

Introduction

... and I imagine that he shared the attitude, which I was to encounter so often later, toward the children who were helping to bring this future about: admiration before the general spectacle and skepticism before the individual case.

JAMES BALDWIN,
"A Fly in Buttermilk," 1958

AMERICANS HAVE LONG TAKEN PRIDE in the idea that their country provides everyone the opportunity to achieve a better life. No aspect of the American ideology has shaped economic life in the United States more forcefully than the premise that individuals can, through hard work and determination, improve on their socioeconomic origins and create a better future for themselves. This idea has lured a constant stream of immigrants to the United States and governed a good deal of public policy.¹ It is fair to say that most Americans desire and hope that they and their children will improve their economic situation over time—and that most believe this is possible.

This norm is an integral part of the "American Dream" and has captivated current and aspiring citizens for at least a century and a half.² Significant disparities among individuals in talent and resources are generally acknowledged, but Americans commonly believe that most individuals can obtain the skills necessary to secure jobs that provide incomes associated with the American Dream—even when evidence suggests this is not the case.³ In the American Dream, the United States is a meritocracy, and because skills can be taught, it has long been argued that with education and training, any individual can improve their economic chances; this is why so much

emphasis in social policy has been devoted to schooling. Ever since education became compulsory through age 16, American society has relied on it to be the antidote to socioeconomic inequality.

No institution in society has been given more responsibility for reinforcing the American Dream than public schools, particularly for young people from families with low incomes.⁴ However, public education has not been successful in improving the economic fortunes of significant numbers of students from low-income families, as many drop out before matriculating or they matriculate but cannot proceed to college because of their poor grades in high school or low scores on the standardized tests used to assess knowledge and competency for college admission.⁵ This situation has elicited concern among education professionals, social scientists, and the general public that underlies many education policy initiatives.

Consider, for instance, President Bill Clinton's package of education reforms announced in 1999 as "Expanding Educational Opportunities"; President George W. Bush's promotion of still other reforms—and testing—in the "No Child Left Behind Act," which he signed in 2002; and President Barack Obama's "My Brother's Keeper," a public-private partnership launched in 2015 to address opportunity gaps, especially for young individuals of color. Despite these initiatives, barriers to successful transitions in education still challenge many low-income youth. Based on observations of low-income youth inside and outside of high school in five different studies covering parts of twenty-three years, this book focuses on factors that created difficulties for these students and how these difficulties created systemic problems that limited their chances of transitioning to the next stage of their education.

LOW-INCOME YOUTH AND THE EDUCATION PROCESS

While low-income youth face significant barriers to their progress through the education system, some make successful transitions through their education and are economically mobile. So why are some individuals from low-income families ineffective in their efforts to complete high school and go to college? Researchers have advanced a number of answers and they will be addressed more fully in the substantive chapters of this book. I will, however, briefly summarize them now and discuss the three broad categories they fall into: structure, culture, and agency.

One group of explanations offered by social scientists for the difficulty low-income youth face in transitioning to the next stage of their education concerns social structures that place these youth at an extreme disadvantage. Environmental conditions, a lack of material resources, various rules and regulations, and certain pedagogical approaches adversely impact learning for low-income youth.⁶ In addition, the limited family resources available to low-income students also impose structures.

Another group of explanations centers on the profound influence that culture has on students' ability to advance. Researchers have focused on what they have seen as limited resources in the personal networks of low-income students (often referred to as their "social capital") and the norms of social decorum in their networks (known as "cultural capital") that negatively affect academic achievement.⁷

The third set of explanations researchers have forwarded is that low-income youth lack agency in achieving the skills they need to succeed in school. In other words, some lack the ability or desire to master the skills associated with the concept of "human capital."⁸ Other researchers concerned with agency have argued that it is not the desire to accumulate "human capital" that separates low-income students from their middle-class counterparts. Instead, they maintain, low-income students' capacity to secure human capital is limited by their inability to acquire sufficient social and cultural capital⁹ and their propensity to make one or more bad decisions.¹⁰

Prior research on educational transitions has had key limitations. First, there is often the merging of the concepts "advancing" and "transitioning." This leads to a conflation of two different outcomes involved in the educational process. When a student moves from one semester, grade, or high school to the next educational stage, they can either *advance* or *transition*. In the case of "advancing," the student is promoted from one level of education to the next, but when the student "transitions," they are both moving from one level of education to the next and are able to understand the new material and competently execute the concomitant operations associated with it—i.e., they are operating successfully in the new stage. I will use this definition of educational transitioning throughout this book. In addition, even though the definition I am using for "transition" means a successful move to the next level of education, in later chapters I will use the technically redundant phrase "successful transition" because some readers may not have read this introduction or read it and forgotten how I defined the concept.

Second, prior research has generally focused on isolating single factors that produce difficulties for low-income high school students. Although this research has identified factors that affect the academic performance of low-income youth, it has not investigated how these factors work in everyday life to produce academic underachievement and to inhibit the transition to college. Further, existing explanations based on aggregated administrative data and surveys are important but primarily inferential because they are not based on direct observation of how these factors influence students' behavior. In practice, by isolating the impact of certain variables, researchers have understated both the role and significance of others, as well as the interactional effects among variables.

A second issue in the existing literature has to do with the concept of transitions. There has been significant research concerning educational transitions, but most of it has focused on the factors affecting the transitions from primary school to high school and from high school to college.¹¹ Students experience many other strategic and meaningful transitions. Of particular importance are transitions from one grade level to another, because their cumulative effect ultimately determines the ability to transition from one school environment to the next. Remaining unaware of barriers that hamper intermediate transitions seriously weakens our understanding of what went wrong or right in a student's ultimate transition to the next major stage. Further, a significant amount of the previous research on transitions used econometric techniques to measure the degree to which various factors accounted for success and failure in educational attainment and transitioning.¹² This enabled researchers to measure the influence that each tested variable had on academic achievement, but it did not help them understand how these variables actually worked.

Thus, additional research is necessary in two key areas. The first is to identify additional factors that play a role in education transitions at all levels. Since these are grounded in organizational and individual practices, it is necessary to identify them empirically instead of simply using those advanced solely in theory. The second area where additional research is needed is in understanding how the identified factors work in everyday life and affect student behavior. Until we know more about how and under what conditions these factors affect individuals during high school, we will not be able to provide effective interventions to increase educational opportunities.

The present book aims to contribute toward addressing these gaps in the research. Throughout, I will separate the concept of "advancing" and "tran-

sitioning,” and will use the definition of transitioning provided earlier. I will also focus on identifying the factors that create educational challenges for low-income youth during grades 9 through 12 in high school, how these challenges create transition problems for these youths even if they advance to the next grade, how the unsuccessful management of these challenges makes each transition from one grade to the next precarious, and how difficulty in making transitions during high school makes the transition to college more fragile.

UNDERLYING ISSUES IN THE TRANSITION PROCESS FOR LOW-INCOME YOUTH

Before delving into the analysis of problems that students from low-income families face during high school, it is useful to consider some issues underlying the transitions. Because there exists in the United States a strong belief that education can produce a better life for every individual in society, public policy has been concerned with providing students from low-income backgrounds the opportunity to achieve educational excellence—although it has not been so concerned with ensuring positive outcomes.¹³

Each student starts the school year not only with a backpack but with an array of personal traits that affect how they learn and acquire the skills, dispositions, and capital that enable mobility and future transitions. One trait most people think of immediately is intelligence, and students vary in their capability to understand information, process and store it (i.e., index it for cross references), recall it, analyze it, and articulate it. Students also vary in their physical capability, coordination, and psychological disposition, all of which affect their abilities to learn and to execute what they learn. Biologically based intelligence cannot be considered the sole determinant of success, however, given that environmental factors also significantly affect academic achievement. In other words, the biological assets or liabilities mentioned above have some impact, but they are found across ethnic and socioeconomic groups and cannot meaningfully account for the variance in the success experienced by students from low-income families.¹⁴

Students transport various social factors to the learning process such as the socioeconomic condition of their family, social network, and neighborhood. Further, there are cultural issues in play. Individuals come to school from homes where guardians (parents, relatives, and other officially authorized

protectors), neighbors, and friends bestow on them a complex set of values, morals, beliefs, and etiquettes; and these aspects of culture provide individuals a window into the human condition generally and into their condition in particular. They also affect an individual's ability to perform well in school.

When students enter a campus, several environmental conditions impact their educational experience. These include the instructional quality of the school¹⁵ and the official regulations students must abide by while on campus (clothing requirements, social guidelines, curriculum, and scheduling).¹⁶

Students also must integrate their personal capabilities and cultural orientations with the structure, culture, and professional capabilities of the school's staff. How well students integrate themselves in these three ways during various periods of high school goes a long way in determining how prepared they will be to transition to college. The process of education includes acquiring technical skills in language, calculation, and analysis, but during the process of education students construct social networks and adopt behavior etiquettes that can provide—or limit—opportunities for academic development and advancement.

It is best to understand that students in general are involved in a development process that includes a sequence of stages and transitions within primary school, high school, college, and postgraduate training. Thus, during high school, students may accumulate some of the educational assets available at that stage, but success occurs only when they accumulate a sufficient amount of the assets available before transitioning to the next stage. Any obstacle that impedes this accumulation process must be navigated so that the basket of accumulated assets is not so small as to compromise the effort to continue to the next stage. When the accumulation process is free of glitches, students can progress at the prescribed pace. When there is a glitch, they fall behind the prescribed pace and must either catch up or carry a limited amount of assets to the next educational stage. If there is a shortfall, the upshot is an increased unlikelihood of fulfilling their next stage goals.

Finally, it is important to point out that recent research has identified key factors that affect an individual's ability to accumulate the assets required for successful transitions. For example, in a very important book analyzing the transition question, Michelle Jackson and colleagues identified primary and secondary factors accounting for individual transition outcomes.¹⁷ In their studies, a primary factor was an individual's performance in executing academic activities, while a secondary factor involved choices the individual made regarding postsecondary education. This model revealed that a stu-

dent's social background directly influenced performance, which in turn influenced the process of choosing whether to attend college. Jackson et al. compared several societies and consistently demonstrated the importance of primary and secondary effects in the transition process. Their model did not, and perhaps could not given the compositional content of the aggregate data available, identify the variety of factors in an individual's social life that might have helped explain performance, nor was it able to consider how these factors acted and interacted to produce an individual's performance. Further, because it focused on an individual's social background and used statistical techniques to assess a factor's effect on an individual's performance, the model was not able to assess factors related to the school's daily operations that also played a role.¹⁸ Finally, homing in on the final choice of whether to attend college missed all the choices made during a student's high school experience that affected their performance—and their ultimate decision.

With all of these issues in mind, and utilizing participant observation to directly monitor how students, teachers, and administrators navigated their respective everyday responsibilities, the present study had three objectives: (1) to identify environmental factors that created obstacles for youth from low-income families during high school; (2) to examine how these obstacles worked to create specific difficulties; and (3) to analyze how the interrelationship of obstacles and choices affected their educational decisions.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this inquiry come from two primary studies—1991 to 1999 and 2000 to 2003—and four follow-up studies—2006 to 2008, 2007 to 2009, 2010 to 2011, and 2013 to 2014—of eleven schools over twenty-three years. Two of the studies were not specifically focused on education but involved the collection of participant-observation data in schools. The first (Study 1) assessed the dynamics of social change and stability in poor neighborhoods, and an important part of it included the functioning of the high schools in the five neighborhoods researched. This study, from 1991 through 1999, included five high schools: three in New York and two in Los Angeles.¹⁹ The second study (Study 2), from 2000 through 2003, investigated ethnic violence in high schools and involved three schools in Los Angeles and three in Oakland, California (see table I.1 for a list of all eleven high schools that will be discussed in this book).²⁰

TABLE 1.1 High Schools Included in the Study

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|-----------------------------------------|
| Lanape High School, Bronx, NY |
| Van Twiller High School, Bronx, NY |
| Knickerbocker High School, Brooklyn, NY |
| Chester Himes High School, LA, Calif. |
| James K. Polk High School, LA, Calif. |
| Tongva High School, LA, Calif. |
| Chumash High School, LA, Calif. |
| De Neve High School, LA, Calif. |
| Miwok High School, Oakland, Calif. |
| Kaiser High School, Oakland, Calif. |
| Ohlonne High School, Oakland, Calif. |

The follow-up studies I refer to above involved the same schools included in the first two studies but with a narrower focus. Whereas I approached the first study from an institutional perspective with the intent to analyze schools' role in the social order of poor neighborhoods and the second study from the perspective of the dynamics in which neighborhood ethnic conflict entered a school's confines, my focus in the follow-up studies (in 2006 through 2014) was on understanding *how* educational problems that low-income students encountered in high school affected whether they were able to transition to college. Thus, in the follow-up studies I more narrowly focused on the interaction of students, family members, peers, politicians, administrators, and teachers in the everyday business of high school. In sum, the first two studies accumulated data on educational issues but in the context of a broader question, whereas the subsequent follow-up studies focused exclusively on educational issues.

For a list of the schools in the present book that includes the schools' locations and the time periods when each was studied, the reader should consult table MA.1 in the methodological appendix.

Because all of the studies utilized participant-observation methodology, it is helpful to review the nature of the resulting data. Each study compared multiple neighborhoods so these sites needed to be representative of poor or socioeconomically changing neighborhoods in different cities.²¹ New York, Los Angeles, and Oakland, California, were selected to provide variation in factors such as administrative context and climate, but the exact neighborhoods were selected at random from a stratified list of potential sites. A detailed discussion of this selection process can be found in the methodologi-

cal appendices of my previous books, *Cracks in the Pavement: Social Change and Resilience in Poor Neighborhoods* and *Burning Dislike: Ethnic Violence in High Schools*.²²

The first two studies were comparative and involved high schools in each of the selected neighborhoods, although the first study also included an array of other institutions. Even though the reader can find detailed descriptions of the research sites in the methodological appendices of the two books mentioned above, I will provide an abbreviated description of the neighborhoods and schools that constitute data for the current book.

Among the three studies just mentioned, nine neighborhoods and eleven schools were researched over a period covering twenty-three years. There were five neighborhoods in Los Angeles, three in New York, and three in Oakland. Nine of the neighborhoods were primarily inhabited by low-income families, while two neighborhoods and schools, one each in Los Angeles and Oakland, were inhabited by middle-income families. A low-income neighborhood was defined as one in which more than 50 percent of the families living in them had low incomes. The following criteria was used to assess whether the neighborhood was low or middle income: the median income for an area reported by the Current Population Survey (jointly produced by the US Census Bureau and US Bureau of Labor Statistics); the median housing price of the area; and the number of families who were eligible for the US government's Federal School Nutrition Program for needy families. Thus, for the current study, this generally meant that "low-income" families with four members had incomes at or below 250 percent of the official poverty line (meaning, for example, at or less than \$34,810 in 1991 and at or less than \$44,007 in 2000). "Middle-income" families were those who had incomes of \$75,000 or more a year.

The schools in this study included students from a variety of ethnic groups that constituted the neighborhoods in which they were located. In the New York schools, the students primarily included the following ethnicities: African American, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Afro-Caribbean (Jamaican, Haitian, Barbadian, Trinidadian-Tobagonian), and small numbers of South Asian and Middle Easterners. In Los Angeles, the students included the following ethnicities: African American, Mexican American, Central American (Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, Guatemalan), as well as various European ethnicities who primarily attended the "middle-class" school. In Oakland, the students came from the following ethnicities: African American, Mexican American, Chinese, Vietnamese, Native American, and various European ethnicities who primarily attended the "middle-class" school. Further, in New York, Los