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On Equal Educational Opportunities and Unequal Educational Outcomes

Mr. Stein, at the first Parent-Teacher Association Meeting: “Welcome to CHS. I am proud to say that 80 percent of our graduates go on to college.”

Mr. Stein failed to mention that only 20 percent of CHS ninth graders ever graduate.

Over the past three decades a splendid series of federal and state decisions have secured the privilege of public schooling for all children.¹ Indeed, in the 1980s, public education can be considered fully legally accessible throughout the United States. Today questions of equity must focus not on educational *access*, but on educational *outcomes*. This introductory chapter articulates the emergent paradox—equal opportunities and unequal outcomes—as it takes readers inside CHS, a social context committed to both.

CHS: A Context of Equal Opportunities and Unequal Outcomes

Ronald: Every time I get on the subway I see this drunk and I think “not me.” But then I think, “Bet he has a high school degree!”

A comprehensive high school in upper Manhattan, CHS was available to any adolescent in the designated sending region of the borough. The student body was predominantly African-American and Latino, largely lower

income and working class. This school was, by reputation, *good*—according to representatives of the Board of Education and teachers as well as administrators throughout the city. To some this meant *safe*. The school ranked quite well in the board's analysis of disciplinary incidents in city schools. To others this meant *stable*. The principal was one of the senior principals in the city and had been at CHS for twenty-five years. To many this meant *pleasant*. The school was situated in a newly gentrifying, largely white, upper-middle-class section of the city, although a pocket of lower-income tenements still stood in the immediate vicinity. The clear message was that these students and their households, located primarily in central Harlem, would never survive the local scenes of "urban renewal."

Unlike the neighborhood, CHS welcomed any student in the zoned district. Mr. Stein took every opportunity to advertise his open-door policies, despite much faculty disapproval. Students who spoke no English, those labeled in need of special education, and those requiring Chapter I services were invited. Indeed, Stein prided himself on equal opportunity. But CHS, with full rhetorical display of equal access, ultimately graduated less than one-fifth of its original ninth graders. Those who graduated, and those who didn't, as Ronald vividly acknowledges, faced a dreary and uninviting economy.

When students drop out of a high school in majority proportions, their exit must be read as a structural, if not self-conscious, critique. In large cities, unequal outcomes are ghettoized so that some schools have barely discernible dropout rates, whereas for others dropping out remains a tradition (Designs for Change, 1985a). CHS falls in the latter category. To understand the rationalized flow of dropout from CHS, we need to examine the working conditions of this school: its student body, its fiscal allocations, and the experiences of its staff.

The Students and the Allocation Formula

Terrence (a student considering dropping out): I ain't got enough smarts to be in eleventh. I keep notes in a book and never lose it, but I'm like a mirror. I take it all in. Like you say a work and I don't know it, I look it up and I be saying it like, "IT'S MANDATORY" and then you think I'm smart.

In New York City, as in other urban districts, "low-skill" students tend to be funneled into their neighborhood comprehensive schools. CHS had, on register, 3,200 students, and, according to one estimate, operated at 144 percent of capacity. The mean reading level of entering ninth graders was 7.0, with math at 6.8, lower than any other high school in Manhattan

(memo, Office of the Superintendent of Manhattan High Schools, 1985). Overcrowding heightened staff alienation and student anonymity. The particular overenrollment of "low-skill" students reduced academic possibilities, magnified the problems imported into schools, and ironically eroded the resources available to students.

Guidance counselor to MF: Are you kidding? We don't have money for a social worker. All 3,200 students need a social worker. Luis just got overinvolved at home. [Luis was dropping out of high school to nurse his ill grandmother to health.]

In the early 1980s, New York State funds were underallocated to New York City, and, within the city, funds were underallocated to comprehensive high schools. At the time of this research, New York City enrolled 34 percent of the state student body and received only 30 percent of state funds. Not only was this disproportionate to sheer numbers, but the students residing in the city were, of course, disproportionately those with academic and family difficulties. More than 20 percent of New York City children lived in poverty, 55 percent resided in female-headed households, 43 percent of kindergarten students were "language minority" students, and 12 percent were classified as disabled (Advocates for Children of New York, 1985a & b).

From 1973 to 1983, the ratio of students to teachers in New York City had increased in nonvocational high schools by 27 percent. During the same time, class size grew by 16.6 percent, and the mean funding per high school student fell by 5 percent. By 1986, a 48 percent funding disparity was calculated between the best-funded schools and the most poorly funded schools in the city (Educational Priorities Panel, 1985, 1986). The best-funded schools were all vocational high schools, where class size averaged 28. The fifteen worst-funded high schools were all zoned, comprehensive high schools, where class size averaged 34.

In this fiscal context we find CHS, a neighborhood, nonselective, academic/comprehensive high school. Its 1983–1984 funding formula, in somewhat oversimplified form, was calculated by dividing the average number of academic classes passed by the number of students enrolled, and was weighted by the proportion of days in attendance. Schools were financially rewarded if they registered many students who enrolled in full-credit courses and who attended regularly.

Comprehensive high schools, predictably, suffered inflated student-teacher ratios and lower-than-average entering skills. Many students enrolled in remedial courses that yielded only half-credits, and most of those students were crummy attenders. Given that the allocation formula rewarded the total number of credits accumulated and consistent attendance, why would an already overcrowded school mobilize around retaining or

retrieving long-term absentees, truants, and dropouts? The allocation formula for New York City schools actually facilitated the neglect, if not the purging, of most students, especially those with academic difficulties, from comprehensive high schools (Educational Priorities Panel, 1985). CHS was no exception.

The Staff

At CHS, the school administrators were almost exclusively white. The teaching faculty was largely white, with some Latinos. Six or seven of the more than 120 teachers were African-American. This fact is striking in comparison with a city like Philadelphia, which mandates that high schools have a minimum of 21.3 percent and a maximum of 35.5 percent African-American (or white) teachers (Philadelphia Office of Personnel Operation, 1985). Paraprofessionals and aides at CHS were predominantly African-American women, many of whom did extraordinary amounts of emotional work in the school and received little pay and varied levels of respect for their labor.

Being oversized and underfinanced, as well as racially organized in the most stereotypic ways, CHS faculty and staff reported a profound sense of disempowerment. According to a 1985 Teachers College survey of CHS faculty and staff, "Approximately 2 out of 3 teachers felt that there was little interest shown to their classroom work either by staff or administrators" (Kane, 1985, p.6).

Although the precise impact of teacher disempowerment on education and students remains to be understood, an earlier survey of over 170 New York City teachers and counselors found that such disempowerment correlated highly with disparaging attitudes toward students (Fine, 1983). Educators who agreed that "no one around here listens to me" and "school policy doesn't reflect what I think about" were also likely to express critical and pessimistic views of students, for example, "These students are bad kids," and "The students can't be helped." The disempowered teacher may help to produce the disempowered student who, more often than not, in city schools, drops out.

Dropping Out and Surviving at CHS

MF to faculty: How would you feel if most students dropped out of the school that your own children attend?

Teacher at CHS: It's just sensationalist to compare this school with my children's school!

Compared with other New York City high schools, CHS reported a relatively high *annual* dropout rate: 20.5 percent compared with 11.4 percent citywide. The records report that a full 85 percent of those leaving CHS were classified as “overage”—meaning age seventeen in any grade. Twelve percent of those leaving CHS indicated that they had enrolled in an evening or alternative program, and only 3 percent left explicitly for reasons of employment. That same year, the New York City Board of Education Dropout Report (1984), defining a dropout as any student who “left school in 1983–84, did not enroll in another educational setting and who had not been counted as a dropout in previous years” (p. 1), extrapolated a 38.4 percent *four-year* dropout rate for senior high schools alone (260,000 students), which grew to 41.9 percent (306,000 students) after including middle schools, retrieval programs, and special education. Dropping out was a majority phenomenon at CHS.

Shifting the analysis to graduation rates at CHS gave little comfort. These data told an equally bleak story. In June of 1983, of a school of 3,200, 483 CHS students were expected to enter their senior year in the following fall. By the next June, however, fewer than 70 percent remained. Eventually only 60.7 percent of the *senior class* earned their way to June graduation. Whether you considered dropout or graduation rates, the figures for this typical comprehensive urban high school were distressing.

Reflections on CHS

CHS presents a warm image, a frightening set of numbers and a dismal portrait of urban comprehensive high schools in the 1980s. Mr. Stein was a talented orator of equal opportunity. By reputation the school was a delight, welcoming to all in the community. This generosity of access was, however, undermined systematically by the stinginess of outcomes. The rhetoric of equal educational opportunity grew suspect as the dropout rate bloated and the graduation rate shriveled. Perhaps this is only the historic legacy of “equal opportunity” under advanced capitalism, the legacy of public education in the United States. To place this school in its historic and contemporary context, we turn now to a brief analysis of equal access, and unequal outcomes, in U.S. public high schooling.

On Equal Opportunities

Beginning in 1954 with *Brown I* and later, *Brown II*, the U.S. supreme Court justices demanded that schools proceed in good faith and

“with all deliberate speed” to dismantle racial segregation (Bell, 1985). With Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, racial segregation within the public sphere of education was no longer to be tolerated. Shortly thereafter, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 called into question differential access by virtue of social class. Federal funds to state and local educational agencies were authorized specifically for compensatory services to children considered educationally disadvantaged—low income, migrant, and/or neglected.

Within seven years, gender was no longer a legitimate basis upon which to provide differential access. With the passage of Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1974, various state equal rights amendments, and the Women’s Educational Equity Act, we saw gender integration of the curriculum, equity in sports financing, and attention paid to the needs of pregnant and parenting teens. With race, class, and gender acknowledged as problematic with respect to educational access, exclusion on the basis of native language came under legal scrutiny in the *Lau v. Nichols* decision (414 US 563 1974).² When these were joined by the Bilingual Education Acts of 1974 (and then 1984 Title II Public Law 98511), the bilingual controversy exploded. Although much of the remedy was left vague, it was clear that equal opportunity required linguistic and cultural accommodation to diverse groups of students.

The moral community to which public education was *accessible* was rendered absolute with three more policy decisions. In 1972, when the parents of thirteen children labeled mentally retarded joined with the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC), the Court determined that denial of education to children deemed “uneducable and untrainable” violated the Pennsylvania State Constitution (*PARC v. Commonwealth*, 334 F. Supp. 1257). With the *Mills v. Board of Education* decision (348 F. Supp. 866) and the passage of P. L. 94–142, disabled children were guaranteed a “free and appropriate public education and related services” designed to meet their educational needs in the “least restrictive environment.”

Within a few years, *Plyler, Superintendent, Tyler Independent School District et al. v. Doe, Guardian et al.* found that children of undocumented workers, despite their parents’ status, could not be denied access to public schools.

These children can neither affect their parents’ condition nor their own undocumented status . . . Public education has a pivotal role in maintaining the fabric of our society and in sustaining our political and cultural heritage; the deprivation of education takes an inestimable toll on the social, economic, intellectual and psychological well being of the individuals and poses an obstacle to individual achievement . (1982, pp. 202–203).

With these decisions, legal access into public schools for all children residing in the United States was firmly established (Bastian et al., 1987).

And finally, although no law has mandated for equal opportunity for lesbian, gay, or bisexual students, New York City's Harvey Milk School now exists as an institutional statement of the need for such opportunity. In the early 1980s, the Institute for Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youths found its doors overwhelmed by adolescent truants and dropouts—students who, for reasons of harassment, violence, alienation, or academic difficulties, fled their original high schools. By 1985, the institute was credentialed as an educational facility by the New York City Board of Education (see Dennis and Harlow, 1986; Hunter and Schaecher, 1987), and within a year, the Milk School served twenty-two students, accumulating a waiting list of over two hundred.

The moral community to whom public education in the United States is committed has grown vast over this century, fully inclusive and absolute for children in this country.³ At the turn of the century, only 6.4 percent of seventeen-year-olds were high school graduates.⁴ By 1930 the figure rose to 2.9 percent. In 1950, 59 percent graduated, and in 1983, 73.5 percent of seventeen-year-olds were high school graduates (Graham, 1987). The gains since the turn of the century, in simple measurement of access “in” and percentage “out,” have indeed been impressive. And yet . . .

On Unequal Outcomes in the United States

Thirty years after the *Brown* ruling, a study of secondary education in Chicago, Illinois, reports the following:

Of 39,350 9th graders . . . 20,860 (53%) failed to complete high school in the public school system. In predominantly Black and Hispanic high schools, 65% failed to complete high school in the public school system.

In the high schools overall only 15% of the original 9th grade . . . both graduated and could read at or above the national average . . . only 8% of the original 9th grade in non-selective segregated high schools both graduated and could read at or above the national average (Designs for Change, 1985a).

If today is a day of broad educational access unsurpassed in our history, doubts linger about the “progress” we have actually made. Most low-income urban students reap little educational benefit from these three decades of progressive legislation. Despite *Brown I* and *Brown II* and Title VI, in 1985, 62.9 percent of African-American students attended predomi-

nantly minority schools and were substantially overrepresented among special education classes, referrals for suspensions, and expulsions. (Bell, 1985; Bastian et al., 1985). Today 68 percent of Latino children are enrolled in racially isolated schools, a substantially *greater* percentage than was true in 1968. And in 1985 in New York City only 60 percent of limited-English-proficient (LEP) students actually received appropriate services.⁵ In 1981 between 20 and 25 percent of all public school students were deemed eligible for Chapter I programs, but only half received these services.⁶ Despite much evidence to substantiate reading gains among Chapter I students, an African-American-white achievement gap reduced by 40 percent and evidence that students removed from Chapter I services gradually lose the gains acquired, funding for Chapter I has been slashed by approximately 20 percent in real dollars since 1981 (Grant Foundation, 1988).

Despite Title IX, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Women's Educational Equity Act (1974), female academic achievement continues to drop off relative to males at age thirteen, plateauing through secondary school in the disciplines of math, reading, social studies, and science. A 1985 California study demonstrates that only 37 percent of high school students in computer classes are female, and vocational high schools and training programs remain almost entirely sex segregated, with continued harassment of token young women in nontraditional sites (FARE, 1984; Zane, 1988).⁷ And with respect to disability,⁸ a national study of the proportion of special education referrals, placements, and mainstreaming across the twenty-eight largest cities in the United States reveals enormous variation. Placements fluctuate from 7.8 percent of those referred for testing in one state to 91.8 percent of those in another. Mainstreaming ranges from 35 percent to 99 percent of those labeled "learning disabled." Despite PL 94-142, in 1986-1987, as was true a decade earlier, only 67 percent of special education students were placed in general classes, with over 35 percent in "special" classes.

By the 1990s, laws designed to expand and "equalize" educational access have yet to be fully realized, and the adverse consequences are cumulative and substantial. But in the 1990s, no law can mandate equal outcomes. Indeed, the very notion is absurd. The structures of social arrangements, carved through capitalism, institutionalized racism, sexism, and handicapism guarantee unequal outcomes—despite and through public education (Ryan, 1981).

Dropping out of High School: An Icon for Unequal Outcome

Nilda (mother of Hector, about to be expelled): When they discharged my son I thought it was over, until the guidance counselor

told me that the dean couldn't do it [legally keep him out of school]. But she told me not to tell them that she told. I knew then it was a cover-up.

This analysis turns now to what is probably the crudest indicator of unequal educational outcomes: high school dropout rates. Dropout rates nationally fall at 25 percent. In many urban high schools, however, they reach 60 and 70 percent. Dropping out of high school is, in some schools, a nearly anomalous event. In other schools, it is a shared tradition. The latter schools are low income, urban, and often "of color," and in these communities, the consequences are almost always devastating. It is time that the policies and practices that ensure such inequitable outcomes for low-income urban students are revealed. In 1987, Assistant Secretary Chester Finn chose to dismiss the dropout problem as one of "social pathology" and genetics, one that did not concern "our" children.

The conventional view of the dropout problem turns out to be an amalgam of over simplification, distortion, self-interest, confusion and the clothing of other goals and agendas within a "motherhood" issue (p.5). . . To the degree that dropping out is caused by factors beyond the school's control the symptom is not likely to be eradicated by school-based remedies. Insofar as it is a manifestation of linked social pathologies and inherited characteristics . . . [i]t would be a blunder . . . to allow our concern for those who do not graduate on the traditional timetable to distract us from the quality of education—the actual skills, knowledge, behaviors and character—acquired by the six Americans in seven who do eventually complete their high school educations. (1987b, p 21).

In his essay, Finn camouflaged the very policies and practices that force most low-income urban adolescents to leave high school prior to graduation, and to leave in ways that appear to be *their choice*. Although the literatures of high school dropouts are, by now, rich, extensive, and not easily summarized, some basic pieces of information may provide a useful correction to Finn and a context for this ethnographic account of adolescent bodies moving into, and out of, their neighborhood high schools.

The Statistical Profile on Dropping Out

National figures estimate the attrition rate for the high school class of 1984 to be 29.1 percent (Rumberger, 1987). Alternatively measured, it is expected that 25 percent of fifth graders will not make it through to high school graduation (Mann, 1986; see also Rumberger, 1987). Perhaps the most ambitious, if limited, data set available on high school dropouts is from the High School and Beyond (HS&B) study, which tracked the 1980

cohort of thirty thousand high school sophomores across six years.⁹ Relying on HS&B, researchers found social class to be the finest predictor of who drops out of high school, with 22 percent of the lowest quartile and 8.9 percent of the highest quartile dropping out (Rumberger, 1987). Native Americans drop out more often (22.7 percent) than Hispanics (18.7 percent) who drop out more often than African-Americans (16.8 percent), who drop out more often than whites (12.2 percent), who drop out more often than Asians (4.8 percent). Among adolescents in the lowest *income* quartile, whites drop out substantially more often than African-Americans and Latinos. But in the *highest* quartile, whites drop out much less often than others. Wealth provides a substantially more efficient educational buffer for whites than for students of color.

Scanning for gender patterns, the main effects are what you might guess—males drop out a bit more frequently than females (14.7 percent versus 12.6 percent). But with race, ethnicity, and geography marbled through, the patterns shift considerably. In urban areas, for instance, Latinas drop out with far greater frequency than any other group (26.2 percent versus 20.2 percent Latinos, 15.7 percent white males, 15.3 percent white females, 24.4 percent African-American males, and 16.5 percent African-American females). Young women overall drop out of high school substantially more often than young men, for reasons that get classified as “family concerns” (37 percent of females versus 5 percent of males). Those who report more stereotypically feminine attitudes and expectations drop out at greater rates than those who represent themselves as less traditional.⁷ Pregnancy, parenting, and marriage, of course, disrupt young women’s educational careers more so than young men’s. In one analysis, it was demonstrated that 50 percent of young mothers (compared with 30 percent of young, self-admitted fathers) drop out, and a shocking 75 percent of those married and parenting leave high school prior to graduation (Barro, 1984).

Although the bulk of the dropout literature obsesses on characteristics of individual students who flee rather than on attributes of the schools from which they flee, some institutional data have been collected. Perhaps most significant for the purposes of this book, it has been documented that high school dropout rates fall somewhat as teacher-student ratios increase (Barro, 1984),¹⁰ and they rise as the numbers of teacher moves and transfer requests rise (Combs and Cooley, 1968). Student achievement drops with increases in teacher turnover (Ascher and Flaxman, 1987). And schools in which students report a lack of faculty interest, unfair discipline procedures, and widespread truancy (Wehlage and Rutter, 1986), as well as those with rigid retention policies, tracking procedures, and competency examinations, report relatively high dropout rates (Barro, 1984; Oakes, 1985). The institutional features likely to precipitate high dropout rates are most typical of

schools attended by low-income urban students (Ekstrom et al. 1986), those who are least likely to return to school within two years of their departure.^{11,12}

The Consequences of Dropping Out

Since low-income students disproportionately attend dropout-prone schools, and since they drop out more often than relatively elite peers, it is important to document the economic impact of their early departure from high school. Here we find even more elaborate layering of social inequity.¹³

A high school degree is economically more valuable to those who are already privileged by class, race/ethnicity, gender, and geography. Women's returns on each year of education are estimated to be 40 percent of men's, and African-Americans' are approximately 63 percent of whites'. *High school dropouts* living in the highest-income neighborhoods of New York City have a 42.4 percent employment-to-population ratio, compared with a 30.7 percent ratio for *high school graduates* in the poorest neighborhoods (Tobier, 1984).¹⁴ The high school diploma yields, for whites, men, and upper-middle-class students, consistently more per additional year of education than it does for African-Americans and Latinos, women, and working-class or low-income students, respectively. Among high school graduates age twenty-two to thirty-four, 8 percent of the white males live in poverty, as do 11 percent of the white females, 16 percent of the African-American males, and 31 percent of the African-American females. And among high school dropouts age twenty-two to thirty-four, 15 percent of the white men, 28 percent of the white women, 37 percent of the African-American men, and 62 percent of the African-American women live in poverty (U.S. Department of Labor, 1983). Whether dropout or graduate, African-American women are two to three times more likely to be poor than white women of the same age and education, and over four times more likely than white males. Not having a high school degree thus yields substantially different consequences by class, race/ethnicity, and gender. One might conclude, therefore, that a high school diploma bears little economic benefit for African-American and Latinos youths and adults. But one would be wrong.

Having a diploma does make a substantial difference *within* demographic categories. Although 62 percent of African-American female dropouts live in poverty, this compares with 31 percent for African-American female graduates. Although over 60 percent of female graduates hold white-collar positions, only 25 percent of female dropouts do so. Having a diploma yields much difference *within* groups, but it doesn't turn an African-American woman into a white man.

Youths who begin their lives at the greatest risks of class, racial or ethnic, and gender exploitation attend the most traumatized schools and

receive the most impoverished educations.¹⁵ They are most likely to exit prior to graduation, and they are least likely to reenter within two years. To worsen their stories, their *relative* economic disadvantage as dropouts is today substantially greater than it was in the past. A General Accounting Office report quotes Gordon Berlin, formerly of the Ford Foundation: "In the late 1960s a high school graduate was 30 percent more likely to be employed in the fall after graduation than dropouts; by the 1980s this gap doubled to 61 percent."¹⁶

When Equal Opportunities Mask Unequal Outcomes

The problem with American schools has been not their lack of purpose but their continued commitment to purposes rooted in social inequality and its attendant culture. (Katz, 1987, p. 144)

In urban areas, especially for low-income African-American and Latino youths, public schools may offer everyone *access* in, but once inside the doors of public schools, many low-income urban youths are virtually *disappeared*. Their bodies are classrooms until they reach the ceiling age for compulsory education. Usually that's seventeen. Thereafter, they are called "dropouts."

At CHS the rationalized production of dropouts happened not at the entrance door, and not in legally sanctioned, explicit ways. At CHS exclusion happens "when my Momma comes and they show her no respect." It happens when national suspension and expulsion rates double for Black and Latino students compared with those for white (non-Latino) students (National Coalition of Advocates for Children, 1986); when a guidance counselor says, "Act like that and you'll end up on welfare" while the student's family struggles to stay alive on the meager offerings of Aid to Families with Dependent Children; or when "moving out of Harlem" was supposed to be the "good" news following receipt of a high school diploma.

Exclusion festered inside the fifteen-year-old history book introduced by a white teacher to her African-American student body with the following apology: "This book is not too good on Blacks," a book in which nobody looked familiar. It existed in a literature class in which "good reading" signified the whiteness and usually the maleness of the authors, or a social studies class in which culture got defined as "what the Puritans and Pilgrims gave us," spoken to a group of African-American and Latino, blank-looking faces.

Exclusion was being held back in grade because you missed classes January through March, nursing your grandmother back to health after coronary surgery.

Diana (a seventeen-year-old dropout): My mother has lupus. She's dying and those doctors are killing her. Nobody speaks English good in my family, and she wants me there. My brothers and sisters, they little and need me.

It was feeling confused in class, but "embarrassed to ask for help." Exclusion was also being absent for five days and never being missed, or hearing that a diploma will bring you success, but knowing that your mother, uncle, and brothers, all graduates, can't find work.

Broderick (a sixteen-year-old dropout): Where else am I gonna make this money, even with a diploma? I know it's a risk, I just got out of Spofford [juvenile facility]. I worry about how my mother feels 'bout it . . . Sometimes I feel its immoral, when I sold Angel Dust to a pregnant girl. Won't do that again. But you can't have a heart up here . . . If I don't give it to her, someone will.

Exclusion was being recruited out of public high school by a proprietary cosmetology school at the school's Career Fair, excited that "I'm gonna get paid to go to school, and then get a job." And getting neither.

In the 1990s, every child may enjoy access to a public education. But in the 1990s, the *bodies* of some are exported out prior to graduation. These bodies are disproportionately bodies of color and of low-income students. These are the bodies that constitute the group euphemistically called "high school dropouts," as if they freely decided to go.

And in the 1990s, the *voices* of some are silenced while others are nurtured throughout their years of schooling. The silenced voices are disproportionately those who speak neither English nor standard English, the voices of the critics, and the voices which give away secrets that everyone knows and feverishly denies. Their secrets tell of racism; of an economy that declares itself prosperous while many live in poverty, sickness, and substandard (or no) housing; of an ideology of education as the Great Equalizer when there's little evidence; and of the secrets of sexism that claim the bodies and minds of their mothers, sisters, aunts, and themselves.

And finally, many children, along with their parents, guardians, and people from their communities, are constrained in publicly sanctioned opportunities to be *critical subjects*, creative makers of their own histories. Those denied entitlement to speak, be heard, and be respected inside public schools are most typically the children, adolescents, and adults of low-income, African-American, and Latino communities.

Exclusion operates powerfully and institutionally inside city schools. Although educational laws, policies, and practices have been dramatically transformed over this century, the exiling of those least privileged neverthe-

less persists, institutionalized inside those buildings we call “comprehensive high schools.” Exiling so thoroughly saturates public schooling, at least in low-income urban areas, that it requires no malevolence, no “bad guys,” no conspiracy. Teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and aides need only operate as dictated by the state, by history, by tradition, and by the demands for “efficiency.” As long as they do, often with good intentions and with what they presume to be the best interests of students, we will continue to witness unequal educational outcomes that correspond, by no means arbitrarily, to the contours of social class, race/ethnicity, gender, and disability.

Flagrant discrepancies have historically characterized *educational access*. Today they characterize *educational outcomes*. One would think that as a culture we would be alarmed. Yet in the face of contemporary exposés about adolescent illiteracy rates and extraordinary dropout figures, most still look to the individual child or family for the source of the problem. Consider Chester Finn’s analysis. No longer able to identify legally inscribed inequities or to claim that schools do not provide equal opportunity, educational despair pivots on “those people”—their genes and pathologies. Despite equal opportunities they seem to be unable, uninterested, or unmotivated to learn. They and their children are called “at risk.” Public attention spotlights on them, obscuring the perverse structures, policies, and practices that place them “at risk.”

Reflections on Unequal Outcomes

Dramatically different patterns of dropping out by social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and disability characterize U.S. public schools. The patterns stand as evidence that the promise of equal opportunity is subverted institutionally by the guarantee of unequal educational outcomes. Students who begin with the greatest economic disadvantages receive the least enriching educations and end up with fewer, less valuable, and historically deflating diplomas. And yet, even though public schools do reproduce existing social inequities, this book is written because public schools also offer us, potentially, a site, accessible to all, for the critique and transformation of these very inequities.

This text tracks public high school exclusion, that is, the (re)production of unequal outcomes, through the lives, words, and minds of high school students and dropouts from CHS. The story wanders into classrooms, eavesdrops on the autobiographies of graduates, and moves from the subways up to the apartments of dropouts and remaining students. The full

work seeks to unearth the ways in which public schools, still the primary public institutions of social democracy and opportunity, exile the bodies, minds, and subjectivities of most low-income, African-American and Latino youths in urban areas (Carnoy and Levin, 1985).