

Introduction

SEGREGATED SCHOOLS AND DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS IN AN AFFLUENT NEIGHBORHOOD

I grew up in San Francisco, a progressive metropolis famous for its hilly terrain, majestic views, and cold summers. In the 1990s, when I was in elementary and middle school, SF was an eclectic and cosmopolitan city, a bastion of liberal urbanism. I used to ride the municipal bus home on the days when I didn't have sports practice after school, which provided me with a front-row seat to the tremendous ethnic and racial diversity of the city. I would sit at the back of the bus because it was customary for youth to sit there, and because it gave me the best vantage point to observe my surroundings. Folks of all backgrounds and identities clambered on and off at different stops, and I took it all in.

I was proud to live and learn in a city as diverse and intriguing as San Francisco, but my pride would soon be tested. It did not take long for my bus rides to introduce me to residential segregation and socioeconomic inequality. I began to notice that the race of those who got on and off the bus roughly corresponded to the property values around those stops; the Black and Latinx riders—the riders

who looked most like me—boarded and exited the bus in lower-income neighborhoods. Over time, I saw that societal opportunities were not distributed equitably and that many people and communities were disadvantaged through no fault of their own. I remember being struck by the rigidity and consistency of it all.

The school segregation that I saw and experienced was even more jarring. I was fortunate to attend schools at which resources were plentiful and opportunities to prepare for high school and college seemed endless. My elementary/middle school, which I attended from kindergarten through eighth grade, had a state-of-the-art gym and theater, a technology lab filled with new computers, richly appointed science classrooms, a two-story library, and multiple courtyards and other green spaces. In high school, my college counselor was on a first-name basis with admissions officers at the most elite colleges and universities in the country. I was, however, always one of only a small handful of students of color in my classes and grade level, a Black boy in what sociologist and seminal urban ethnographer Elijah Anderson refers to as “white space.”¹ Moreover, I can count on one hand the number of teachers of color I had during my grade-school years, and I did not have a Black teacher until college. White teachers taught me about Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of North America, Native American genocide, the enslavement of Africans in America, the Civil War and Reconstruction, blackface minstrelsy, the Harlem Renaissance, Jim Crow segregation, and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. They taught the work of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ralph Ellison, among others. We also read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in which author Mark Twain marshals the n-word no less than 219 times. They were good teachers and good people, but I wished for a deeper understanding, a kinship and perspective that they could not adequately provide.

When I was an adolescent, the dearth of students or faculty of color at school often engendered feelings of isolation and the need the prove myself—to prove that the color of my skin did not mean

that I was less capable than my peers of lighter complexion. And I saw that many of my Black friends and family members outside of school attended schools that did not provide them with the same opportunities that I had. My peers who were Black or Brown, the ones whom I hung out with after school at track practice or on weekends, attended schools on the other side of town, schools that looked like dilapidated juvenile detention centers: massive blocks of concrete with peeling paint and cracked windows, surrounded by tall fences, thick bars, and foreboding gates. Inside, those school buildings were often dimly lit and in a state of general disrepair.

When I was twelve, my track teammates taught me how to fight since fights were routine at their schools, though I never ended up needing those skills at mine. We dressed the same and listened to the same music. We spoke the same slang. We were all Black and on the same team living in the same city, but our school experiences were worlds apart. They had aspirations and big dreams just like I did, but they lacked the opportunities that I had to see them through. We went our separate ways after track practice each day, and it all seemed so unfair. I wanted to go with them, to be with them at school. I wanted them at *my* school, because I knew, even at that young age, that the segregated school system around us was stunting their potential. Also, selfishly, I wanted them at my school so I wouldn't have to be the only one; so I wouldn't have to feel alone because I looked different; so I wouldn't have to be "the Black kid" in class anymore.

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I carried those childhood experiences with me through college and, eventually, on to graduate school as a doctoral student in sociology. I read dozens of scholarly journal articles and books about racial inequality and segregation, but those studies rarely, if ever, mentioned students like who I was as a youth. My experiences, and the experiences of others like me in similar educational and social contexts, were largely missing from the literature. Thus, I began this

book project intending to examine my own experiences—the experiences of Black and Latinx students navigating affluent, elite, and academically stringent school culture, particularly in schools where they were one of very few Black or Latinx students enrolled.

I decided to conduct the study in Valley View, California,² a Los Angeles suburb where the majority of residents were middle class or affluent. As I began the project, the median household income in Valley View was nearly \$100,000 and roughly 68% of adult residents over age twenty-five were college graduates.³ The ethnoracial composition of the city reflected broader contemporary immigration flows in middle-class, coastal California communities: 45% White, 39% Asian, 9% Latinx, 2% Black, and 5% “other or mixed-race.”

I chose Pinnacle High School—the flagship high school in the Valley View Unified School District—as my initial field site. Pinnacle’s campus was spread over a sixty-acre plateau, and it featured a plethora of scholastic and athletic facilities. It was known as an academically elite school; the graduation rate was 95%, and the percentage of those graduates who went on to college was even higher. Approximately 89% of Pinnacle’s 2,000+ students came from middle-class or affluent households.⁴ Just over 50% were Asian⁵ and roughly 40% were White, while Black and Latinx youth comprised approximately 2% and 7% of the student body, respectively.

I was drawn to Pinnacle in part due to its racial composition, which would allow me to study the experiences of Black and Latinx youth in a setting where they were vastly outnumbered by their White and Asian peers. Moreover, the racial diversity at Pinnacle would enable me to deviate from the Black-White racial binary that was, and remains, so commonplace in sociological studies of segregation and racialized schooling.⁶ In 1960, approximately 84% of American high school students were White, and the overwhelming majority of the remaining 16% were Black.⁷ As I began fieldwork for this project, the racial makeup of American children reflected America’s new and increasing diversity: Whites, Blacks, Latinx, and Asians comprised 51.7%, 15.8%, 23.7%, and 5.1% of high school-age

children, respectively,⁸ and Asian Americans were the fastest growing racial group in the United States.⁹ As such, Pinnacle High School presented an important, contemporary context of racial and ethnic diversity—an educational terrain in which Asian and Latinx students were indispensable to the story.¹⁰

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I began my fieldwork at Pinnacle by sitting in on a US history class for sophomores. The class was taught by Ms. Miller, who was White, in her early forties, and a Pinnacle alumna. Of the thirty-eight students in class that day, nineteen were Asian, twelve were White, four were Black, and three were Latinx. Each student had an assigned seat among several rows of desks.

Jamal, one of the Black students, stood 6'1" and was a legitimate star on the varsity football and basketball teams. His assigned seat was in the back row and in the far corner of the room, farthest from the whiteboard and projector screen at the front. On my second day of observation, during a PowerPoint lecture on the Civil War, Ms. Miller projected a copy of the Gettysburg Address onto the screen. The letters and words were small enough that she asked the class whether anyone was having trouble seeing and reading the text. One hand shot up; it was Jamal's. "I am," he said. Several students around him cracked smiles and chuckled. "How come you're having trouble seeing?" asked Ms. Miller. "I'm blind," replied Jamal. Half the class burst into laughter, which quickly spread throughout the room. Ms. Miller was not amused. She dismissed Jamal's statement as a joke, ignored the laughter, and resumed the lecture.

I started paying more attention to Jamal during subsequent visits to Ms. Miller's classroom because I saw my childhood self in him—a Black student-athlete at an elite prep school where only 2% of his fellow students were also Black. Unlike my teenage self, however, Jamal often appeared listless and disinterested during class. For instance, after watching a PBS Civil War documentary, students were to write

a short essay in their notebooks on whether the United States could exist as two separate nations—North and South. Instead of responding to the prompt, Jamal chose to draw pictures while listening to music through one of his earbud headphones.

Ms. Miller then showed the class a painting of a scene and asked students to comment on it aloud, but Jamal kept doodling. He glanced briefly at the painting after several students had offered their interpretations, and then went back to drawing, his head bobbing ever so slightly to the beat of the song that he was listening to. Ms. Miller posed questions about the significance of various colors and symbolism in the artwork, but Jamal never looked up again after his initial glance. A few more minutes passed, at which point he leaned his elbow on his desk, rested his head in the palm of his hand, and closed his eyes. “Jamal, wake up,” Ms. Miller said to him after a while, but her voice was flat and lacked urgency, and he continued to rest until the period was over.

Jamal was not always disengaged in class. His attention would wane whenever subject matter was presented visually—such as via PowerPoint—but his level of focus increased markedly whenever doing worksheets in class, and he often assumed a leadership role during breakout sessions, peer review assignments, and small group projects. There was a clear pattern to the discrepancy in his engagement, and I wondered why.

Exactly three weeks into my fieldwork, everything changed. As I stepped into the classroom, I noticed that Jamal was not in his seat. Ms. Miller used a seating chart to take attendance and, on any given day, she would circle the names of any students who were absent before handing me the chart so that I could see who was present. I noticed immediately that she had marked Jamal as absent by crossing his name off the chart.

After class I asked Ms. Miller about Jamal and why she had eliminated him from the class roster. She said that he had been “transferred to Crossroads for credit recovery.” I asked her what Crossroads was and what “credit recovery” was, as I had never heard of that

school or that term. She said Crossroads was a “continuation high school” located about a mile away in Valley View and that it was a public school within the Valley View Unified School District. She added that students were sent to Crossroads from each of Valley View’s four comprehensive high schools, including Pinnacle, when they had fallen behind on their cumulative coursework such that they were no longer on pace to graduate on time with their class.

How and why did students like Jamal end up at Crossroads? How did they feel about changing schools in this fashion, in the middle of the semester? What was the transfer process like? Under what conditions, if any, could students return to Pinnacle? How did the academic culture at Pinnacle compare to the academic culture at Crossroads? These were some of the questions that I jotted in my notebook right away as I stood in the hallway outside Ms. Miller’s classroom door that afternoon.

CALIFORNIA’S CONTINUATION HIGH SCHOOLS AND ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS ACROSS THE NATION

Continuation high schools have existed since 1919 in California as an “alternative education” option for students enrolled in the state’s comprehensive public high schools. In 1965 there were only thirteen continuation high schools in the state, but changes to state law that year mandated that most public school districts operate a continuation high school for sophomores, juniors, and seniors deemed “vulnerable to academic or behavioral failure.” Consequently, the number of continuation high schools in California increased dramatically in the ensuing decades.¹¹ Then, during the George W. Bush administration, a central focus on improving public school test scores incentivized high schools to push lower-achieving students into continuation schools.¹² In 2018, there were 435 continuation high schools statewide, serving a total of 85,343 students, or roughly 5% of the public high school student population that year.¹³

The purpose of continuation schools is to provide an accelerated credit recovery program that gives students who are behind on their course credits a chance to catch up and graduate on time from high school.¹⁴ As a “dropout prevention” strategy, continuation high schools are intended to be temporary off-ramps for students who eventually return to graduate from their comprehensive high school once they have gotten back on track. However, continuation high school students are far more likely to drop out than their peers at comprehensive high schools,¹⁵ and most continuation school students who end up graduating remain there to do so, never returning to the high school from which they were transferred.¹⁶

A recent analysis of national data revealed that roughly 500,000 high school students across all fifty states were enrolled in an alternative education program at some point during the school year, and that those students were disproportionately Black, Latinx, and from lower-income backgrounds. Nearly two-thirds of state education departments implement policies in which students can be involuntarily transferred to an alternative school for disciplinary reasons. Nationwide, alternative high schools are generally housed in trailers, dilapidated buildings, or tucked into strip malls. There is often little instruction from teachers, and extracurricular offerings are sparse at best.¹⁷

A separate analysis found that in some states, such as Florida and Michigan, alternative high schools can operate as private charters, which means that students who drop out of them are not counted toward the official dropout count of the broader district. In Pennsylvania, once students are transferred to an alternative high school for credit recovery, their test scores are absorbed into the district average instead of recorded as belonging to any specific high school. Such arrangements have been criticized as ways for comprehensive public high schools and districts to skirt state accountability measures by concealing struggling students and dropouts.¹⁸ In short, the mechanisms of segregation and inequality that I highlight throughout this book are far from unique to Southern California.

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After I learned of Jamal's transfer, I left Pinnacle for the day seeking more information about Crossroads. I clicked through the Valley View Unified School District's website, and what I found in that simple search convinced me that what had up to that point been a study of race and academic culture at Pinnacle would surely need to expand to include Crossroads. These two public high schools, in the same school district, in the same upper-income suburb, were demographically divergent. According to district data, the student body at Crossroads was approximately 39% White, 36% Latinx, 11% Black, and 7% Asian. This meant that, at Crossroads, Black and Latinx students were conspicuously overrepresented, while Asian students were clearly underrepresented.¹⁹

I also came across evidence of socioeconomic and academic inequality. Whereas 11% of students at Pinnacle had been designated by the district as "socioeconomically disadvantaged," 51% of Crossroads students shared that label. I then read that over 90% of Pinnacle students who took the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) as sophomores passed on their first try, but only 30% of Crossroads sophomores who took the test could claim that achievement. Taken together, these glaring racial, socioeconomic, and academic disparities were curious. The demographic features of Valley View, Pinnacle High School, and Crossroads High School—and the relationship between the two schools—were intriguing and warranted a thorough examination of the processes and practices that contributed to these inequalities.²⁰ This book is the result of that study.

Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork at Pinnacle and Crossroads, as well as 122 in-depth interviews with students, parents, and faculty at each high school, I unveil hidden, institutional mechanisms of school segregation and inequality that disproportionately placed Black, Latinx, and lower-income students at risk. At Pinnacle High School, where exceptional achievement was commonplace, students who fell behind were framed as misfits who did

Table 1 *Racial compositions of Pinnacle High School, Crossroads High School, and Valley View, CA, in 2015*

<i>Race</i>	<i>Pinnacle High School</i>	<i>Crossroads High School</i>	<i>Valley View, CA</i>
Asian	52.2%	7.5%	39.1%
White	35.5%	39.6%	44.8%
Latinx	7.2%	36.5%	9.2%
Black	2.1%	11.4%	1.9%
Other	3.0%	5.0%	5.1%

not belong there. The presence of a continuation school in the district gave comprehensive high schools like Pinnacle the option of pushing out lower-achieving students and intensifying the focus of their considerable educational resources on high-achievers. A few days into my visits to Crossroads, Mr. Gregory, a thirty-year-old, second-year math and science teacher, described Crossroads and its relationship with Pinnacle in stark terms: “Here at Crossroads, we’re essentially a dumping ground for the students that the comprehensive high schools don’t want to teach and support,” he told me one day after school. “It’s really a form of school segregation, plain and simple.”

A SUCCINCT SUMMATION OF SEGREGATED SCHOOLING IN AMERICA SINCE 1954

On May 17, 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that a system of “separate but equal” schools for Blacks and Whites was “inherently unequal.” The ruling established that de jure racial segregation in American schools was unconstitutional. *Brown* was a pivotal legal victory of the civil rights movement, a

resounding declaration that racial segregation had no place in the field of public education. But countervailing forces of segregation and integration after *Brown* resulted in periods of progress, stagnation, and backsliding, such that de facto racial segregation has remained an entrenched and defining feature of American schooling.²¹

Brown did not reduce school segregation at first because it lacked enforcement provisions. Furthermore, “freedom of choice” desegregation plans that were enacted by Southern school districts helped preserve school segregation in those districts in the 1950s and 1960s by placing the responsibility of integration on Black families.²² Black parents had the “choice” to enroll their children in all-White schools, but White families, faculty, and staff at those schools were often overwhelmingly and openly hostile toward any racial integration whatsoever. For instance, in 1957, the Little Rock Nine—nine Black teenagers in Little Rock, Arkansas—were the first Black students to attend Little Rock Central High School. They faced a torrent of racist slurs and death threats, and President Eisenhower ordered the National Guard to escort them into the school building to ensure their safety. This sort of racist backlash had a chilling effect on school desegregation in the late 1950s.²³

The situation improved somewhat with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which ended the legal segregation of public spaces and criminalized employment discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion, or national origin. The Civil Rights Act greatly increased the power of the executive and judicial branches of government to enforce school desegregation. The law granted the US Department of Justice the power to file lawsuits to force school districts to desegregate, and it cleared the way for the Department of Education to cut funding to districts that continued to segregate their schools.

Despite these momentous legal victories in the fight against a racially segregated school system, few lawsuits were filed to compel desegregation in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Rights Act, and school districts remained highly segregated across the country

in the late 1960s; in 1968, well over a decade after *Brown*, 50% of Black students nationwide attended a school in which at least 90% of all students were also Black.²⁴ Widespread desegregation did not begin in public schools until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when court orders began to require school districts to adopt more effective integration plans.²⁵

One such plan was busing. In 1971, in the Supreme Court case *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, the Court ruled that busing was a constitutionally protected remedy for racially segregated schools, particularly in districts where residential segregation made school integration even more challenging. By the mid-1970s, hundreds of school districts across the nation were subject to similar court-ordered desegregation plans,²⁶ and the plans were effective because they had the weight of a federal judge's ruling behind them.²⁷ At the end of the 1970s, school segregation was still widespread in all regions of the country, but significant progress had been made; in 1980, 33% of Black students nationwide attended a school in which at least 90% of all students were also Black, a 17% decrease since 1968.²⁸

The 1980s and 1990s were decades of stalled progress on school integration, and the period from the year 2000 to today has been a combination of continued stagnation and the gradual resegregation of public school districts across the country.²⁹ A complex set of social and structural forces undergird these dynamics. Residential segregation between Blacks and Whites declined slightly between 1990 and 2010, but that decline did not correspond to a meaningful decrease in school segregation between Black and White students.

One of the most important reasons for this incongruous finding involved "White flight," in which White parents responded to the racial integration of previously all-White neighborhoods and schools by moving to Whiter suburbs,³⁰ or pulling their children out of public school and enrolling them in private options.³¹ White flight began in earnest in the late 1960s when school desegregation plans were increasingly enforced through the courts,³² and it gained traction in