Market-based education reform leaders are a diverse group; education theorist Michael Apple calls them a *new alliance* of “neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists, and a particular fraction of the upwardly mobile professional and managerial new middle class” (Apple 2001). As the case studies below illustrate, what many of these reformers have in common, however, is a damning critique of public schools, a plan to “fix” schools through choice, a history of profiting from their programs of school reform, and a tenuous claim to be the true saviors of students of color.

#### *Cooptation Case Study #1: The NAACP vs. Success Charter Network*

In the summer of 2011, conflict erupted between the New York state NAACP and Success Charter Network when the NAACP’s New York chapter sued New York City to stop the opening of additional charter schools, contending that charter schools were creating a separate and unequal environment for school children. With additional private funding that was not available to public schools, charter schools in New York, a majority of which were “co-located” with public schools, i.e. shared public school buildings, were renovating bathroom facilities, giving their students laptop computers, and paying for additional extracurricular programming for charter students only. In response to the lawsuit, Success Charter Network, with an overwhelmingly White board, organized parents to protest against the NAACP. A majority African American group of Success Network parents called the NAACP “sellouts who were blocking (their) children’s right to a quality education.”

Media outlets became virtual cheerleaders in the conflict. An op-ed in the Washington Post by Black Alliance for Education Options (BAEO) board chair Ben Chavous compared the NAACP to Alabama Governor George Wallace, who barred black students from integrating white schools (Chavous 2011). The Wall Street Journal and New York Post published a series of anti-NAACP op-eds with provocative headlines like: “NAACP versus Black Parents”; “Why is the NAACP fighting African Americans?”; and “NAACP sells out.”

Success Charter Network’s intended position in this conflict mirrored that of market-based reformers at large—that they were the true champions of Black families, and that teachers, and especially their unions, were guilty of throwing up their hands and giving up on students who needed their help the most. This point was further elaborated on the Success Charter website, which quotes a Wall Street Journal article asserting that: “the teachers union wants to keep these abysmal schools open to preserve jobs for their members....the union and NAACP want to limit better educational options for low-income families...(and) (I)f you want to know why the NAACP has become irrelevant to

the lives of African-Americans, this typical display of moral indifference to the plight of minority children is Exhibit A” (Wall Street Journal 2011).

In this context Success Charter Network clearly positioned itself both as civil rights choice advocates and as market-based reformers. By positing that the NAACP and teachers’ union are not passive observers but active perpetrators of a system that denies the right of choice to low-income families, Success Charter Network identifies itself as the savior.

The Success Charter parents implored NAACP President Hazel Duke to stop the lawsuit in the name of the NAACP’s legacy: “if you and the NAACP continue on this horrible lawsuit against my daughter’s school and the fellow 18 charter schools, it will not be the best legacy to leave behind” (Success Charter 2011, quoting Janette Ramos, parent at Bronx Success Academy Charter).

In a letter that was splashed across newspaper pages with a great deal of fanfare, Duke replied,

You need to know your facts before you make any accusations. You are not a member of the NAACP and don’t understand that you are doing the business of slave masters (New York Daily News 2011).

Success Charter Network used Duke’s response in its organizing campaign, urging other Success parents to challenge her and published Duke’s response on its website. The dramatic image of the Success Charter Network as slave masters drew protests from its board, teachers, and especially the parents of color, who saw themselves as advocating for their children against the racist oppression of an inequitable schooling system.

The NAACP distributed a letter to its supporters asking for petition signatures in favor of the lawsuit and repeatedly attempted to frame the fight as equality for all. Again and again, Success Charter Network effectively mobilized the media to back its portrayal of the NAACP as anti-Black children. As the media legitimized the market-based frame of the achievement gap, Success Charter Network legitimized itself as an advocate of Black children.

A fundamental tenet of the civil rights movement was that of access—to jobs, to housing, and to education. Shortly before his death, civil rights leader Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed a fear to his friend and comrade Harry Belafonte about the gains he had assisted in bringing about. He said, “I fear I am integrating my people into a burning house.” Indeed, under school desegregation, resources were not equitably distributed to students of color and little or no training was offered to the myriad White teachers who had grown up under segregation and would then be expected to treat all students “equally.” Desegregation meant Black children attending formerly White schools and having White teachers, but not the reverse. Officials who implemented desegregation orders seldom considered retaining Black teachers to teach White children, or how to maintain the important role that Black schools had played in Black communities (Milner and Howard 2004, Siddle-Walker 2000, 2001). Fifty years after the legal gains of civil rights, students of color are still seeking to integrate the already-burning schoolhouse.

Martin Luther King and other leaders of the civil rights movement came to believe that the movement’s true goal was not equality of opportunity but equity in outcomes.

Access alone could create technical equality of opportunity, but equity calls for concrete changes in institutional policies and practices, along with a redistribution of resources.

Jeannie Oakes (2006) distinguishes between education reform efforts that seek change through providing *pathways of access* and efforts that are *redistributive*—that specifically reorder and change ownership of some aspect of school capital, e.g., AP classes, technology tools, or campus resources. Many education reformers who place themselves within the tradition of Martin Luther King continue to demand access to education, despite clear evidence that *de jure* access has not resulted in *de facto* equity.

The current conceptualization of school choice creates pathways of access to a tiny minority of students. But the language of choice allows advocates of market-orientated reform to use and purposefully confuse the language of civil rights to advocate privatization. Choice, however is not the only idea with radical roots that privatization efforts have co-opted.

#### *Cooptation Case Study #2: Community Control and the Parent Trigger*

On December 7, 2010, under California’s “parent trigger” law passed earlier in the year, a group of Latino and African-American parents delivered a petition signed by 62 percent of parents at McKinley Elementary School in Compton, California to Acting Superintendent Karen Frison (Associated Press) demanding that the school be turned over to the Celerity Charter Association. Under the parent trigger law, a petition with a simple majority of parents can redirect the operation of a public school by turning it into a charter school or “forcing administrative and staff changes” (Fox 2010).

Like the parents at Coleman Advocates, which I discuss in detail in the next chapter, Parent Revolution members were supported in developing their analysis by a staffed organization. However, unlike Coleman, Parent Revolution had strong ties to the Green Dot charter network (Annenberg Institute 2012). Parent Revolution hid its continued association with Green Dot, and executive director Ben Austin does not list his time as a 2008 consultant for Green Dot in his biography on the Parent Revolution website.

Early coverage of Parent Revolution and its use of the parent trigger law was overwhelmingly positive. Most news coverage framed the story as one of empowered parents seeking to improve their children’s education. A Los Angeles Times article published on December 11, 2010 included two short paragraphs of “concerns” about the parent trigger among 21 paragraphs that included quotes from parents and Ben Austin and connected enactment of the trigger and well-known reformer Michelle Rhee, who visited the parents to give a “pep talk.” The article quoted a parent who said, “I know it’s never been done before, but I want to step up because I’m a parent who cares about my children and their education” and noted Rhee’s encouragement to parents to reclaim their school from “special interests and big bureaucracies” (Watanabe and Blume 2010).

An unabashedly enthusiastic Los Angeles Weekly article observed, “For the first time perhaps in U.S. history, parents are poised to take over and turn around a failing public school on their own terms” (McDonald 2010). Reaction from the California Teachers’ Union was tellingly skeptical. Union President Marty Hittleman condemned the

effort, calling it “a charade—a way for California legislators and campaign contributors to weaken unions while pushing a “corporate agenda” (McDonald 2010).

The Weekly article in particular portrays the passing of the parent trigger as a David and Goliath battle, with Parent Revolution as David and the California Teachers’ Union as Goliath, noting that with the passage of the parent trigger, “the administrators and teachers unions who have often shut out parents will no longer have a monopoly on power” (McDonald 2010). In fact, Parent Revolution is more accurately portrayed as the powerful giant Goliath. With a budget of \$1 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, and Broad Foundation, among others, it advocates on a single issue (Parent Revolution website, accessed 7.25.13). Nonetheless, the “empower parents” language was used in news accounts that appeared in the Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Weekly, Wall Street Journal, Fox & Hound, etc.)<sup>12</sup>

Despite the strong rhetoric about parent empowerment, once the parent trigger petition was submitted to the school board, McKinley parents who had signed it began to claim that Parent Revolution organizers had misled them about the petition’s purpose. One parent claimed she had been told the petition was for school beautification; another said that she had believed the petition was for general school improvement, not a takeover (Rizga 2010, Watanabe and Blume 2010b).

The Compton school board demanded verification of the signatures with photo identification, which Parent Revolution claimed was unnecessarily inconvenient for many working parents and purposefully intimidating for undocumented parents (Newton 2010). Former state legislator Gloria Romero claimed that the demand amounted to disenfranchisement (Hing 2011) and two Parent Revolution parents claimed that they were intimidated into *not* signing the petition because of harassment their children faced from McKinley teachers (McDonald 2011).

The narrative that Parent Revolution reformers constructed and sold was one of embattled minority parents attempting to assert power over a corrupt system. The Parent Revolution campaign was a strong iteration of both the parent empowerment and community themes present in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflict and the market-based frame—that the problem was the system itself and the solution was more choice, in the form of a charter takeover.

But neither of these assertions accurately represents the actual dynamics in the school or the district. In fact, McKinley Elementary was improving: the school's 77-point two-year rise between 2008 and 2010 on the state Academic Performance Index put it among the most rapidly improving schools in the state (Watanabe and Blume 2010b). However, just as the market-based frame is a hidden push factor in the drama, so was another: Compton’s reputation as a Black city largely stems largely from its representation in mainstream media and in hip hop, specifically NWA’s infamous “Straight Outta Compton” album released in 1988 (Behrens 2011). According to 2010 census data,

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<sup>12</sup> “Parent’s Trigger” Goes National, *Fox and Hound*; November 16, 2011; California’s Parent Revolution: ‘Triggering’ school reform in Compton, December 7, 2010, *Wall Street Journal*; “Compton School Board Rejects Parent Trigger Effort: A unanimous vote by the Compton school board rejects McKinley Elementary parents’ petition seeking to turn the struggling campus over to a charter operator”, February 23, 2011, *Los Angeles Times*; Parents hope to force sweeping changes at Compton school-In the first test of a new law, they want to have a charter company take over McKinley Elementary”, December 7, 2010, *Los Angeles Times*.

though, the city is approximately one-third African-American and two-thirds Latino, a demographic shift that school services had not caught up with. Many public offices were still held by African-Americans, which generated a backdrop of racial tension. In fact, most members of Parent Revolution were Latino, and most members of the Compton school board were Black.

The urgency McKinley parents felt to improve their children's school is certainly understandable. And, while one should not attribute Parent Revolution's actions solely to racial tension, the narrow framing of a market approach in general and the parent trigger in particular clearly fails to account for exactly the sort of economic and racial context that the racial justice frame throws into sharp relief.

These reform efforts, and others, are snapshots of moments in which school stakeholders, many concerned about racial equity, are pitted against each other. Organized groups concerned with *choice* and *individual rights* stand in opposition to those focused on the *opportunity to learn*, *equality of access*, and *collective rights* of students, while those concerned about *racial justice* and *equality of outcome* are still trying to get into the ring. The dominant frame surrounding the achievement gap is dangerous because it prevents a holistic understanding of racial inequity. And the largely unmarked, neoliberal shift in Americans' understanding of *rights*—from the collective rights of the civil rights era to the individual rights of today—has led to an intense emphasis on choice as a strategy to address racial inequities. Under the mantle of choice, civil rights, and in some cases, cultural relevance, market-based reformers have driven school reform toward privatized practices of charters, vouchers, and the parent trigger.

## Key Observations

Both of these case studies in frame cooptation illustrate several trends:

- 1) **The competence and integrity of public schools is difficult to defend.** The uniformly poor reputation of public schools has created a ripe opportunity for privatized interests to claim that they represent the interests of children of color and that even when schools are on the road to improvement charters are the right choice;
- 2) **You can't tell the players without a scorecard.** This old adage is even truer when it comes to school reform. Certainly racial identity does not predict how individuals or groups will position themselves around issues of equity and school reform. For many individual parents, the question is not about education reform, it is about immediate individual opportunity for their children. For organizations, the considerations may be related to resources. It is, for instance, no surprise that in both cases charter school proponents received substantial financial support from the Bill and Melinda Gates and Walton Family Foundations, and that Parent Revolution was led by a former consultant to the Green Dot Charter Network and publically supported by key market-oriented leaders like Michele Rhee. Organizations can also have similar constituents but completely different politics. The Success Charter Network has effectively used the same pressure tactics of community organizing, phoning, accountability sessions, and rallies as the NAACP of old. However, despite similar constituents, they are on opposite sides of the



“choice” question. Their ideas about the meaning of “just outcomes,” not their tactics, distinguish them.

3) **Race still matters, but the content of perceived race-based solutions has changed.** The initial remedy for racial inequities sought by civil rights advocates was school integration. Although some civil rights advocates still see school segregation as the biggest barrier to quality education, racial justice advocates tend to demand access to good teachers and gifted and talented classes for students of color and market-based reformers demand access to higher quality schools via “choice.” As both of these cases illustrate, the public dimension of these fights, particularly given the ascension of Black staff into administrative positions in public education institutions, are as likely to be among people of color as between people of color and whites.

4) **Media outlets are more likely to report on conflict among people of color than united groups fighting for racial equity in schools.** Episodic conflict among people of color—black parents fighting the NAACP and Latino parents challenging a Black school board—seem to be intrinsically more attractive to news media than the more common cases of racial discrimination or profiling;

5) **Choice, as a meme, has eclipsed equity.** The civil rights maxim of equal opportunity and the racial justice demand of equitable outcomes for all has in many cases devolved to “choice” for those who can afford it.

The question at the center of my research—why certain frames of the achievement gap are so dominant and where opportunities exist to bring racial justice readings to the gap—is partially answered by the existence of the “legitimate” field of education reform. If framing is a contested process, civil rights and racial justice frames lose the contest to frames of market logic. The story of local-level education struggles that are concerned with non-market reforms is not being told.

The organizations and groups involved in trying to bring about reforms through organizing are not monolithic in their challenge to neoliberal education, but the vast majority embody the plea of the late Jean Anyon, a longtime critic of market-based education: “What *should* count as education policy would include strategies to increase the minimum wage, invest in urban job creation and training, provide funds for college completion to those who cannot afford it, and enforce laws that would end racial segregation for housing and hiring” (2005: 13). Educational justice organizations join the framing contest with the continued insistence that schools are part of a network of institutions that perpetuate racial inequity and should not be addressed in isolation. In the next chapter I discuss the efforts of Coleman Advocates, a San Francisco-based community organization, to use a racial justice frame to make the San Francisco school district accountable to the needs of parents and students of color.

## Chapter five:

### THE RACIAL JUSTICE FRAME IN ACTION: WINNING ACCESS AND SYSTEM CHANGE FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR IN SAN FRANCISCO

In my four year survey of education reform related to the achievement gap, community-based organizations have been the most visible vehicles through which Black and Latino parents are able to voice their concerns in regard to schools and racial equity. Community organizing has a long history of directly challenging power structures in order to make lasting change. As one community organizer remarks in Kavitha Mediratta's 2005 study of community organizing for education, "organizing is not simply about solving problems. It is about empowering people, having choices, and beginning to dream of new ways of doing things" (Mediratta et. al. 139).

Community organizing can be defined most simply as building power among those who lack it. Through a review of some seminal works on community organizing (Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*, Piven & Cloward's *Poor People's Movements*, Gary Delgado's *Beyond the Politics of Place*, Doug McAdam, Sydney Tarrow and Charles Tilly's *Dynamics of Contention*). This approach is premised on a set of three key theories:

- 1) *Self-determination*. People who are most impacted by a set of circumstances not only have the right and ability to decide what would most improve their lives; they are also the best people to make that decision.
- 2) *Mass power*. Those who lack access to formal power can best build power through uniting with large numbers of other people in the same situation.
- 3) *Leadership development from membership*. Members of community-based organizations join campaigns out of concern for their personal circumstances; become empowered through both knowledge and action through the organization; and move toward a broader commitment to equity and seeing themselves as one among many who face the same challenge.

Indeed, in Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*, he urges organizers to positively reclaim the notions of both self-interest and power in order for members of community organizations to see themselves as both capable of both conceiving and executing their vision of justice (Alinsky 1971). Community organizing as a strategy for racial justice emerged most clearly in the late 1960s and 1970s through organizations like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and poverty organizations that developed under the War on Poverty like the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). Among leadership of the Left, the growth of staffed and funded organizations doing community organizing was somewhat controversial; many feared that establishing institutions would decrease the militancy of social movements and centralize power in a non-democratic fashion (Breines 1989, Piven & Cloward 1977). In Research for Action's (RFA) early 2000s national study *The Cross City Indicators Project*, RFA defined community organizing groups working for school reform by the following behaviors:

- Community organizing groups working for school reform share the following characteristics:
- They work to change public schools to make them more equitable and effective for

- all students.
  - They build a large base of members who take collective action to further their agenda.
  - They build relationships and collective responsibility by identifying shared concerns among neighborhood residents and creating alliances and coalitions that cross neighborhood and institutional boundaries.
  - They develop leadership among community residents to carry out agendas that the membership determines through a democratic governance structure.
  - They use the strategies of adult education, civic participation, public action, and negotiation to build power for residents of low- to moderate-income communities that result in action to address their concerns.
- Cross-City Indicators Project

Though community organizing varies enormously across geography and time, the key theories and strategies listed above are characteristics of both traditional community organizing and community-led school reform.

The local organizing work that these groups take on stands in contrast to the national picture of parents of color, and particularly Black parents, supporting conservative trends in education. The high-stakes testing movement, manifested most concretely in the No Child Left Behind federal legislation, has sought to align itself with parents of color (Hirsch 2007). City policies in favor of vouchers, which claimed to be a school accountability mechanism, were most publicly associated with African-American parents in cities like Milwaukee. Rod Paige, former President Bush's secretary of education and one of Bush's first African-American cabinet appointees, claimed that the No Child Left Behind Act carried on the legacy of civil rights—a branding that other policymakers have been quick to use, as well.

Underneath the surface, however, it is clear that Black and Latino parents have been more concerned with issues of racial equity in schooling than they have been enamored of standardized tests or traditional grading. In 2009, Kavitha Mediratta and colleagues published the first national study of community organizing around education. Unlike the market-based and civil rights frames, which seek to shift the mechanisms of schooling, the racial justice frame requires a confrontation of the fundamental beliefs and attitudes of teachers, school administrators, and policymakers.

In urban districts, reform efforts typically impose new operational structures—new classroom observation or performance assessment procedures, for example—to prod schools along the path to improvement. Community organizing groups have positioned their reform efforts differently, working instead to confront normative beliefs and then propose new structures (or reshape existing ones) to embed an alternative set of beliefs in schools (117).

The distinctive focus of community organizers on power and an alignment with those most impacted by school inequities (and usually least powerful to make changes) results, then, in a challenge to the hegemony of schooling itself. Many community-based organizations define racial equity to mean shifts in the power structures of districts and schools; formal

political representation; access to challenging curriculum; small, community-based schools; culturally competent educators and courses; gender- and race-based safety in schools; and diversified forms of assessment for students. Clearly, in these community organizations equity means more than adequate performance on standardized tests.

Using the lens of racial justice, they are fighting to expand the educational and economic opportunities available to their young people (Mediratta 2001 “Mapping the Field”). Coleman Advocates, the organization I’ve chosen to focus on in my fieldwork, is a case example of a community-based educational organization. Coleman exemplifies all of the characteristics of a community-based educational justice organization and has been particularly successful in initiating and achieving significant structural reform in the San Francisco school system.

Most parents at Coleman are not members of their local PTAs or School Site Councils. Though they are the same parents who are frequently working several jobs, speak little English, and may not attend Back To School night, they are dedicated members of Coleman. Why? Because in addition to validating the culture and experiences parents bring, Coleman members share an understanding and collective anger about the structures of race and class that govern their schools and their lives. For parents and youth at Coleman, closing the achievement gap is about survival. In the very first membership meeting I attended, Coleman staff members were presenting charts that displayed student performance on standardized tests by race. Though the issue had been discussed before, seeing racial inequity as starkly as it was represented on that bar graph made several parents gasp. The number of Black, Latino and Pacific Islander students not passing the test represented lives lost to poverty and racism. As YMAC organizer Pecolia put it,

How many of us have gone down to the district and said, you can’t do this to us?

This is able to happen because people do not stop it.

That’s why PMAC and YMAC exist. We need to say, this is jacked up. And because it’s jacked up, we are going to change it. Not we MIGHT, but we’re GOING to.

Because this is how many students die on the streets. How many students become drug dealers. How many funerals we go to a year.

That’s the flip side of this.

(field notes, 10.4.08)

For members of Coleman, and many of the educational justice organizations mentioned in here, fighting for schools that do right by students of color is not an abstract aspiration, but a concrete alternative to criminalization of and harm to our youth.

### ***Case Study: Coleman Advocates and organizing communities in a racial justice frame***

On April 22, 2008 the San Francisco Board of Education passed Resolution 82-26A1, acknowledging that San Francisco’s racial achievement gap, in place for over 30 years, was the largest among the seven largest school districts in California. The board adopted a four-year district-wide goal of increasing the academic achievement of underperforming groups such as African Americans, Latinos and Pacific Islander students so that a minimum of 60% of students in all racial groups would be at proficiency levels in English/Language Arts and math by 2012. This chapter examines the campaign that led to

the passage of the resolution and the frames employed by Coleman Advocates, the organization that led the campaign.

## Research Origins

In the preceding chapters I presented the market-based and civil rights frames as distinct approaches for addressing the achievement gap. These frames are widely debated in mainstream discussions of the achievement gap and enjoy legitimacy in the public sphere as potential solutions to closing the gap. In contrast to these narrower approaches, advocates of the racial justice frame focus on building power as a means to enact a whole host of reforms, from increasing student voice in school district decisions and adopting more equitable discipline policies to student assessment of teachers and culturally relevant curriculum. This emphasis on building power over alignment with existing power is a hallmark of community organizing and one reason why the racial justice frame resonates most often with organizations of parents and youth of color.

When I began my research on the achievement gap in 2008, it quickly became clear that the discourse about the gap that was so prominent in the media—apparent through the voices of neoliberal reformers and their op-eds, talk show appearances, and Hollywood movies—was significantly different from the ways in which many community organizations were talking about the gap. Put simply, I saw community organizations again and again share analysis and demands that centered structural racism as the gap's cause; and again and again saw their analysis bypassed by the media in favor of yet another interview with Arne Duncan.

My first contact with Coleman resulted from my participation with Teachers 4 Social Justice (T4SJ), a San Francisco-based group of teachers who work to provide what they call “real professional development” to teachers. T4SJ operates under a racial justice framework, and in addition to organizing an annual conference for 5,000 teachers, youth, and community educators, facilitates study groups and “salons” on popular topics in education. At a T4SJ meeting in 2008, a member brought up the recently-passed San Francisco school board's Closing the Achievement Gap (CTAG) resolution. Many in the room—including myself—considered it foolhardy to advocate for a particular timeline for closing the gap. Such a resolution was certainly doomed to fail, we concluded. It was determined that members of T4SJ would meet with Coleman staff and members to ask questions about their campaign and possibly offer organizational support, despite our concerns.

What became apparent over the next year to both members of T4SJ and myself—as I began to conduct ethnographic research with Coleman—was that the CTAG resolution was a strategic action meant to establish a foundation that would enable Coleman to push for more radical changes in the future. From their grounding as a group positioned in alignment with the district, Coleman members subsequently demanded significant changes in student and parent support, curriculum, and discipline policies. CTAG, which had initially seemed a somewhat anemic policy in the vein of civil rights, was, I later discovered, a lever meant to gain racial justice wins for the district's dwindling and embattled population of African-American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students.

Staff and members at Coleman made a strategic choice to craft a campaign that reflected an access/civil rights frame but could leverage racial justice practices. Coleman's members walked the line of structure and agency; and in doing so they improved educational opportunities for students of color in San Francisco but failed to shift the city-wide frame of the achievement gap toward racial justice.

In this chapter, I explore the evolution of Coleman's CTAG victory into the "Voices of the Next Generation" campaign as an effort to assert a racial justice analysis of the problem of the achievement gap. The data in this chapter includes ethnographic research conducted between 2008 and 2011. During that period I attended Coleman's campaign meetings with members (approximately 15 in all), observed A-G implementation task force meetings convened by the San Francisco Unified school district; conducted interviews with key leaders and staff; and reviewed the minutes, strategy documents, and public outreach materials from the organization's Educational Justice program over the course of five years (from 2006-2011). This method was one of **purposeful sampling** (Merriam 1998). Over the last five years I have marveled over the tenacity and persistence of the organization's staff and leaders and have come to deeply appreciate both the enormous difficulty of the challenges the group has undertaken and the good will, kindness, and patience that marked all their interactions with me.

## Ethnographic Case Study: Coleman Advocates

### *Organization origins*

Coleman Advocates<sup>13</sup>, as a community-based organization, is both typical and unique. It is typical in that its membership structure reflects elements common to other community-based organizations engaged in education campaigns: it is rooted in values of self-determination, mass power, and leadership development from members. However, it is unique in that when it began the campaign to transform opportunities for students of color in the San Francisco schools, the organization itself had only recently come through its own transformation from a professional advocacy group to a grassroots parent- and youth-led organization.

Founded as a small group of parents in the 1960s called "Citizens for Juvenile Justice," Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth was incorporated in 1975 with a grant from Gertrude Coleman. In its first decade the group concentrated on children's rights, following a fairly traditional model of lobbying and advocacy. In 1991, Coleman Advocates' landmark "Prop J" campaign created the San Francisco Children's Fund, and ultimately the city's Department of Children, Youth and their Families (DCYF). Both DCYF and the Children's Fund have endured into the present in San Francisco. With a budget of more than \$100 million DCYF supports more than 200 community-based children and youth programs targeted to low-income children (Coleman website, accessed July 10, 2013).

In 2006, staff and members began to transition from political advocacy to a community organizing model, with a community-based leadership structure. By the beginning of the campaign in 2008, all major decisions were either made or approved by

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<sup>13</sup> Real names used for organization, staff and members.

parent and youth leadership. While some members of the Coleman staff were still engaged in traditional political advocacy, four staff supported the community organizing programs Youth Making A Change (YMAC) and Parents Making A Change (PMAC). YMAC works with several hundred youth in six schools across the city, and its primary membership is low-income African-American, Latino, and Asian youth. PMAC is similar in size, though the majority of its members are Latino parents. Coleman campaigns have traditionally centered on the most underserved student populations in the city, which include low-income African-American, Latino, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander students.

The 2006 transition was an enormous shift in the culture and configuration of the organization. Prior to 2006, parent members were paid stipends to advocate for Coleman's interests—interests which were generally identified by the staff and board. The need for change was voiced in the summer of 2006 during an overnight retreat with staff, members, and the Coleman board; parent leader (and eventual staff member) Rosario Ramirez describes an “aha” moment in which it became clear to her that it was important for the organization to move away from a focus on advocacy toward a focus on “building power” (Ramirez interview 6.9.11).

In the new organizational structure, Coleman instead began to organize parents into a traditional community organizing structure, in which staff would go to schools and recruit parents on the basis that Coleman was representing *their* self-interests. Under the former advocacy model, parents were paid to represent the interests of the organization. In the current organizing model, parents pay dues to a body that can amplify their agendas and concerns. Staff began to do more intensive trainings with members in order to provide information on pressing issues, so parent members could make informed decisions about campaigns.

The transition was difficult. A number of board members left the organization, preferring the old model. Margaret Brodtkin, who had been Coleman's executive director for 26 years, left in 2004, and Ntanya Lee, the organization's African American youth program director, stepped into the executive director position. Staff members who remained with the organization were universally proud of Coleman adopting the community organizing model. As former staff member Rosario Ramirez remembers:

The advocacy model was: Rosario would get trained on an issue and go advocate for that issue representing the community, but I didn't have anyone behind me. Like...[b]ased on the research I've done, [this is] the issue. But I had not heard from the community—I had not heard from Juana, Rosa, Berta. It was just me. But this new model is, I have to go to the school and say what would you like to change? And I support you, but you have to do it. I'm going to help you learn how...

Advocacy is just me and no one else going to officials. Organizing is parents in front of me, and I'm in the back. You prepare those leaders, and you step back because you have prepared them well for the battle.

### *Campaign Roots*

In 2009, Coleman had eight staff members: NTanya Lee, Executive Director; Tom Jackson, Organizing Director; Pecolia Manigo, YMAC Program Director/Education Campaign Lead; Chelsea Boilard, Family Policy Associate; Rosario Ramirez, Parent Organizer; Alvaro Sanchez, Parent Organizer; MK Nguyen, Youth

Organizer; and Audrey Ingalls, Youth Organizer. Of the parent members, 75% were immigrant Latino and 25% were African American. Most members hailed from the Mission and Southeast neighborhoods of San Francisco—Excelsior, Visitacion Valley and Bayview. Coleman’s African American membership (40%) was almost seven times that of the city’s overall African-American population (6%), and its 40% Latino membership was 2.5 times the city’s Latino population of 14%; the remainder of the membership was divided approximately evenly between Pacific Islanders and Asians. The entire membership of the organization’s youth component, Youth Making A Change (YMAC) were from poor or working-class, struggling families.

At the time of the launch of the education campaign, Coleman had a membership base of approximately 200 parents and youth, who ranged from supportive members who might only rarely attend meetings to active members and leaders who attended multiple meetings every month as well as representing Coleman at school board meetings and their local school campuses.

#### *San Francisco as a Political Backdrop*

San Francisco, the fourth wealthiest city in the country and buoyed by its proximity to Silicon Valley, has a highly educated population. One third of San Franciscans age 25 or older hold a bachelor’s degree, and one in five adults holds a graduate degree (SF neighborhood socioeconomic profiles). The city’s median household income is \$70,117, while the median family income is \$86,665. Eleven percent of San Franciscans live in poverty, and 7% are unemployed (San Francisco Planning Department 2011). The city is 6% African American, 33% Asian, 48% White and 14% Latino (though the Latino population is very likely undercounted due to the undocumented status of some Latino San Franciscans) (San Francisco Planning Department 2011).

Coleman serves the southeast neighborhoods of San Francisco, which include the Excelsior, Visitacion Valley, and Bayview/Hunter’s Point. Some Coleman families also live in the Mission and Outer Mission neighborhoods that, while not in the geographic southeast of the city, share a number of racial and economic characteristics with southeast neighborhoods. The Bayview, Excelsior, Outer Mission and Mission neighborhoods have disproportionately high numbers of Latino residents, with the Mission enjoying the reputation as the demographic and cultural Latino heart of the city. The Bayview and Visitacion Valley have a disproportionately high African-American population. The Bayview sits on the city’s docks, and most of its Black population are descendants of African-Americans who migrated to the city during World War II to take war industry jobs. (POWER 2001). Visitacion Valley is home to some of the largest tracts of public housing in San Francisco, and many of the neighborhood’s African-American residents reside in the Sunnydale and former “Towers” projects (buildings that retain the Towers title despite the destruction of the original Geneva Towers in 1998). The Bayview, Mission and Visitacion Valley neighborhoods have some of the city’s highest crime violence rates.



	% African American	% Latino	Holds college degree or higher	Unemployed	In poverty
San Francisco overall	6%	14%	51%	7.0%	11%
Bayview	32%	25%	17%	14%	18%
Excelsior	3%	30%	23%	9%	11%
Outer Mission	2%	26%	34%	5%	7%
Mission	4%	41%	49%	5%	13%
Visitacion Valley	13%	15%	16%	11%	15%

Source: San Francisco Planning Department 2011

Inequity in the city has grown a great deal since the dotcom boom of the 1990s, which was responsible for displacing a number of San Francisco's low-income residents and residents of color. A recent report argues, "[t]he economic and political power of the city's white residents are disproportionate to their population. They are less than 50% of the city population (2010), but more than two-thirds of the city's voters, with the highest number of high-income residents in the city" (Al-Sharif et. al. 2012). While the political and economic clout of San Francisco's white residents has grown, quality of life for Black San Franciscans has actually declined:

There is a uniquely severe crisis in the African American community, both in the dramatic decline in the population, and the social and economic well-being of the residents who remain. African Americans have dramatically higher rates of poverty than other racial/ethnic groups - even among people of color - and a particularly acute incarceration crisis.

The African-American population decreased by more than one-third between 2000 and 2010, a net loss 12,010 African American families. The total African American population is predicted to decrease another 34% by 2050 (Al-Sharif et. al. 2012). Forty three percent of African American households are very low income, under \$25,000; for every \$1.00 of white per capita income, African Americans have \$0.40 in per capita income. African American students are 11.3% (6024) of the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) and have a graduation rate of 48.6%, the lowest among their peers (Al-Sharif et. al. 2012).

While fewer Latinos have left San Francisco they are more likely than other races to have larger households. While they are not victims of the same rates of displacement, 21% of Latino households are very low income, below \$25,000; for every \$1.00 of white per capita income, Latinos have \$0.38 in per capita. As Coleman Advocates concluded in a 2008 report, "the majority of children who do not have a secure future in San Francisco are children of color, and the majority of children who do have a secure future are white" (Coleman 2008).

This insecure future for children of color is strongly reflected in San Francisco's schools. In 2008 the dropout rate for Black and Latino students was over 50%. Only 26.5% of African Americans, 35.2% of Pacific Islanders, and 36.2% of Latino students passed the California State Test in math in 2007, compared to 76.3% of Whites, and

78.2% of other Asians (NCES 2008). In addition, a 2007 study by UC Berkeley policy student Mandy Johnson found that the least popular elementary schools were those with the highest rates of low-income and African-American students. Johnson's research found that "as the percentage of African American students in the school increases, kindergarten demand decreases" (Nevius 2007).

One of the key variables that shaped Coleman's ability to wage a successful campaign was the appointment of a sympathetic leader at the San Francisco school district. Carlos Garcia began his tenure as the San Francisco superintendent in 2007, as these test score data figures emerged. In contrast to the previous superintendent Arlene Ackerman, who was frequently accused of putting the interests of city businesses above those of students, Garcia quickly established a reputation as someone genuinely concerned with issues of equity. His landmark act as superintendent was the creation of SFUSD's Strategic Plan "Beyond the Talk", which focused on access and equity, achievement, and accountability. Much like Coleman would do in a few short months, the strategic plan purported to focus on social justice through actions: "We believe access and equity are at the heart of making social justice a reality. The politics and ideology of social justice are empty without daily actions that improve the living and learning conditions for the children of San Francisco" (SFUSD 2008). The strategic plan proposed to "raise the bar and close the gap" through a variety of measurement strategies designed to highlight not only each school's academic performance but its performance in relation to the race- and class-based challenges of its population. Garcia's presence and the strategic plan also contributed to an opening for Coleman to launch the first phase of the group's campaign to address the achievement gap.

In sum, with the release of national data on the gap still recent (2007), the discursive opportunity structure surrounding the achievement gap was both ripe and evolving. Three factors in particular contributed to the opening Coleman leaders saw to present their own vision: (1) the national release of achievement data in 2007 and subsequent media frenzy over the achievement gap; (2) San Francisco's shifting reputation to that of a city that catered to young, wealthy, White, single residents (to the detriment of low-income residents and residents of color), and (3) the creation of the District's new strategic plan and the school board's newfound willingness (through the leadership of board member Sandy Fewer, Superintendent Carlos Garcia, and assistant Superintendent Tony Smith) to discuss the realities of racial inequities in the city's schools.

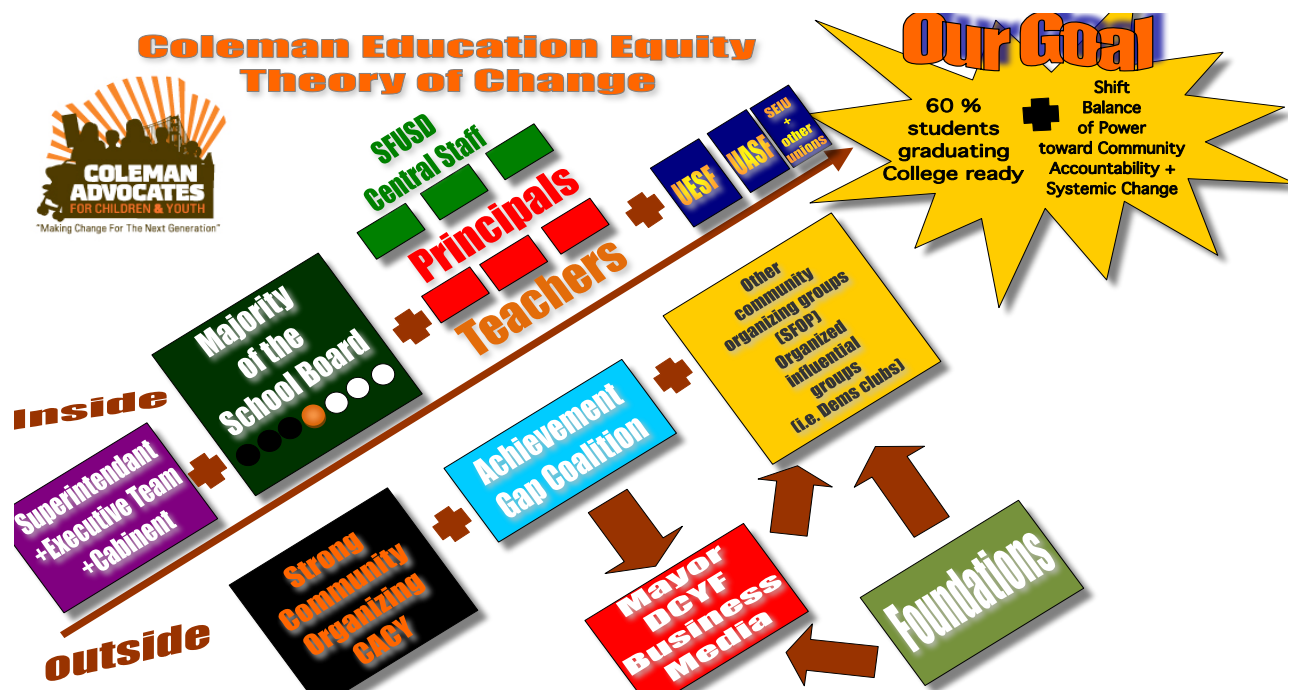
#### *Coleman's Theory and Strategy for Change*

The signature approach of the Coleman-initiated campaign was the use of an inside outside strategy: allies on the inside of a system of power, as elected officials or decision makers of some kind, and agitation from the outside from an organized body. Inside-outside is a tried-and-true organizing approach—allies on the inside can introduce proposals or lend legitimacy to outside organizations at critical moments, while groups on the outside, unconstrained by concern with maintaining a position of power, are able to voice radically critical ideas. Renowned theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971) called this negotiation a war of position—in this case, a critique of the status quo must be met with framing grounded in some familiar language. A wholly racial justice frame—one that makes no

reference to the more common discourses of civil rights, tests, or accountability—had little chance of succeeding.

As working-class African-Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Latinos, most Coleman members saw themselves outside the city’s system of power. With the organization’s history in advocacy, Coleman had a number of close allies in city government in 2008. For example, Sandra Lee Fewer, the most recently elected school board member, was a former Coleman staff organizer. Board of Supervisors member John Avalos also had ties to Coleman; he had worked for the organization in the early 2000s.

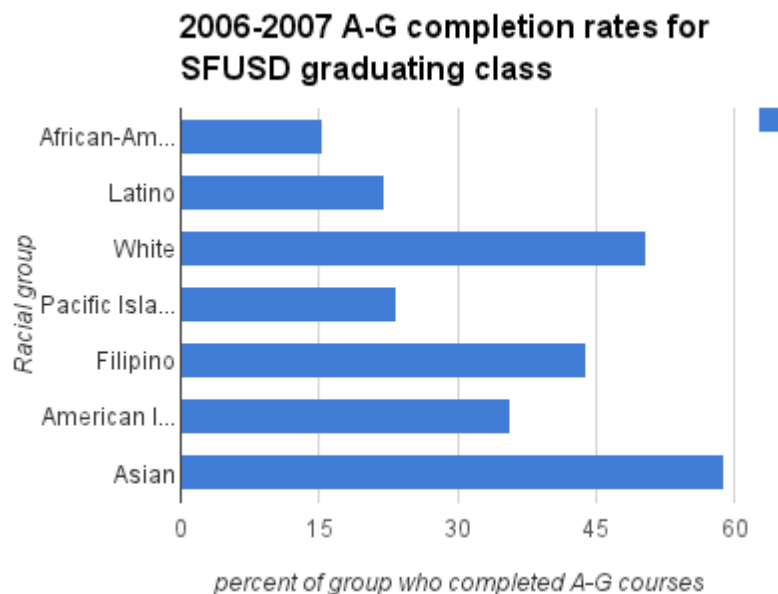
Describing in practical terms how the strategy worked, parent organizer Ramirez described, “The inside and the outside have to go together. Sometimes the inside makes decisions, but it doesn’t make sense. So the outside pressure comes to make them do things” (field notes, 8.30.10). In terms of how the approach looked in practice, the inside-outside approach meant going to bat for allies on the inside, participating in the district’s A-G implementation committee, and as outsiders, continuing to raise the racial justice frame in public forums. Once the CTAG resolution was passed, Coleman’s work was just beginning. Coleman organizer Pecolia urged, “We have to all show up [to the school board meetings]. And everything they say, we have to say, “Whoa, whoa, whoa—what does this do for the student who is not achieving? What about the African-American? What about the Latino? What about the Pacific Islander? How is this affecting those students?” (field notes 12.6.09).



Source: Coleman Advocates Education Justice Program

### Campaign Beginnings

Coleman’s school reform campaign began as a demand for schools to provide an equitable opportunity for college access to African-American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students in San Francisco. To those outside the state—and even many Californians—A-G (pronounced “A through G”) requirements probably sound unfamiliar. A-G courses are

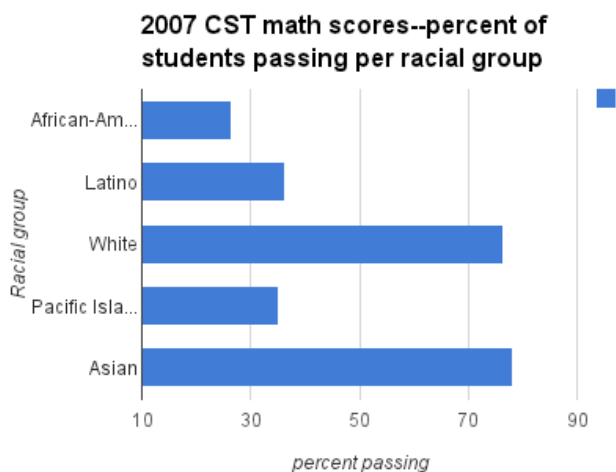


essentially the minimum required for eligibility for admission to state universities.<sup>14</sup> In high schools with low graduation rates, frequently not enough students in their senior year demand or are academically prepared for a class like fourth year English. (However, many Coleman members assert that more youth would take A-G requirements if they understood that such classes were required to apply for college, and that teachers and counselors “counsel out” students of color are from taking more demanding courses.) Hence, the reality in California is that not only are students graduating from high school unprepared for college; the schools themselves do not even offer the *possibility* of gaining the required

<sup>14</sup> The ‘A’ requirement, for example, is that a student takes 2 years of history or social science in high school. ‘B’ is 4 years of English; ‘C’ is 3 years of mathematics (4 is recommended); ‘D’ is 2 years of laboratory science (3 years recommended); ‘E’ is 2 years of a language other than English (3 years recommended); ‘F’ is 1 year of visual or performing arts; and ‘G’ is one year of a “college preparatory elective”, which can include any other A-F requirements, or another subject. These are the minimal requirements for a graduating senior to be eligible for California state colleges and universities. They exceed the minimal requirements for graduation from high school.

preparation. In San Francisco—unlike many urban California school districts—every high school offers the A-G requirements, but huge numbers of students—disproportionately African-American, Latino and Pacific Islander students—do not take these courses.

In the spring of 2008, Coleman parents and youth embarked on an investigation of the achievement gap in San Francisco. The racially disaggregated data made available by No Child Left Behind policies and legislation was compiled by policy group Ed Trust West. For the first time, the parent members of Coleman Advocates were able to see the realities of the gap for their children. The percentages of SFUSD students who achieved proficiency on the California State Test math section in 2007 were: 26.5% of African Americans, 36.2% of Latinos, 76.3% of Whites, 35.2% of Pacific Islanders and 78.2% of other Asians (with significantly higher rates for Korean, Japanese and Chinese students compared with Filipino and Vietnamese) (SFUSD data made available by Coleman Advocates). A-G completion rates for 2006-2007 graduates by ethnicity were: 58.9% of Asians, 50.4% of Whites, 43.9% of Filipinos, 35.7% of American Indians, 23.5% of Pacific Islanders, 22.0% of Latinos, and 15.4% of African Americans (CA Department of Education Data Quest, made available by Coleman Advocates).



At the internal meetings in which Coleman staff presented their findings about the achievement gap in San Francisco, members were shocked—and wanted to take action. The circumstances that led to the passage of the district’s Closing the Achievement Gap (CTAG) resolution was a happy coincidence for Coleman: public discussion of the achievement gap was prominent, and a new

superintendent pledged to social justice had just been appointed in SFUSD. As former Executive Director NTanya Lee recounts:

So how do you strategically use the dominant frame in a way that could accomplish a much deeper kind of change? We felt like one of the most strategic ways was to use some of the dominant language of the day around standards—not testing-based standards, but standards—so that we could demand other things that wouldn’t by themselves be compelling (Lee interview 7.10.12).

In a style typical of many community-based organizations, the Coleman staff began the process of building on their members’ instinctive desire for action and the window of political opportunity brought by the presence of Superintendent Carlos Garcia.

In order to strengthen members’ understanding of the gap and to determine what form of action would be most effective, staff simultaneously began conducting research on the processes and practices of the SFUSD bureaucracy *and* led the members through a process of political study about the gap. Although, in reflective discussions with staff,

neither process produced the depth of content most staff members would have liked, the discussions with community members led staff organizers to discover that an analysis of the shortcomings of the SFUSD was already well within the purview of their members.

In fact, the campaign provides particular insight into the organic analysis of members. As both the written material and the interviews in this chapter illustrate, with relatively little training or formal space for reflection community members were able to point to complex connections between the achievement gap data and larger issues of class- and race-based inequity.

*Chronology of Coleman's Voices of the Next Generation Campaign*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Key External Socio-Political Elements</b>	<b>Major Organizational Activities</b>	<b>Significant Outcomes</b>
2007	NCLB Data release  Former Coleman staff member elected to SFUSD school board  Carlos Garcia appointed Superintendent	Initial organizing of parent and student groups within Coleman	Formulation of initial demands
2008	Local news media highlight changing demographics in San Francisco local dialogues	Coleman youth & parents engage in discussions to identify major challenges in schools	Coleman helps craft the Closing the Achievement Gap (CTAG) resolution passed in SFUSD
2009	SFUSD convenes A-G implementation study team  Local controversy over JROTC in schools	Coleman members connect closing the achievement gap to college preparatory courses (ie "A-G")  Members commit to being a consistent voice district's A-G implementation study team	Coleman completes 12 "A-G Policy Demands" and supports Superintendent's proposal to graduate all students with A-G coursework  Group expands Achievement Gap demand to "College and Careers for All"
2010	Restorative justice program piloted  SFUSD passes Ethnic Studies resolution  State-wide protests against education budget cuts; hundreds of San Francisco youth rally downtown on Day of Action March 4 <sup>th</sup>	Coleman and allies demand programs for restorative justice and ethnic studies  "Our Jobs, Our Future" campaign re-named "Voices of the Next Generation"	Organizational energy increases with victories in other areas; new membership less familiar with A-G campaign
2011	Initial SFUSD A-G committee recommendations take effect	20 <sup>th</sup> anniversary party  Key senior staff leave organization  Group continues participation in SFUSD A-G implementation study team.	Internal focus to orient new staff

Most of the organization's analysis of the achievement gap in SFUSD—and its resulting racial justice frame—developed in campaign meetings, which all parent and youth members were invited to attend. Former Executive Director NTanya Lee recalls,

We did those big root cause trees that led to these conversations about what is it you really want out of education? Not simply “I want the teachers to tell me when my kid's not doing well” but what's our GOAL? Actually—we want to be able to stay in SF. We're getting pushed out of our city, and the reality is that if you don't have a college degree, you're not going to be able to afford to live here in any secure, dignified way. So, we want to have jobs, to go to university, and we want to be able to stay if we want.

What happened after that issue identification process was that parents decided that “since all this achievement gap stuff is in the air, so we want a commitment from the Board of Education and the superintendent to close the gap.”

That was the parents' push. The way the data came out of NCLB led to a kind of race-based argument. And it resonated. It wasn't a sophisticated race frame, but we knew that there are racial disparities in the schools not because our kids are biologically inferior, but because there's something systemically wrong (Lee interview 6.25.11).

For Coleman members, the right to stay in the city and the need to close the achievement gap were integrally related; they both connected directly to confronting the forces of racism that made their standard of living lower than that of White San Franciscans. Despite Lee's observation that the race frame was unsophisticated, the analysis from Coleman's parents differs markedly from its more mainstream market-based and civil rights frames. In those first months of 2008, before a full campaign was born, Coleman members generated an analysis of the intersections of race and class and identified active forms of racism (such as tracking, the disproportionate suspension of Black and Latino students, culturally narrow curriculum, etc.) that were responsible for the gap. By March 2008, although members were still engaged in self-education on the achievement gap, they nonetheless chose to seize an opportunity to push the issue in the district. San Francisco's new superintendent Carlos Garcia spoke openly about the problem of racism in the district, and social justice was a key piece of his platform. Fueled by still-recent righteous indignation at San Francisco's achievement gap, Coleman parents asked the Board to pass a resolution to close the gap.

Politically, the resolution was a slam-dunk. Both national and local media were devoting a great deal of coverage to the issue of the achievement gap, and Superintendent Garcia wanted to claim credit for a bold resolution out of the gate. Passed unanimously by the SFUSD school board in April 2008, the resolution call for a new minimum standard that “60% of all students in all racial groups are at proficiency levels in English/Language Arts and math by 2011” (Resolution No. 82-26A1, Closing the Achievement Gap in the San Francisco Unified School District). Given where African-American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students were performing on these tests, a 60% passing rate on the California State Test by 2011—an increase of 26% more African American students and 28% more Latino students—was extremely ambitious.

After the passage of the April resolution, Coleman members did not count their victory complete. Instead, they launched into a yearlong process of study and strategic planning. Over the summer of 2008, youth members of Coleman's student arm Youth Making A Change (YMAC) participated in a leadership development program that entailed political education about, among other things, race- and class-based oppression. They also



conducted interviews with local potential allies to ask about their stances and beliefs about the achievement gap. Parents Making A Change (PMAC), Coleman’s parent group, surveyed parents in Excelsior neighborhood schools. The survey parents created included questions about who helped their child most academically; whether they felt the school was preparing their child for college; and whether they knew what A-G requirements were. In a joint PMAC-YMAC meeting on October 4, 2008 where the surveys were discussed, the PMAC parents added factors that contribute to the achievement gap. The combination of survey results and additional factors from the members’ conversation are organized into categories in the following chart:

### **Causes and Indicators of the Achievement Gap: A View from the Ground Up**

<b>Key Causes</b>	<b>Indicators</b>
<b>Lack of resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outdated textbooks—newer textbooks don’t explain</li> <li>• Buildings not equipped to have classes</li> <li>• School budget</li> </ul>
<b>Discrimination</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Racism</li> <li>• Lack of support/communication</li> <li>• Less rigor, lower expectations</li> <li>• Cultural incompetence</li> </ul>
<b>Policies and Practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School does not ID students early to provide support</li> <li>• Teachers, counselors, not helping students</li> <li>• Teachers overworked, underskilled</li> <li>• Disconnection between parents, teachers</li> <li>• Substitutes-no teacher prep</li> <li>• Lack of rigor/classroom management</li> <li>• Teaching to the test</li> </ul>

(Field notes, 10.4.08)

Through this process of grounded community research and analysis, Coleman members challenged the limited framing of the achievement gap as a problem of culturally deficient or lazy students and parents. The list above exhibits a deep awareness of both individual and structural factors that create the chasm in which students of color fall behind. In the same meeting, parents were asked to envision what a “perfect district” would look like. The majority of the visioning fell into the following three categories:

- **Parent and community connection** (“more parent-teacher communication”, “teacher development with cultural awareness”, “teacher-parent conference for all students”, “interpretation at meetings”);
- **Preparation for college and the support systems to accompany such preparation** (“college workshops”, “curriculum lined up with standards”, “everyone on college track—extra support for struggling students”, “teachers know A-G courses”, “college-going culture”; and
- **Explicit focus on addressing racism and racial difference** (“no racism from teachers or students”, “no discrimination”) (field notes, 10.4.08).

By February 7, 2009, Coleman’s original campaign addressing the achievement gap had evolved into 12 “A-G Policy Demands,” which included points to address the larger strategic and discursive traits (in bold) : cultural relevance, distribution of resources and institutional racism.

- Ending tracking; (**improve support services by directly addressing institutional racism**)
- Developing and implementing a multimedia, multi-lingual curriculum that includes the history of students and is relevant to their lives; (**cultural relevance**)
- Improving and increasing access to support services in all schools sites, specifically for African American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students and families; (**improve support services by directly addressing institutional racism**)
- Implementing a mandatory communication protocol plan and training for all teachers, principals, and staff in how to communicate with parents and students in their first language; increasing the number of counselors in our schools so that the student case load per counselor is 100:1; (**improve support services by directly addressing institutional racism, equalize distribution of resources**)
- Equalizing distribution of teacher quality throughout the district and within schools so that all schools can maintain a consistent rigor in implementing A-G successfully; (**equalize distribution of resources**)
- providing an opt-in option for current students, newcomer, continuation, special education, and county school students in classes of 2011, 2012, and 2013; (**improve support services by directly addressing institutional racism**)
- Designing a new curriculum program for special education and newcomers that is equivalent to the rigor and course work of A-G but addresses the specific learning disabilities and language needs of the students; (**cultural relevance, improve support services by directly addressing institutional racism**)

- Implementing a testing and assessment system that is culturally relevant, assesses multi-learning styles, and supports students' and parents' understanding of areas for improvement; (**cultural relevance, improve support services by directly addressing institutional racism**)
- Reforming the discipline system to be preventative and not punitive. (**improve support services by directly addressing institutional racism**) (Field notes, 2.7.09)

In their demands to close the gap, Coleman parents brought frames that challenged dominant neoliberal reforms within education. Using the common language of the achievement gap, the campaign consistently centered frames of **cultural relevance, civil rights and access, and structural racism**. These demands, which would entail a sweeping reform of the entire district, are indicative of the knowledge intuitive to communities of color and are almost completely absent from mainstream achievement gap policy and rhetoric. They reflect the assumption that in order to close the gap, the whole educational system has to change.

#### *Voices of the Next Generation Campaign*

Over the summer of 2008 and fall of 2009, parent and youth members of Coleman moved from a short-term demand of the district (the CTAG resolution) to a holistic campaign for “College and Careers for All” (2009-2010) and finally to the “Voices of the Next Generation” campaign (2010-2011). The combination of a media frenzy over the achievement gap (informed by recently-released disaggregated data); local controversy over whether San Francisco was a sustainable city for families (May 2007); an incoming district superintendent who talked the talk about social justice; and the school board election of Sandra Lee Fewer, a former Coleman staff member, made the opportunity clear. Former Coleman staff and Voices of the Next Generation campaign director Pecolia Manigo reflects, “In fall of 2008, there was a lot of movement in San Francisco... a lot of conversations and discussions about what does the achievement gap even mean? Some folks think it’s class, some think it’s something else” (Manigo interview 6.3.11). In 2008, the *fact* of the achievement gap existed, but in that moment, both in San Francisco and nationally, there was an absence of explanatory frames. Coleman staff and members were well aware that if they did not put forth analysis about why the gap exists, soon other explanations—ones that did not center racism—would gain legitimacy.

The late 2000s in San Francisco can be characterized in part by the question, “Whose city is it?” Most of the city’s Black and Latino residents were painfully aware of the displacement of low-income families, reflected in the decreasing enrollment in public schools. While the city’s public image continued to be that of a world-class city and tourist destination, its schools were a different story. NTanya Lee recalls,

It used to be like, ...don’t talk about how bad the schools are in Bayview, talk about the “gems” that work. Then we intervened, calling out that racism is part of the problem. [Assistant superintendent] Tony Smith was part of that. He was the White guy who made it ok to talk about racism (Lee interview 7.10.12).

For Coleman, “calling out racism” in the district was not a matter of politics or principle alone; it was also a matter of opportunity. As I mention earlier, focused national attention

on the achievement gap and “insider” receptivity within the SFUSD were certainly opportunity factors, but there were also opportunity factors within the organization itself. The organization’s recent transition to an organizing model, the new leadership of NTanya Lee as an executive director committed to anti-capitalist, feminist, and anti-racist politics, and newly hired education program coordinator Pecolia Manigo’s commitment to keep parent and youth concerns at the center of the campaign, ideally positioned Coleman to amplify the frames, concerns, and solutions developed by its members.

In the political moment and context of San Francisco in 2008, the A-G campaign could serve as a lever by representing, on a public level, a broadly supported call for college access for all students. Such a tall order, however, would require the kinds of additional supports that could immediately benefit low-income students of color in the city, and were in alignment with the organization’s vision of the achievement gap as a problem of structural racism. No policy alone would solve the gap; but a combination of services, supports, and additional resources, might.

## Expanded Demands

With this strategic logic a racial justice organization committed to “calling out racism” in the district poured three years of energy into a campaign that seemed to follow a civil rights strategy of resource distribution and access. Although an A-G campaign was the most strategic option given the initial existing political opportunity structure, soon after the district passed the Closing the Achievement Gap (CTAG) resolution, Coleman met with policy allies Ed Trust West who proposed expanding the scope of the campaign to demand universal college-preparatory classes for all students.

Coleman leaders and staff were initially initially lukewarm to the idea. Executive Director NTanya Lee told me later, describing the meeting in which leaders and staff questioned the utility of the demand, that the deciding factor for beginning the campaign was the group’s viewing it as a lever toward other concrete wins:

There were all these questions—people said this sounds like a business thing. Then there was a professor from SF State who said, “yes, this may fit into dominant narratives, and yes, you may get some business people on your side, but it’s the lever argument. You use the demand as a lever to set a standard. The standard positions the organization to make other demands.”

So we could then run implementation-based campaigns, 8<sup>th</sup> grade math, literacy supports, etc. We saw universal college prep as the scaffolding for other demands to meet that goal (Lee interview 6.25.12).

From the beginning, Coleman members were wary of education reforms that asked for smaller components and that were market-based—hence leader hesitancy around an A-G campaign sounding “like a business thing.” In this case, Coleman chose to make its case on widely-held values: 1) college is a goal for all students and 2) high schools should prepare students for college. The real battle lay in *how* San Francisco high schools would move toward actually ensuring all students were enrolled in college-prep courses.

Coleman members walked a fine line between bowing to existing hegemonic ideas surrounding the achievement gap and holding true to their desire to radically shift those ideas. In implementing a campaign that enjoyed popular support, Coleman members crafted an in-depth series of “implementation demands” that spoke to the district’s

inadequacies with regard to its African-American, Latino, and Pacific Islander populations. While both the resolution to Close the Achievement Gap and the subsequent campaign to secure universal access to college-prep courses were civil rights-oriented (focus on inputs, distribution of resources), the way in which the Voices of the Next Generation campaign was executed and the supports demanded transformed the campaign into one with racial justice goals.

### *The Racial Justice Frame in Action*

In a May 2009 handout for members and the public, Coleman staff members connected the frames brought by members to the tangible policy of A-G implementation. The text of the handout is below.

Coleman Advocates for Children & Youth is a member-led, multi-racial community organization in San Francisco, working to create a city of hope, justice and opportunity for all children and all families.

We have hundreds of parent and youth members – primarily African American, Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander – who identified “A thru G for all” as their advocacy priority almost one year ago. We believe: **All students have a right to a quality education and a secure future in San Francisco, regardless of race or income.** (emphasis added)

The use of the term “quality” before education is a discursive echo of the use of “quality” as a marker in other civil rights demands for education. For example, New York’s Alliance for a Quality Education sued the state for equitable funding, while the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund uses the term “quality” to distinguish schools at which Black students would be adequately served. The demand for San Francisco to be a livable city for its residents of color is an explicit challenge to the structural racism of the city’s development trajectory. This “right to the city” claim is a direct challenge to the dominant development schemes in San Francisco: gentrified neighborhoods where Black and Latino people add an occasional splash of color. Aligning its organizational demands with the national Right to the City Alliance, of which Coleman is a member, the group’s members assert a rights framework—that they have the right not just to a *chance to compete* for quality education and housing, but to the goods of education and housing themselves.

A textual analysis of the campaign flyer entitled “Why We Support the Superintendent’s Proposal to Graduate all Students with A thru G Coursework”<sup>15</sup> further demonstrates the development of Coleman’s racial justice frames:

#### ***How will A thru G help close the racial “achievement gap”?***

*An “A thru G” for all policy will play a key role in transforming SFUSD into a school district that provides equal educational opportunities to all students, regardless of race, income, language, or neighborhood. Right now, the racial achievement gap in SFUSD is getting worse, most Black, Latino and Pacific Islander students are not graduating with A-G (or dropout even before graduation), and student access to A-G classes varies dramatically from school to school.*

This text uses the civil rights phrasing of “equality of opportunity,” aimed at a broad

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<sup>15</sup> This flyer was created both to help Coleman supporters understand why the organization had positioned itself in alignment with the district (since they were more commonly opposed to the district’s actions), and to inform San Franciscans who were not familiar with the A-G policy or San Francisco educational issues. It goes from more general information (“What is A thru G?”) to more specific questions that would likely be concerns specifically for residents of color, like “Will A thru G increase the dropout rate?” and “Will the needs of special education students, newcomers and others be addressed?”

audience likely to respond to a civil rights frame. For Coleman members, this informational flyer on the district's A-G policy represented an opportunity both to address the achievement gap directly through increasing access to college-oriented curriculum and to reorient the conversation about the achievement gap toward both opportunities and outcomes, rather than isolating test score data from significant contextual factors like school funding and availability of classes.

***Institutionalizing high expectations for all.** Requiring “A thru G” for all will make college, a living wage job or a union trade the expectation for all students, not dependent on the personal judgment of individual school staff, teachers or students. It ensures that all students will have the option of college, even if they choose another path.*

This text indicts the institutional racism inherent in student course schedules being determined by the “personal judgment” of school staff. Secondly, college and living wage or union employment are placed on equal ground, which is a strong departure from a market-based emphasis on human capital with a goal of improving the economy. In this text, the economic well-being of graduates and their communities, and not the general “economy” is the focus. Education here is not merely an abstract right but a vehicle for improving one's material life.

***Providing support systems for all students to succeed.** The question the district should ask once this policy is passed should be “What support do we need to support this student to succeed in A-G courses?” There will be new, creative ways to support struggling students.*

The specific “support systems” Coleman members would go on to demand included additional tutoring services and increased communication with parents. Again, the racial justice frame seeks changes in *practice*, not merely new goals that pay lip service to equity without making meaningful change. Rather than demanding that students or teachers work harder, the district is positioned as the accountable party, responsible for ensuring student success. Later, Coleman would specify that the district should include additional assessments for students and increased interventions for students whose assessment results warranted additional support. Unlike the high-stakes assessments that their market-based reform counterparts promote, the Coleman community envisioned assessments solely to ensure that each child was prepared for college-level courses, rather than to punish students, teachers and schools for poor results.

***More rigorous courses can mean more engaging and relevant classes.** Ed Trust West has found that many low-income students and students of color are more engaged with more rigorous teaching and with teachers who expect them to succeed. Coleman parents and students support a new professional development plan that supports teachers' abilities to educate the most struggling students.*

Unlike plans to close the achievement gap that advocate tracking or other forms of student segregation, Coleman members promoted research finding increased course rigor to be the best academic approach to closing the achievement gap. The group's continual insistence on tangible practices as equally necessary to implementation of an A-G policy speaks to its racial justice analysis. In Coleman's strategic view, passing the Closing the Achievement Gap (CTAG) resolution was a “win” but without ongoing practices to provide additional support to African-American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students, the victory could be hollow. Therefore, Coleman drafted a set of demands soon after the resolution, including the creation of an A-G implementation committee, with a 1:1 ration

between SFUSD staff and community stakeholders (Coleman Documents H, G, J). With this demand, the organization sought to maintain a high level of accountability from the district and attempted to shift implementation power toward the community. The implementation committee was to focus on changing both organization and culture in SFUSD as it created processes aimed at closing the achievement gap. Pecolia Manigo, the education justice lead, recounts,

What we heard resoundingly from our allies that devil is in the details...that it is critical to monitor and influence the process of implementation and you have to be at the table throughout the process (Manigo interview 6.3.11).

Manigo's language demonstrates a number of key points: first, that an ideal (such as a resolution) is distinct from the laborious process required to reach the ideal; second, that without constant vigilance from the community that demanded change in the first place, the process would likely be ineffective; and third, despite a win with the district, Coleman still viewed its achievement gap campaign as an organizing process—one with opponents and allies.

Through the organization's racial justice frame and community organizing approach, Coleman members demanded structural change in the areas of **instruction** via ethnic studies curriculum, **assessment** that would identify off-track students earlier in their educational careers; **school organization** by means of ending tracking and additional tutoring services; and **discipline**. On the forefront of the school-to-prison-pipeline activism and scholarship wave,<sup>16</sup> Coleman wrote in a public document of demands: "SFUSD must address policies **and practices** that currently allow for the disproportionate suspension, expulsion and dropout rates of African-American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students. To not do so runs the risk of making A-G another systemic support for Asian, White and other advantaged peers, while leaving our neediest students languishing behind in the status quo" (Coleman Documents G, J)

Such cautionary recommendations reveal a particularly strong insight—that without appropriate supports and changes in other parts of the institution, policies intended to result in racial equity sometimes serve to exacerbate inequity. As member-leader Maritza Diccio summarized, "The A-G [implementation] is [the responsibility of] the school, but that doesn't mean we're not also at the school working on the climate, the discipline, and for restorative justice" (interview Summer 2010).

## Discursive Traits of Coleman's "Voices of the Next Generation campaign" texts

A textual analysis of field notes, interviews, and the hundreds of flyers and documents produced by Coleman's education program between 2005 and 2011 reveal a number of the discursive traits of the racial justice frame presented by the organization's members and staff. These traits include concerns with civil rights, cultural relevance, an emphasis on structural racism and racial outcomes (as opposed to inputs), and shifting power from institutional structures to the people most affected by racism.

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<sup>16</sup> Although School-to-Prison pipeline is a term that both education and prison abolition organizations have been using for at least a decade, the American Civil Liberties Union has published the most on the topic. See ACLU publications on the pipeline for more.

### *Civil Rights*

The racial justice frame in general, and Coleman's representation of the frame in particular, shares some elements with the frame of civil rights. The racial justice frame can best be distinguished from the civil rights frame, however, by its emphasis on practice: both the ways in which resources are distributed and the results of resource distribution (again, inputs + outputs, as opposed to inputs alone). As I've discussed earlier, the civil rights frame is premised on the assessment that the achievement gap exists due to inequitable distribution of both material resources (in the form of funding and educational materials) and human resources (such as highly qualified teachers).

The civil rights frame of education reform calls for equality of educational opportunity. A number of civil rights reformers use the language of "opportunity gap" in their assessment of the performance difference between African-American, Latino, and Southeast Asian students and their White counterparts. These reformers have used the strategies of legislating equal resources (as in *Williams v. California*) as well as attempting to pressure districts and schools politically to achieve more equal distribution of highly qualified teachers.

In their "A-G Policy Demands" Coleman members similarly address the need for "equitable opportunities" among all SFUSD students. These opportunities included both teachers and programming as resources:

**Equalize distribution of teacher quality throughout District and within schools so that all schools can maintain a consistent rigor in implementing A-G successfully.**

This includes raising teaching standards so that they are inline with the values and principles of SFUSD strategic plan and are used to insure all teachers meet our standards to implement and teach A-G curriculum at the necessary rigor levels.

—A-G Policy Demands, 2009

Teachers were the main independent factor (aside from structural practices) that parents identified as a cause of the achievement gap. In some cases, parents discussed teachers who could not relate to their children or who displayed racist attitudes. In other cases, parents expressed concerns about teachers' lack of experience:

There are a lot of teachers who are good, good at their jobs, but there are a lot who don't put a lot of importance—they aren't very dedicated. There are a lot of instructors who aren't certified, who aren't well-prepared. If there were better teachers, we wouldn't have all these kids not advancing" —Juana Rodriguez, member, interview 7.5.11

In stark contrast to the model of market-based reform, in which young and energetic teachers are plucked from their undergraduate experiences to fill "hard-to-staff" schools (Lipman 2011, Kumashiro 2008), Coleman parents placed a great deal of import on a teacher's years of experience as the primary indicator of capability. However, the group's view of teachers was also nuanced; while some teachers were seen as allies, others were certainly perceived to be gatekeepers. The push for A-G courses for all children was in a very real sense an attempt to diminish the power of gatekeepers like teachers or counselors who, through both formal and informal mechanisms, determined a student's academic path. One parent, Maritza Diccico, expressed her frustration with a system that would so underprepare her child for college:



The main reason [for the achievement gap] is you're not getting the courses that you need. If my child needs to have algebra by 8<sup>th</sup> grade or 9<sup>th</sup> grade, why is my child being taught too low a math? Why is everyone being taught the low level? I think it has to do with the teacher, with the courses, with the resources. (Dicicco interview, 7.9.12)

Maritza Dicicco's experience was a common one among Coleman parents. Over and over, parents expressed the need for access—access to information and the concrete services that would adequately prepare their children for college. During a Spanish-speaking parents' breakout group at a Coleman member meeting, one parent declared angrily,

No one explains to parents, "Hey, your child is on the track to prison." They just tell us that they need to be in math class. But not *which* math class.

We have to sign things, but we don't know what they are, and we don't have meetings about it. Now at HillCrest, we have Maritza to do this work as the parent liaison. But if Maritza leaves, there is no one to continue it. We need a law that does this (field notes, 2.7.09)

In this moment of sharing, the parent identified several issues: 1) lack of information about course requirements, 2) inadequacy of communication that is provided (e.g., having to "sign things" without knowing what they are, because there are no "meetings about it" (like the meetings parents frequently attended at Coleman, in which discussions ran the gamut from the history of educational segregation in the U.S. to which counselor at Burton High School was the best advocate for Latino students)), and 3) the need to institutionalize these services for parents. At the time of the meeting described above, Maritza Dicicco was a very active parent leader who had been involved with Coleman for several years and remained with the organization through its transition from advocacy to organizing. But as the parent pointed out, Dicicco would likely leave her position of leadership as a parent at Cleveland Elementary when her daughter left. And then what?

The A-G Policy Demands sought institutionalization of advocacy like Maritza's Dicicco's:

Improve and increase access to support services in all schools sites, specifically for African-American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students and families.

This includes School to Career programs, school lunch, after school programs, family support programs, study halls, etc. in all schools, for all students. -A-G Policy Demands, 2009

Following the "devil is in the details" mantra, Coleman staff did not want to leave to chance *how* students would be identified for services. To address this concern, in conjunction with the district A-G implementation task force, the organization published an "A-G Policy Implementation Benchmark Agenda" that included a recommendation for assessment that would not punish teachers or students but would establish a pathway for services when students failed to meet their achievement goals:

All students k-8 should have individual achievement/college & career plans developed with school staff that show how the students will reach key benchmarks, like 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading or 8<sup>th</sup> grade algebra, and that show what supports/strategies are needed to help the student succeed (A-G Policy Implementation Benchmark Agenda)

Use of such benchmarks would have engendered a different form of accountability than that advocated by market-based reformers: that schools be accountable for instituting developmentally-appropriate goals for individual students and for connecting students with services when those goals were not met. Rather than follow the dominant forms of

“accountability” being called for in education reform, Coleman’s leaders found a way to reflect their internal commitment to racial justice through directing additional resources to students of color, using non-punitive assessment, and keeping the onus for action on the school system, rather than individual students or parents.

### *Cultural Relevance*

The cultural relevance frame, while not as prevalent in media or reform policies as that of civil rights, is a familiar concept in the field of education. Cultural relevance argues essentially that students of color under-achieve because their education is not relevant to their lives. Curriculum in the United States has historically normalized the experiences of its white citizens, and minority students have difficulty relating to a curriculum that almost exclusively centers whiteness (Ladson-Billings, Sleeter, etc.). Culturally relevant pedagogy advocates argue that teachers should strive to put the needs of students of color at the center of their teaching (Ladson-Billings 1994; Gay 2000a, 2000b; Villegas and Lucas 2002). To meet this goal, White anti-racist educator Gary R. Howard in *We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*, lists the following components of multiracial teaching:

- 1) To know who we are racially and culturally
- 2) To learn about and value culture different from our own
- 3) To view social reality through the lens of multiple perspectives
- 4) To understand the history and dynamics of dominance
- 5) To nurture in ourselves and our students a passion for justice.

Because schooling is based on Eurocentric skills and content, teachers must not only relate to, but begin from, the cultures of the students in their classrooms. Ladson-Billings defines culturally responsive teaching as education the aim of which is to assist in the development of a relevant curriculum that allows for students to choose academic excellence and still identify with their home and/or ethnic cultures. She continues, [Culturally relevant pedagogy] is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right (Ladson-Billings 1994: 17-18).

Coleman’s 2009 policy demands included culturally relevant curriculum as a strategy for closing the achievement gap:

**Develop and implement a K-12 multimedia, multi-lingual curriculum that includes the history of students and is relevant to their lives.**

This curriculum should include strategies for teachers to use that engage all elementary, middle, and high school students with early intervention, accelerated learning, increased electives, small group learning and learning academies to achieve all students on track to enter and complete A-G.

~A-G Policy Demands, 2009

Parent and student advocacy for culturally relevant pedagogy alone does not necessarily grow out of a racial justice framework, as it centers the problem in the classroom rather in the overall structure of schooling. In this instance however, Coleman’s demand for a curriculum that reflects the cultural and ethnic experiences of students of color is both simple and complex. On one level, the demand is simply a call to recognize a demographic

reality. In other ways, such a demand is an indictment of both historic and current ethnocentrism. This policy demand from Coleman is complex in that it includes not only a mandate for more expansive curriculum but also a change in practice to incorporate intervention strategies. The language of the demand puts the onus on teachers to engage *all* of their students and to develop programming for “early intervention, accelerated learning, increased electives, small group learning, and learning academies” in order to ensure success from all students. In this demand for cultural competence, the practice and structures of schools are implicated, again reflecting the racial justice approach of Coleman members.

#### *Explicit Language of Structural Racism*

Unlike a number of its community organizing counterparts, which obscure their more radical visions in order to execute pragmatic campaigns, Coleman chose to use the explicit language of structural racism in a number of public documents.

Based on research and our participation in the study team, we are firm that in order to address the achievement gap, we must simultaneously address the structural racism that perpetuates beliefs that African-American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students do not deserve equitable opportunities for success in college and career after high school. These belief systems are maintained by those in SFUSD, thus creating a severe tracking system that pushes our students into low wage labor or prison. (“A thru G Equity Plan” Summary, April 20, 2009)

This analysis lays out the process through which institutional racism in schooling is connected to the structural racism of society, in which African American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students are locked into poverty and prisons and locked out of opportunities. In the same document, Coleman argues that the group’s proposed A-G policy is an effort to “mandate equal opportunity, thus superseding individual prejudice/racism” (ibid). In addition to the specifics of racism and achievement, Coleman’s leaders addressed the relationship between structural racism in the practices of schools and the power of parents and students to change the system. A campaign document entitled *Our Analysis* (2008) asserts:

We live in a society that has systems of oppression embedded within our communities and the institutions that serve our communities. As a result of this we have an achievement gap in the education system. We organize to change the expectations to have an affect on the education system that raises student of color achievement and the state and power of our communities’ involvement with the education system. (Coleman Advocates: “Our Analysis” 2008).

While I observed a great deal of strategizing and debate over campaign strategy during my research at Coleman, there was a marked absence of discussion about whether or not to “come out” with an analysis of structural racism. Descriptors of the phenomenon varied among staff and members, but in almost all of my observations and organizational interviews, and in both internal and public documents, the organization’s staff and membership talked about the A-G campaign as one step in a strategic fight against the greater evil of racial oppression. This is a significant finding in light of Ferree’s (2003) concerns about resonance—that movements must consider the extent to which their frames might resonate with the common sense present in their target audience, but that movements overly concerned with resonance inevitably sacrifice radicalism. In the case of

Coleman, while members were pragmatic about the urgent need to make change as soon as possible—and hence follow established channels—they were also clear in their understanding of the racist undergirding of the gap and did not hesitate to attack the policies and practices that perpetuated racially biased outcomes.

*Assessment of racial equity in outcomes*

Another important indicator of Coleman’s analysis of structural racism was the demand that the accountability data address *racial equity in outcomes, as well as racial equality in access*. Where historically civil rights struggles have been struggles of access and equality of opportunity, Coleman’s A-G campaign demanded what it called “ABC” indicators of progress:

**A. Tracking Students’ Paths After High School, by Race:** *How many students of color are able to enter a university or college upon graduation?*

**B. Tracking High School Students’ Progress and Outcomes by School and by Race:** *Are all students on track to graduate having completed the UC/CSU A-G courses with a C or better?*

**C. Tracking Whether Students Are On-track to Being College and Career Ready from K-8th Grade, by School and by Race:** *How many incoming freshman have already been placed on a rigorous pathway including having taken and passed Algebra I in 8<sup>th</sup> grade? (“Coleman Advocates’ Campaign for College and Career for All”)*

These indicators are designed to hold the district accountable for ensuring that students are enrolling in A-G courses, are passing those courses, and that students of color are adequately supported in the college preparation process. Choosing to track racial equity in outcomes as well as inputs demonstrates the understanding that structural racism manifests not only in racist policies; it is also present in the uneven implementation of policies intended to remedy racial inequity.

*Shifting Power*

The *Voices* campaign also exemplified a racial justice approach because it sought to shift the racial distribution of power. As Lee explains,

Part of the basic problem is that Black and Brown communities in urban areas simply don’t have enough political power. In education reform especially because there’s mostly not space for a racial justice lens, our concerns for decent schools are often coopted by the Right.

But that’s not what people really want. It’s not what would organically come out of our communities. What the Bayview parents would say is, we want control of our education.

We want it to reflect what’s happening here. We want the power of self-determination (Lee interview 6.25.12).

This vision of self-determination manifests in Coleman’s organizing approach. A key piece of any community organization’s work, however, and a litmus test for whether it will undertake a new program or campaign, is: *will this build power for our members?* Although ostensibly the A-G campaign focused on adequate college preparation, Coleman members also attempted to make space for themselves as leaders and decision-makers in the district. Lead education organizer Pecolia Manigo articulated this vision in the San Francisco Guardian:

Every 5 years, there is a new strategic plan in SFUSD with a new bold vision for San Francisco. However, *every plan has lacked a major investment in engaging students and parents in the redesign and improvement of the public education system.* This is **critical** to deep, systemic change that is needed to address structural racism at the heart of our education system. (The Guardian Forum: Issues for the Next Mayor: Issues of Importance for San Francisco of Education, presented by Pecolia Manigo, Education Justice Campaign Lead for Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth July 2011).

Though strategy remained a watchword, the A-G campaign was a fascinating effort by a racial justice organization to balance on the one hand, winning immediate tangible improvements in the lives of its constituency and longer-range structural changes in the district with, on the other hand, an ongoing struggle for the power to make change in the district. Such a dance is even more difficult when one considers that, to maintain political viability, Coleman members had to remain within the sphere of respectability (thus not alienating potential strategic allies) while still signaling to fed-up members and potential members that this was, indeed, a head-on battle against racism.

### **Leveraging race: how making space for a racial analysis resulted in wins for San Francisco youth of color**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Coleman staff viewed the A-G campaign as a *lever*—a campaign whose foundation would allow them to push for other race-based reforms. In retrospect, while the victories of ethnic studies and restorative justice may not have been *contingent* on the A-G policy win, A-G did act as a “door opener” for introducing additional racial justice policies. Within three years of passage of the Closing The Achievement Gap (CTAG) resolution, Coleman and other organizations advocated successfully for two other measures: pilot programs for ethnic studies in the district and for restorative justice as a discipline model. Each of these resolutions was framed in relation to the A-G requirements and college and career for all. Coleman’s successes in these arenas signified public acknowledgement of the connections between culturally relevant curriculum, racially disproportionate suspensions and expulsions, and the academic success of the district’s African-American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students.

#### *Ethnic Studies*

Asserting that “students have a right to learn about their history and be engaged in meaningful learning that validates their own life experiences,” (Ethnic Studies Resolution Passes School Board Unanimously,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*) Coleman worked with a broad array of community organizations, student and teacher organizations, and sympathetic school board members to pass a resolution that reflected the group’s analysis of the relationship between ethnic studies and achievement: **‘WHEREAS:** The Ethnic Studies curriculum can help close the achievement gap, reduce drop-out rates, and increase graduation rates” (text of SFUSD Ethnic Studies resolution 2010).

The ethnic studies resolution was not a campaign for cultural relevance in isolation from other factors of structural racism. Instead, the Board publicly connected a need for ethnic studies to its potential impact in both decreasing student contact with the juvenile justice system and closing the achievement gap. It was because of the political pressure and

resonance of Coleman's Voices of the Next Generation campaign, and the racial justice framing that made repeated connections between the "achievement gap," discipline, and cultural relevance, that the group was able to leverage the passage of ethnic studies and restorative justice programs.

#### *Restorative Justice*

Education and youth advocacy organizations have been organizing for the last decade around criminalization of children in schools. A number of studies indicate that African American Students are disproportionately suspended and that students who are suspended are less likely to be on track academically and more likely to drop out (Maryland State Board of Education 2012, Fabelo et. al. 2011). With zero tolerance policies in place for infractions as small as dress code violations and increased presence of city police and security guards in urban schools, in-school arrests and suspensions have increased dramatically in the last 30 years.

Among Coleman members, the relationship between school discipline practices, labeling, and achievement was a major concern. Coleman's parent organizer Rosario Ramirez, explains: "So you have a student who does something, or the teacher doesn't like him. And he gets suspended 3-5 days. He just gets sent home—there's no packet of work. The child is losing all that time, and not learning everything...AND they get labeled troublemakers" (Ramirez interview 6.9.11). Ramirez's linkage between students falling behind academically and being labeled as discipline cases was a point that Coleman made repeatedly over the course of the campaign. In 2009, as part of the organization's A-G Policy Demands, Coleman circulated a flyer that read in part,

We must reduce the number of suspensions and expulsions so that students are present in their classroom for their education. ...Teachers need to be trained to be on how to communicate with all parents, with or without student behavior problems. -"A-G Policy Demands" 2009

A year later, lead education campaign organizer Pecolia Manigo reiterated the connection between Coleman's A-G campaign and changing discipline policies:

We lose hundreds of students every year to truancy, dropouts, jails, and prisons. Investing in education must be viewed as an investment in the next generation of San Franciscans to be not only college and career bound, but the next generation of community organizers, supervisors, commissioners and mayor who have the ability to make the vision of a city of hope, justice and opportunity real for all families and individuals in San Francisco. -The Guardian Forum: Issues for the Next Mayor: Issues of Importance for San Francisco of Education, presented by Pecolia Manigo, Education Justice Campaign Lead for Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth July 2011

In 2010, community pressure led the district to commit to implementing a restorative justice program. According to Simon Fraser University's Centre for Restorative Justice in Vancouver, B.C., "[r]estorative justice is a philosophy that views harm and crime as violations of people and relationships. It is a holistic process that addresses the repercussions and obligations created by harm, with a view to putting things as right as possible" (Adler 2011). Restorative justice programs using mediation, small group circles, and peer juries to resolve conflict are becoming a common practice in districts with high rates of suspension and influential racial justice community groups.

Though the SFUSD restorative justice program is a pilot being funded through a grant, rather than a district resolution, district officials seem confident that the practice will become district-wide in the next few years (SFUSD Restorative Practices Implementation Plan Overview). Coleman's original resolution to close the achievement gap created the opportunity to introduce the restorative justice pilot, a program that will disproportionately benefit African-American and Latino youth.

## Key Observations

An examination of the major components of Coleman's Voices of the Next Generation Campaign suggests a number of trends:

1. The external opportunity structure, including the high visibility of the achievement gap and the presence of allies on the school board, gave Coleman a political opening of which it took advantage. National media attention on the achievement gap combined with tension within the city over a racial and class-based demographic shift provided a for Coleman to represent a view on the achievement gap that represented marginalized San Franciscans.
2. The inside/outside campaign strategy enabled the organization to use the insider knowledge and clout of school board allies while at the same time continuing to agitate as a community-based outside force. Coleman's conscious inside-outside strategy enabled the organization to demand action from Assistant Superintendent Tony Smith, school board member and former Coleman staffer Sandra Lee Fewer, and from city council representative John Avalos while retaining organizational autonomy to push their own strong agenda.
3. Coleman's internal transition enabled it to use the momentum of the change from an advocacy to a community organizing group, coupled with new leadership with an ideological commitment to racial justice to move boldly into the arena of educational reform. Coleman staff members' grounding in an ideologically racial justice, feminist, and anti-capitalist framework engendered a commitment in staff to both take up the more radical elements of members' concerns about schools, as well to do strengthen members' understanding of what was occurring within SFUSD through political education.
4. The group's commitment to ongoing analysis was important to the campaign's progress. The ability of parents and students to delineate key causes and indicators of the gap enabled Coleman to press for multiple demands related to its original "close the gap" victory. What started as a campaign to close the gap expanded to race-focused demands around curriculum, discipline, school outreach, and student support.
5. Coleman's decision to "call out racism" and its use of a racial justice frame allowed the organization to consistently voice concerns about the undergirding reasons for racially biased outcomes.
6. Coleman's expanded demand for universal college-preparatory classes for all students laid the ground and acted as a lever for demanding and winning ethnic studies courses and a pilot program in restorative justice.

Despite this impressive list of accomplishments, the analytical frame, demands, and actions taken by a group like Coleman are seldom acknowledged. In reality, the racial justice frame is brought by a wealth of community-based organizations, representing those who are the most affected by the gap and who have the most to gain from closing it, is lost under the weight of a media celebration of market reform. While market-based reformers like Michelle Rhee grace the cover of Time Magazine and appear on talk shows, Coleman's counter-hegemonic demands to address the ways in which school systems are complicit in creating racial inequity go—mostly—unheard.



## Chapter six: CONCLUSION: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

In the five years since I began my research, the usage of the phrase *achievement gap* in mainstream media has diminished. Every so often a new report will be published, and the obligatory news articles will note that the gap still exists and still crosses class lines. Whatever the mixed results of No Child Left Behind, its legacy of racially disaggregated data has been strong. In this final chapter I assess the outcomes of the Coleman campaign, examine the implications of frame cooptation, highlight current examples of tension and opportunity in school reform—particularly where the racial justice frame has resonated—and explore the future potential for proactive reform efforts that have the capacity to close the deep chasm that is the achievement gap.

### Voices of the Next Generation: The Aftermath

Five years after Coleman’s campaign to bring college preparatory classes to all SFUSD students, African American and Latino students in San Francisco are in as risky a position as they ever were. Although both ethnic studies and restorative justice programs were launched as part of the effort to close the achievement gap, the A-G course offerings for every student stands as Coleman’s most important victory and the district’s most significant effort to close the gap. Unlike ethnic studies and restorative justice, which could be added to the district’s structure with minimal disruption of other programs, A-G required new courses, teachers, and counseling systems district-wide.

The class of 2014 is the first class mandated to receive A-G courses. With tragic shortsightedness, SFUSD did not fund or mandate any of the additional support services that Coleman members insisted were “key” to a successful implementation of A-G. As a result, by spring 2013, 72% of the African American students and 62.5% of the Latino students in the class of 2013 were off-track<sup>17</sup> for an A-G graduation. Nine percent of African American students and 8.2% of Latino students in the class of 2014 were moderately or severely off-track, i.e., missing a year or more of credits (data from SFUSD, made available by Coleman Advocates). Most of these students are missing a single course or a semester’s worth of credits in several courses, and the district has some credit recovery options available in the form of summer school and night school. The number of students who need credit recovery before spring 2014, however, is unprecedented. As of August 2013, the district has no plan to expand credit recovery options for this class. As a result, hundreds of students would have to spend a fifth year in high school to qualify for admission to a California public four-year university.

Despite Coleman’s careful research and advocacy for additional support services to be phased-in with the implementation of the A-G policy, in the end, almost none were put in place. The district-convened A-G implementation committee met for almost three years to study effective implementation. Although the committee was given no formal power to implement the policies and practices that it recommended, members from Coleman and other community-based organizations dutifully attended the initial meetings. However,

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<sup>17</sup> Off-track means that the student is missing one or more course needed for graduation by Spring 2014.

attendance dropped sharply after the first several months, when it became clear that the district, not the community, was setting the agenda.

With some of the highest graduation rates in the state in 2012, SFUSD will certainly lose face if the off-track students fail to make up their courses by spring 2014. Coleman predicts that the district will either issue waivers to for the class of 2014 to be able to graduate without having met the A-G requirements, or spend on additional large sum on credit recovery programs in the 2013-2014 school year—money that might have been spent on the *preventive* support services that Coleman initially recommended. For the most part, Coleman’s activities around the A-G course implementation, ethnic studies curriculum, and restorative justice program have been reduced to watchdogging.

Three factors can explain Coleman’s failure to obtain programmatic support for the necessary courses, teachers, and counseling systems:

**1. Coleman’s organizational experience.** Although Coleman had been an advocacy organization for over 30 years, the A-G campaign was the group’s first organizing effort to change and monitor the policies of an institution with a \$617 million dollar budget. Coleman staff members, many of them newly hired, recount that “in addition to the organizing work, the process of researching the bureaucracy of the SFUSD as it’s processes was, by itself, a full-time job.” As former Executive Director NTanya Lee remembers:

Coleman as a community organization was almost a start-up and I was a new Executive Director. So, staffing of programs, education of the membership, and the organizing campaign were all shaped in part by both the strengths and limitations of my experience and leadership (Lee interview 6.25.13).

Although there is no question that Lee provided stable, innovative leadership, her transition out of the organization, along with two other senior staff in 2011, pressed the organization into a period of restructuring and rebuilding.

**2. Parents lack “credibility as educators” and political power.** Coleman’s analysis called for schools to provide auxiliary programs and services to low-income youth of color, including restorative justice initiatives and culturally relevant ethnic studies programs. Although in July 2013 the district hired Richard Carranza, a new Latino Superintendent who claims that “closing the gap” tops his agenda, the district has not yet made the financial commitment to reallocate resources to programs many in the district view as “ancillary” rather than core. Paul Monge-Rodriguez, Coleman’s new Education Program Coordinator, reflecting on the school district’s lack of support for Coleman’s recommended support services, noted that “those ideas didn’t burst forth from the school board. When policies aren’t school board or [internal] staff-led...when they’re coming from the community, then there isn’t buy in” (Monge-Rodriguez interview, 6.19.13). While Coleman had the political capital to mobilize for a policy change, the district never saw the organization’s parents and staff as credible educators. Over time, Coleman was unable to sustain political pressure sufficient to ensure ongoing programmatic interventions that would be truly effective in closing the achievement gap.

**3. Specific issue vs. root causes.** Coleman’s battle with the San Francisco Unified School District actually took place on at least three levels. The first was what community organizers call the “specific, immediate, and realizable” win: the vote to pass a policy. The second, often referred to as the accountability level, is where advocacy and organizing groups monitor and “bird dog” policy implementation. Many groups that are successful in

mobilizing a mass base to pass a public policy are less successful at monitoring, simply because that is not what they are set up to do and the slow bureaucratic plodding of a large institution can lead to stalemate. This was, in part, Coleman's experience. The third level is on the plane of ideas and ideology, where assumptions about why specific social problems exist and what might remedy them are articulated and either embraced and legitimated or delegitimized and rejected.

As the chart below illustrates, most community organizing campaigns, even those instigated with anti-racist aims, fall into the traditional category of single issue efforts.

#### Community Organizing-Led Education Reform Efforts

Issue Objective	Sample Campaigns
High-stakes testing reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Texas: IAF groups organized to find ways for schools to demonstrate achievement other than through standardized tests. (Mediratta et. al. 132).</li> <li>• As of August 2013, parents in Washington state (Seattle), New Jersey, New York and California have joined a national effort to boycott standardized tests.</li> </ul>
Curriculum reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long Beach, CA: K'miri Girls in Action got a high school to show video on sexual harassment to all 4,500 students in local high school, and the school agreed to have trainings for teachers and student health classes (Torres-Fleming et. al. 2010).</li> <li>• Philadelphia, PA: Youth United for Change organized for access to challenging courses, and for all 9<sup>th</sup> graders to take algebra (Gold 2002).</li> </ul>
School discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oakland, CA: In 2010 Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice successfully advocated for an institutionalized restorative justice program in the Oakland Unified School District.</li> <li>• Florida: Power U has introduced a Restorative Justice Model Discipline Code in Miami-Dade schools and is part of a national effort calling for a moratorium on the use of out-of-school suspensions (Watchtel 2012).</li> </ul>
Shifting power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chicago, IL: Logan Square Neighborhood Association helped parents run for local school councils and fought for the construction of seven new school buildings; (Mediratta et. al. 2002, Warren 2011).</li> <li>• Tunica County, MS: Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County renovated and expanded schools serving African-American students and won three seats on local school board; (Warren 2011).</li> </ul>
Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Innercity Congregations Allied</li> </ul>

training/education	<p>for Hope (MICAH) partnered with Marquette University and Alverno College to set up a program for alternative teacher certification.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sacramento, CA: Sacramento Area Congregations Together partnered with schools to pilot a program in which teachers did home visits—as a result, parent participation and math scores have risen (Bilby 2002: 7).</li> </ul>
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Coleman's campaign differed from those of many other community organizations because instead of the single issue approach, Coleman's racial justice frame enabled the organization to initiate a multifaceted campaign. As the successes outlined in the last chapter illustrate, this approach had some advantages: the parents' ability to name key causes of the gap allowed the group to expand its scope of demands to be more comprehensive; the inside-outside strategy enhanced organizational clout, and the universal A-G demand was a lever for ethnic studies and restorative justice. However there were also disadvantages. With the exception of the group's initial A-G victory, because the scope of the campaign was continually expanding, Coleman could never consolidate its political capital and regroup and rearrange its resources. In addition, although the scope of Coleman's campaign base continued to grow, its organizational resource base, in terms of staff and funding, did not.

Thus even as the group's expanded analysis was helpful in clarifying the connection between structural racism and the achievement gap and in specifying changes in policy and program that could have made a significant difference in racial outcomes, in the final analysis, Coleman did not have sufficient organizational structure or resources to sustain the fight at a level sufficient to make and monitor the changes demanded.

Coleman's effort, however, was both significant and partially successful. Given these lessons, what factors would enable racial justice progressives to approach education reform work more sustainably? In the next section I examine the possibilities for reform through case studies of moments of opportunity.

## **Moments of Opportunity: Centering Race and Claiming Legitimacy**

As the popular discourse on remedies for the achievement gap offers little room for a racial justice frame, those who hold the beliefs in equity that undergird that frame are often conscripted into market-based reforms. Openings to bring cultural relevance, civil rights, and racial justice frames to the forefront of education reform are important, if only because they will enable parents and youth of color to lead school change on their own terms. How might these efforts survive and thrive? We may find some clues in two efforts that stand out in the framing contest between market-based, versus civil rights and racial justice reform: the Chicago teachers' strike of 2012 and the Philadelphia Student Union's 2013 Challenging Choice Campaign.

### ***Racial Justice Case Study #1: The Chicago Teachers Union and the Framing of Harm to Our Children***

In 2010 CORE (Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators), a progressive slate within the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU), ran Karen Lewis for CTU president. During the previous decade Chicago had undergone a rapid neoliberal transformation. Chicago teachers' support of Lewis and CORE was strong enough to unseat the United Progressive Caucus, which had led the union for 37 of the last 40 years. With 58% of the vote, Lewis' victory was substantial.

Not content to rest on her laurels, Lewis continued to organize. Launching a door-to-door outreach campaign to 26,000 teacher members of the union, Lewis and CORE assessed teachers' concerns and restructured the union to include a governance training program for members and 14 member-led committees addressing issues from political action to media. (Uetracht and Perez 2012). In addition, immediately drawing the battle lines in her first post election press conference, Lewis made her perspective clear—"school reform," she asserted, "is not an education plan but rather a business plan. What drives school reform," she continued, "is a single focus on profit. Profit. Not teaching, not learning, profit" (Sustar 2010).

#### *The Conflict*

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan had left Chicago schools in an uproar after his 2001-2008 tenure as the schools' CEO. Duncan's *Renaissance 2010* plan called for closing underperforming Chicago schools and expanding "turnaround" charter schools. Although market-based reformers and President Barack Obama hailed Duncan's accomplishments of raising test scores in Chicago and building public-private partnerships (Department of Education 2012), his critics point out that school closures in Chicago have led to increased levels of student pushout and violence (Lipman 2011).

In the fall of 2012, the CTU took action to back up its words—school employees struck for eight days to protest a proposed lengthening of the school day, value-based teacher assessments, and market-based reforms in general. Although the news media focused inordinately on the harm the strike was causing to the children of Chicago, the CTU brought attention to the harm that social conditions caused for many students—harms wrought by racism and poverty. As one teacher remarked, "[Students are] dealing with issues like, 'I'm hungry', or 'I don't necessarily know where I'm going after school'...There are things that happen in this neighborhood all the time... Standardized tests don't account for any of that..." (Goodman 2012).

#### *CTU's Framing*

In February 2012 the CTU published a proposal that directly opposed *Renaissance 2010*: "The Schools Chicago's Students Deserve: Research-Based Proposals to Strengthen Elementary and Secondary Education In The Chicago Public Schools." The report's frame argued that:

Merely equalizing resources between the children of the haves and have-nots is insufficient. Students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds require additional support services to supplement their learning and emotional growth. Yet CPS does not even attempt this "nominal" equity. Bringing real equity into the education system will require a depth of

commitment and resources that is totally outside the scope of CPS' current "reform" agenda (CTU 2012: 16).

Punctuating the report, CTU included 10 "essential" recommendations: 1) Recognize That Class Size Matters, 2) Educate The Whole Child, 3) Create More Robust Wrap-Around Services, 4) Address Inequities in Our System, 5) Help Students Get Off To A Good Start, 6) Respect and Develop The Professionals, 7) Teach All Students, 8) Provide Quality School Facilities, 9) Partner With Parents, and 10) Fully Fund Education. These recommendations all stood in contrast to the privatization strategies of Renaissance 2010.

Like Coleman, CTU challenged the district to recognize that equity is not equality—and that equitable outcomes cannot be accomplished by giving every student the same resources. Low-income students require more services to be on equal footing with their middle-class counterparts, and to demand accountability through high test scores without providing such services is both unrealistic and irresponsible. The report's acknowledgements of structural poverty and racism situate the CTU within a racial justice approach to school reform. Recommendation #3, calling for more robust wrap-around services, is premised on recognizing poverty and economic inequity as primary factors that affect student performance. The fourth recommendation, "address inequities in our system," is similarly contextualized. Contending that high-stakes testing practices and school closures have made the Chicago schools an "apartheid system," CTU states that "[standardized testing] has come to define the policies, operation, curricula, pedagogy, and survival of urban schools serving low-income students." When these schools earn low scores, they are closed and frequently re-opened as charters that do not admit the same neighborhood student population (Lipman 2011).

The CTU report, written with the input of thousands of union members, was a guiding document for the union's approach to the strike. In the context of truly addressing inequities, CTU took a firm stance against high-stakes testing and other marketized practices and directly challenged the neoliberal conceptualization of parents as empowered consumers, devoting a heading in its report to the notion that "**families are not customers, students are not seats**" (CTU 2012: 14)

### *Opposition*

Though the union made its concerns for both teachers and their students clear to the media covering the strike, news stories disproportionately focused on the harm the strike was caused students the inconveniences and frustration that the strike caused for parents. "With their patience growing increasingly thin, Chicago parents continue to grapple with child care issues and ways to keep their kids busy as the teachers strike enters its second week" read the opening line of a Chicago Tribune story as the strike entered its second week (Smith & Delgado 2012). Other stories were titled "Parents Voice Frustration as They Deal with Fallout of Chicago Teachers Strike" and "As Strike Goes On, Support Wavers for Chicago Teachers." While the union attempted to address the complexities of racial inequity in its strike statements, the dominant media structures limited such discourses to small conversations of inconvenience and frustration.

Although the strike was difficult for many parents, they did not always voice frustration of their own volition—the groups *Education Reform Now* and *Power of Parents* bused in residents from South and West side neighborhoods to a anti-strike rally in

downtown Heritage Green Park. Though a news story acknowledged that “Education Reform Now, which also goes by the name Democrats for Education Reform, is an organization started by Wall Street hedge fund managers,” the authors did not further interrogate the implications of such a group supporting parent opposition to the strike (Doyle, Hirst and Nix 2012). Democrats for Education Reform has long supported market-based reforms and shares critiques of teachers’ unions with its more conservative counterparts (Skeels 2011).

In fact, opinions were deeply divided about the strike, along lines not only of ideology but of race. Chicago is 32% White, 33% Black, and 27% Latino (Moser 2012). A majority of residents overall supported the strike, but support was much higher among Black (63% in favor) and Latino (65% in favor) residents than among Whites (48%). The disapproval among Whites is even more notable because Chicago Public Schools are only 9% White, while Blacks and Latinos respectively make up 47% and 41% of students. Blacks and Latinos are disproportionately over-enrolled while Whites are disproportionately under-enrolled.

### *Outcomes*

Market-based reformers and most media outlets framed Chicago teachers as selfish, asserting that their choice to strike harmed children. The CTU consistently responded with its own framing: that inequitable education, not striking teachers, harms children. The CTU’s continued commitment to addressing the reality of children of color—at times at the expense of its public image—speaks to a strong racial justice commitment. Not content to ascribe to the civil rights frame and demand equal funding, the CTU demanded *more* funding for Chicago’s low-income schools with high Black and Latino populations—a direct challenge to the neoliberal reign of Arne Duncan.

Although the results of the strike were mixed, the Chicago Teachers Union succeeded in bringing national attention to the negative impact of market-based reforms on students of color and the futility of insisting on “accountability” for teachers when their students faced poverty and structural racism. Given the uneven national sentiment toward teachers’ unions and consistent attempts from market-based reformers to portray teachers as greedy and/or incompetent, Chicago’s show of solidarity with teachers is significant. Even more significant, however, is the union’s choice to use its bargaining platform as a showcase for the racially biased outcomes that shape their students’ educational experiences. If more unions followed the example of the Chicago Teacher’s Union, community-based organizations using a racial justice frame would have strong allies in their fights to close the achievement gap.

### ***Racial Justice Case Study #2: The Philadelphia Student Union and Challenging “Choice”***

#### *The PSU*

The Philadelphia Student Union was founded in 1995 as part of a multi-sector non-profit project. Though its first participants were primarily students from Philadelphia’s magnet schools, the majority now hail from the city’s large public high schools. PSU has engaged in a number of successful campaigns to increase school funding and resources and

has opposed market-based reforms since its 2001 campaign to limit the impact of Edison Learning on Philadelphia schools. In addition to funding demands, PSU's most enduring campaigns have focused on school violence, specifically the targeting of Asian and queer youth in Philadelphia schools and school discipline practices, specifically the promotion of restorative justice practices and training of school police officers (Philadelphia Student Union website).

### *The Conflict*

In March of 2013, to address a city deficit, the Philadelphia School Reform Commission voted to close 23 schools, 10% of all schools in the city. Nearly a year earlier, the Reform Commission had published a plan to close 40 schools. That plan, created by the Boston Consulting Group, recommended that the district shift to a "portfolio management model" focused on expanding high performing schools and attracting high-quality leadership and operators, more strategic management of charter schools, decentralizing academic support structures, providing district services to all schools, including charters, to enable charters and the district to benefit from increased purchasing power, and increasing school autonomy. These recommendations were essentially a recipe for privatization: 40% of public school students were projected to attend Philadelphia charter schools within the next five years (Boston Consulting Group).

### *PSU's Framing*

PSU members understood the privatization intent of market-based reformers before most adults in Philadelphia had even heard of the closures. In order to develop an analysis of school reform, PSU students conducted a power analysis of the forces of education reform, making connections among reformers like the Gates Foundation and Viacom (which had produced "Waiting for Superman") and discussing the common values held by a number of the players involved in Philadelphia's school reform plan.

The organization's analysis of the school closures included a blend of civil rights and racial justice framing. The analysis was reflected in the *Union Rep* Fall/Winter 2012 newsletter, which included an article about funding and disinvestment in Philadelphia schools, focusing specifically on funding inequity that harmed vulnerable groups:

Funding is especially important for those students who are English Language Learners, those with disabilities, and some that live in deep poverty. These students may need more one-on-one time from a teacher or a tutor. They also may need certain tools to increase theirs [sic] chances of learning. We have lost more than \$75,000 per classroom since 2010-2011.

The group made an even stronger connection to a civil rights frame with an article in the same newsletter comparing and contrasting the struggles of PSU members with those of the Little Rock 9, the African-American students who integrated Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas amid a storm of racist, violent protest. The author (Philadelphia high school student Nuwar Ahmed) acknowledges numerous differences between the situations but also argued that

Governor Faubus and his supporters made decisions on behalf of hundred of students in Little Rock, which oppressed the African American students looking for an education. Today, the School Reform Commission, which consists of only five people, decides the fate

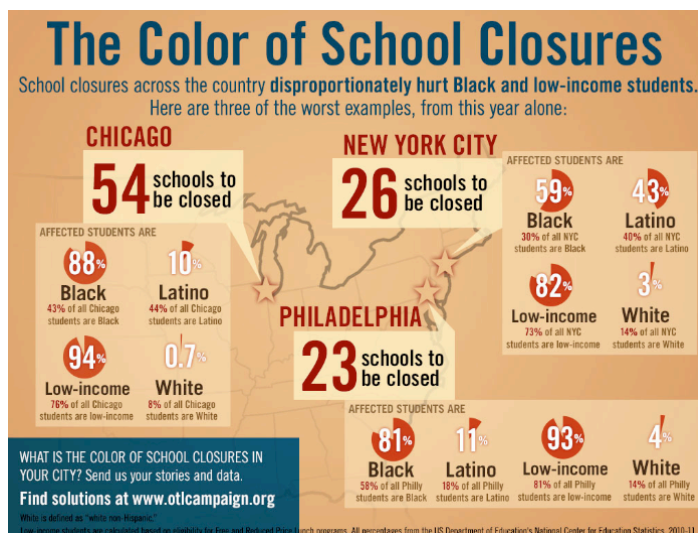


of thousands of Philadelphia students. Just like the Little Rock Nine, the students of today are not willing to back down and are making it very obvious we deserve a better system that will allow the students of America to grow and learn the way we should (Ahmed 2012). PSU members viewed themselves on a continuum with civil rights struggles. While they understood the vast differences in severity of racist backlash between the civil rights activists and themselves, civil rights remained an important concept for the group and a legacy from which they hoped to learn.

In order to move their own vision forward, PSU partnered with other community organizations in an alliance called PCAPS—the Philadelphia Coalition Advocating for Public Schools. After determining that the Boston Consulting Group blueprint failed to “lead to better and more equitable educational opportunities, safer communities, less poverty and a stronger, healthier Philadelphia,” but instead “puts our children, our families and our communities at greater risk,” and that the group’s “unproven strategies...will likely make schools less equitable and less safe,” the Coalition’s plan roundly rejected market-based reform. Reappropriating the language of choice, the Coalition argued that the decision to disinvest in Philadelphia schools—was the *real* crisis in a “crisis of choice”: “[e]xpanding charter schools and increasing the privatization of public goods have been prioritized over ensuring that Philadelphia students in traditional public schools receive a high-quality education” (PCAPS 2012: 14).

In the process of developing the report, the PCAPS coalition engaged in a number of community organizing activities. Members administered a survey to over 1,500 Philadelphia students and parents, held a conference with 300 attendees, conducted 26 listening sessions of approximately 750 youth, and hosted two town hall meetings with input from over 250 community members (PCAPS 2012: 5). Of those surveyed, only one in eight supported the Boston Consulting Group plan.

Finally, in framing its argument about school closing, the Coalition was race-explicit when talking about the potential devastating outcomes in communities of color. With data available from proposed sweeping school closures in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, the Schottt Foundation’s Opportunity to Learn campaign published an infographic on the “color of school closures” (inset).



Philadelphia activists quickly integrated the data into their campaign against the closures, making the racial nature of the impact difficult to ignore. Hundreds of media outlets picked up the data and published it in their coverage of the Philadelphia school closures.

In a segment of the Melissa Harris-Perry show, PSU representative Sharron (no last name given) pointed out that the school closures were all slated for North and West Philadelphia neighborhoods—where the majority of the population is Black and Latino (Philadelphia Student Union 2013).

### *Opposition*

On the city level, PSU and PCAPS stand in opposition to Philadelphia's School Reform Commission, the temporary body that recommended the school closures. In May 2013, PSU and PCAPS helped to stage a massive student walkout protesting the school closures. Despite numerous organizing efforts from parent, teacher and youth bodies, however, the SRC has moved ahead with its austerity measures. Just before Philadelphia schools opened in Fall 2013, the SRC demanded of teachers:

- teachers earning more than \$55,000 a year would receive a 13 percent pay cut, along with a 13 percent hike in health care contributions
- Elimination of tenure and sabbatical
- Lengthened workday (and teachers would be forced to work additional hours off the clock without pay).
- Elimination of librarians would be eliminated
- Elimination of class size limits
- No counselor requirements at schools (Uetrict 2013)

In addition to these specific proposed cuts for teachers, PSU has taken care to highlight the neoliberal and pro-prison philosophy behind Philadelphia's reforms. The city's charter schools continue to expand, and will enroll a predicted 40% of Philadelphia's schoolchildren by the year 2017 (Uetrict 2013). As Philadelphia faces the closure of 23 schools, cuts of personnel and salaries, and a potential teacher strike due to its deficit of \$304 million, the state is spending \$400 million on the construction of a new prison just outside of the city. While the local city government has tried to de-link the two issues, PSU and its PCAPS allies accuse: "projects such as building more prisons have been prioritized over our children" (PCAPS 2012: 14). PSU's analysis of the state's budget priorities goes beyond a civil rights demand for equal funding—PSU students are not simply demanding more funding, they are accusing the state of directly contributing to the criminalization of Philadelphia's youth.

### *Outcomes*

The PCAPS Coalition membership includes: Youth United for Change, Philadelphia Student Union, ACTION United, the Philadelphia Federation Of Teachers, the Philadelphia Home And School Council, UNITE HERE, SEIU 32BJ, Fight For Philly, Philadelphians Allied For a Responsible Economy, the American Federation Of Teachers PA, Jobs With Justice, Teacher Action Group, Coalition Of Labor Union Women, Occupy Philadelphia Labor Work Group, Decarcerate PA, and the Association of Philadelphia School Librarians. The Philadelphia Student Union shares many elements in common with Coleman. Its membership is majority low-income African-American and Latino; it engages in activism around multiple issues; and it is situated within a large urban district.

However, while at the time of this writing it appears that the school closures will go forward (despite an eight-day hunger strike against the closures in June 2013), the PSU's strategic alliances put it in a different situation than Coleman. Coleman Advocates used an inside-outside strategy with some allies on the inside of the school system. PSU, on the other hand, has engaged in a broad united front firmly outside of the system. The depth and breadth of the coalition and the diversity of experience and expertise of its member groups, including national and city-level teachers' unions, a seasoned prison moratorium group (Decarcerate PA), and a "home and school council," may not gain a complete "win" on this issue. However, given the breadth of organizational participation, it is clearly positioned to "go the distance" on the long road to equity.

## Lessons from Campaigns with a Racial Justice Frame

Although Coleman's A-G campaign, the Chicago teachers' strike and the Philadelphia Student Union's efforts to challenge school closures were initiated by organizations of different types about issues that were similar but not the same, some key themes and lessons were present in all cases:

1. **Organizational structure, experience, and resources are of significant consequence.** In Chicago, CTU resources enabled teachers to activate and mobilize their very significant base, and their legitimacy as educators gave them a credible platform from which to challenge the dominance of market-based solutions. Coleman's inside-outside strategy was important for the group to get a sense of the political possibilities and craft its A-G resolution, but given the organization's relatively small staff, it was unable to garner and allocate resources sufficient to push and monitor a comprehensive reform package. PSU won widespread support by building a multi-organizational coalition that could share the work necessary to win comprehensive reform. However, issues of organizational maintenance and cohesion may challenge the coalition's ability to function as an effective unit.
2. **Mainstream media are not supportive or even neutral toward racial justice framing.** In Chicago, although the CTU attempted to frame its campaign around equity and the availability of the resources to achieve it, much of the media reports focused on harm to students and parent frustration with the strike. In the cases of Coleman and the PSU, the media were supportive of "parent empowerment." However, because that term has no implicit ideological content and mainstream media tend to report episodic incidents, often devoid of historical content, reporters are as likely to write uncritically about corporate charter schools with parent advisory boards as they are to report on community organizations attempting to address issues of racial profiling in student discipline. If community organizations are to articulate a racial justice frame, they must "borrow legitimacy" from more powerful actors, either organizations or prominent and powerful individuals.

3. **The market-based frame focuses on, and forces us to respond to, the wrong questions.** The frame views both schools and students as commodities to be assessed on the basis of their economic viability. Thus, as the PSU case illustrates, schools must close if they are not economically viable, regardless of their intrinsic value to a particular community. If students' test scores suggest that they may not be economically viable as workers, the solution is to bring in a privatized educational institution that has as its mission the production of student success on standardized tests that are created by yet another private business. Though more complex and less susceptible to easy solutions, a racial justice frame, grounded in an analysis of racially equitable outcomes, has the capacity to assert students' and parents' humanity...and their agency.
4. **Campaigns in isolated localities are necessary but not sufficient to solidify a unified national effort.** As the case examples illustrate, while many local organizations have won pieces of local fights on racial equity in education, currently no organizational entity helps disparate groups collectively discuss lessons learned and plan strategies. The questions that these fights raise and the solutions that progressive racial justice advocates, activists, organizers, and organizations need to craft and recraft, are simply too big and too complicated for any single organization to take on alone. The movement for equity reform in education, grounded in a racial justice frame, needs an infrastructure—if not one that mirrors that of the political right, certainly one that takes on the same tasks: gathering and focusing resources, conducting research, distilling campaign results and then distributing them and discussing their implications with activists and organizers.

## Conclusion

Market-based reformers shape the dominant public discourse surrounding education because they draw on the established common sense of neoliberalism and have access to money and media that enable them to further their prognostic frame of marketized solutions. While the civil rights frame is palatable because of most Americans' favorable association with the civil rights movement, the reforms most frequently advocated in this frame—equal distribution of funding and resources—do not address the outside-of-school structural inequities that contribute to student underperformance.

The most promising approach to school reform, then, is **1) to use a racial justice lens to frame solutions to the achievement gap, 2) for community-based organizations to be in leadership of school campaigns, and 3) to leverage broad inside-outside coalitions to drive racial justice-based school change.** Authentic racial justice reform would mean a huge sea change in every detail of schooling—teacher training, curriculum, school organization, and philosophical approach to students. Broad coalitions could address some of the shortcomings—staff turnover, lack of resources, lack of media platform, etc.—that prevented Coleman's racial justice campaign to be entirely successful.

My initial research questions concerned how the public understood the achievement gap, why certain frames of the gap were more dominant, and what the potential was for parents and youth of color to “critique and transform” the dominant

frames. The answers are fairly straightforward—that the public understands the achievement gap through the market diagnosis of dysfunctional bureaucracy and lack of choice, that market-based framing is dominant because it builds on the hegemony of neoliberalism, and that while much potential exists for community-based organizations to change the frames, to be effective they must be inordinately strategic as they navigate discursive opportunity structures.

I believe, however, that a shift toward a racial justice understanding of the achievement gap is not only necessary, it is possible. More proof emerges every year that market-based reforms have harmed communities of color (Lipman 2011, Schott 2010, Leonardo 2007, Hirsch 2007, Fuller 2000, Wells et. al. 2004). Given their history and structure, community-based organizations are best positioned to ensure that a vision of racial justice is guiding school reform efforts. Because most community-based organizations seek to increase the political and social power of communities who have historically lacked it—people of color, youth, low-income people, etc.—they frequently find themselves outside of opportunity structures. Being positioned outside traditional power structures might make fights harder to win, but it also removes the temptation to sacrifice vision for resonance. In contrast to the more narrowly focused reform agendas of advocates of the market-based and civil rights frames, advocates of the racial justice frame focus on building power as a means to enact a whole host of reforms that range from increasing student voice in school district decisions; bringing about more equitable discipline policies; student assessment of teachers; culturally relevant curriculum, etc. Isolated from the process of community organizing, a number of these reforms overlap with those backed by the civil rights frame. Both an expansive approach to education reform and the process of community organizing itself distinguish the racial justice frame—the understanding of racism as a pervasive entity and the insistence on shifting power to those most affected by the gap characterize the racial justice frame.

A common training module of community-based organizations, and one that Coleman uses for both adult and youth members, is the “Raining Rocks” story.<sup>18</sup> In the story, members are asked to put themselves in the position of a small village at the bottom of the hill. One day, a villager is injured by a large rock that has tumbled down the hill. The next day, more rocks fall and more villagers are injured. The problem continues on the third day. One group of villagers wants to venture up the hill to investigate the origin of the “raining rocks”, while another group argues that all hands are needed to assist with the injured, who are growing in population. The members engage in a simulation in which they have a town meeting acting as representatives of one of the two groups. Exercises like “Raining Rocks” are designed to encourage members to think about not only the most obvious manifestation of the problem, but also what the most effective strategy might be for cutting the problem off at its roots. More than other reform actors, community organizations understand Frederick Douglass’ still-accurate assessment of American power structures—that power concedes nothing without a demand.

In Kavitta Mediratta’s 2002 study of community organizing around schools, the organizations ranked “building parent power” as the most significant way to raise their participation. In fact, building parent power was ranked four times higher than

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<sup>18</sup> Coleman used a version of this training published by the School of Unity and Liberation (SOUL).

“promot[ing] relationships among parents/teachers/schools/communities” (24). This emphasis on building power over aligning oneself with existing power is a hallmark of community organizing. Similarly, when asked to rank why schools are unsafe, community-based organizations ranked the school-based factors of unfair or disrespectful treatment of students (33%) and excessive/inappropriate security (26%) more highly than the factor of ‘neighborhood’ (16%). Community organizations roundly reject the common sense of the deficit model, which blames parents and students, rather than contextual and historical factors like institutional racism, for student of color failure. Finally, Mediratta’s survey reveals that according to community organizations, the primary **parent factors** impeding parent involvement were parents working two or more jobs (38%), speaking a language other than English (29%), and feeling powerless (22%). The primary **school factors** impeding parent involvement were school/administration being generally unwelcoming (46%), high levels of involvement being undermined (40%), school’s poor communication (34%), school personnel not respecting parents/children (34%), schools having low expectations of children (24%), parental involvement being low on principal’s agenda (24%), race/class insensitivity (20%), and racial/cultural difference between school staff and parents (20%) (Schoolhouse Door 28). In recognition of the relative power difference between the parents and the institution, community organizers do not absolve parents, but rather assert that their members are committed to making change; and the same should be required from more-powerful institutions.

Community-based organizations, however, inevitably face some of the same limitations that Coleman did: staff and member turnover and inexperience, lack of capacity and money, and a constant barrage of other pressing issues around which to organize. The best chance for a successful racial justice campaign that truly addresses racial inequity would mirror Coleman’s inside-outside strategy: it would be an alliance of teachers’ unions, civil rights groups, and community-based organizations.

Lois Weiner points out in *The Future of Our Schools: Teachers Unions and Social Justice* that the very things that make unions stable—funding, dues, political credibility—also make them bureaucratic, and potentially paternalistic. Despite the demonization of teachers unions in from market-based reformers over the last decade (Gutstein and Lipman 2013, Lipman 2011, Kumashiro 2008, Weiner 2012), they remain large, organized, resourced sites of potential social movement. While Weiner suggests that teachers work within unions to bring in a social justice frame, I would offer that the best strategy for a racial justice education movement that is both visionary and resourced would be for unions and other groups to follow the leadership of community organizations.

Organizations like Coleman, the Alliance for Educational Justice, Dignity in Schools, the Chicago Teachers’ Union, the Schott Foundation, Research for Action, and the Philadelphia Student Union are on the right track, but each sector—teachers’ unions, research organizations, and youth and parent community groups—must lend its particular claims to legitimacy and resonance to a multilevel initiative that includes changes in policy and practices, the redistribution of resources, monitoring and accountability, and most importantly, the ability to challenge the dominant market-based frame. If an alliance of community-based organizations, civil rights groups, and teachers unions were to coalesce in a national campaign demanding, for example, the implementation of opportunity to learn

standards, there is a very real possibility that such demands could gain traction in the political arena. Rico Gutstein and Pauline Lipman describe the emergence of the united front that came to support the Chicago teachers' strike:

Public-sector workers...are...strategically positioned to fight alongside communities for reinvigorated, more socially just and equitable public institutions...The dismantling of public education in Chicago disproportionately impacts low-income African-American and Latina/o communities and contributes to their disinvestment and destabilization...African-American and Latino/a parents and community organizations, with support from progressive educators, lead the battles against school closings and privatization...By acting like the union should have, standing with parents and communities against school closings, fighting for teachers' jobs, and educating the membership on the corporate education agenda...CORE brought new power and visibility to grassroots education struggles. (Lipman and Gutstein 2012).

While the Chicago case must be understood in its own context of sweeping school closures and historic union activism, many of the factors that led to the Chicago strike are becoming universal truths in American cities—privatization, school closures, and increasingly marginalized teachers and parents.

As one of the few institutions in which 90% of young people participate, schools continue to be an ideal vehicle for addressing the realities of racism because they are such an enduring symbol of democracy, upward mobility, and civil rights struggle. An alliance led by the students and parents and teachers most affected by the “achievement gap” could have the power to shift both the discourse and actions of education reform from closing the achievement gap to eradicating the racist roots that produce it.

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