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Educational Tracking and Shelby County's Optional Schools

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Educational Studies

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Committee Approval

Educational Tracking and Shelby County's Optional Schools

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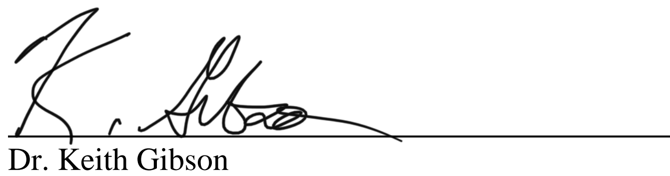

Dr. Keith Gibson

Date 9/16/2020

Abstract

Educational Tracking and Shelby County's Optional Schools

Mackenzie Lampner

This study focuses on educational tracking within Shelby County Schools in Memphis, TN. Often, the means through which students are assessed and chosen for optional or traditional classes are predicated on the concept of inherent intelligence and rooted in culturally biased conceptions of intelligence. In an effort to understand the relative equity of these programs, I studied the optional schools with respect to their student populous, entrance requirements, district ratings, and discipline practices. As a comparative case study I examined two optional schools, Idlewild Elementary and Cummings K-8 School, that are on opposite ends of the district ratings. I found that Black students in Shelby County face disproportionately high rates of discipline and disproportionately low rates of identification as talented and gifted as compared to their White peers. Ultimately, educational tracking is much more adept at identifying and reinforcing societal marginalization than reaching the individual educational needs of students in Shelby County. Rather than continuing these racist and classist trends in education, Shelby County should abolish the optional program and instead offer rigorous curriculums to all students. The district should utilize the district ratings as an indication of the relative needs of the students served by each school and provide support and resources responsive to student needs.

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Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the impact of the admissions requirements for elementary students to optional schools in Shelby County in regards to equity of opportunity and availability of high quality educational environments across the district. While optional schools across Shelby County share many requirements, such as attendance requirements, individual schools are able to determine their own admissions criteria for their programs. These criteria generally focus on either student conduct, academic performance, or a combination of the two. Conduct is often interpreted through student data such as behavior or attendance, whereas academic performance is determined by educational artifacts such as classroom grades or standardized test scores. I will seek to understand what motivates schools to focus on their desired admissions criteria as well as the extent to which the variance in criteria for admission to higher-quality public education exacerbates inequality on the basis of race and class in Shelby County.

At face value admission requirements focused on conduct or behavior within the classroom may seem more equitable than those based on academic performance as a measure of preparedness for advanced curriculum. Educational scholars have been critical of academic artifacts such as grades and standardized test scores, as they are misrepresented as objective measures of student intellect whilst consistently demonstrating an inability to appropriately capture the intellect of poor students and students of color (Au, 2016). These concerns are evoked in concepts such as the educational debt. Through her reconception of the achievement gap as an educational

debt, Ladson-Billings (2006) criticized the attribution of blame for the gap in achievement between students of privileged backgrounds and those who are traditionally underserved by our public education system. In comparison, conduct, characterized by a students' behavior within the classroom, or their consistent attendance at school conduct and attendance tend to be perceived as less influenced by socioeconomic factors that typically limit the relative success of marginalized students.

However, school measures of a student's conduct can carry similar biases as their more straightforwardly academic counterparts. In the same way that standardized tests and other formal ways for students to measure or demonstrate their intellect are envisioned within the context of the culture of middle-class White students, so too are conceptions of appropriate classroom behavior (Hatt, 2012). Classroom practices generally expected of students in order to be perceived as smart are rooted in hegemonic ideologies of the natural relationship of teachers and students, in alignment with Friere's (2018) theories of the banking model of education, wherein students are quiet empty vessels ready to absorb and retain information from their teachers.

In urban classrooms, there is often a dissonance in identity and culture between students and their teachers. American teachers are disproportionately White. In the elementary grades 79 percent of teachers are White, 9 percent are Latinx, and 7 percent are Black ("Characteristics of Public School Teachers," 2020). However, in Shelby County the teaching force is more closely representative of their students. As of the 2019-2020 school year 76 percent of educators in Shelby County were Black, 22 percent were White, 1 percent were Latinx, and 1 percent were Asian ("Shelby County Schools by the Numbers," 2020). Ultimately, regardless of their backgrounds, educators are able to

return to the classroom because they were academically successful themselves. The salary that teachers earn places them in a middle-class socioeconomic position, distancing teachers from working-class students and their families. These differences in perspective contribute to misalignment of teacher expectations and student behaviors. This disparity is especially salient in classrooms wherein teachers are not explicit about their expectations and intentional in their efforts to understand their students and incorporate the cultural competencies of their students in meaningful ways within their educational environments.

The cultural values and assets of minoritized communities are often left out of mainstream conceptions of intelligence; therefore,

> what a teacher attributes to students' general intelligence or ability might in fact be differences in cultural understandings. Many students become 'viewed as incapable of success despite having the capabilities to succeed.' … Hence it is important children be taught by teachers who value their cultural knowledge. (Hatt, 2012, p. 440)

Education is a social practice through which students share and exchange information with their teacher and with their peers. All students have different funds of knowledge, and disparities arise when these assets are not valued equally.

The Shelby County optional program contributes to the binary nature of the American educational system. Framed as a rigorous educational experience for exceptionally gifted and deserving students, this program functions to separate the "good" students from the "bad" students through tracking. As early as kindergarten, this program begins to segregate students anticipated to be successful from those who may

require additional support to be successful in a conventional classroom environment. For the latter, rather than receiving this support, these students are placed on their respective track and pushed out of their schools altogether through the cradle to confinement pathway (Morris, 2016). For these students, expected outcomes are academic failure, detachment from their educational environment, and early induction into the criminal justice system, again beginning as early as kindergarten (Morris, 2016). This study is intended to address the racial and economic equity of the Shelby County optional schools for elementary students. Specifically, the comparative case study (CCS) of two optional schools within the district is intended to highlight potential disparities within these programs as they relate to larger inequities in education. I situate my study within the existing literature on discriminatory school discipline and educational tracking in order to argue that the optional program exacerbates Memphis' history of racism.

Literature Review

This review of the literature first focuses on Shelby County's history and then details discriminatory school discipline and educational tracking beyond the county in order to contextualize the district's optional schools. When being considered for a seat in an optional classroom a student's attendance is often taken into consideration. While students are oftentimes punished for their attendance, as poor attendance negatively impacts a school's ratings and funding not-to mention capacity for student achievement, students, especially in the elementary grades, cannot be held responsible for getting themselves to school. Parents may struggle to secure transportation for both themselves and their children, which is generally attributable to a lack of investment in services, such

as high-quality public transportation, that would benefit Memphis's working-class population (Pohlmann, 2008). This systemic disinvestment in working-class communities of color, therefore, functions to limit the population of students eligible for programs such as Shelby County's optional educational program.

While seats in the optional classrooms are limited, the difficulty of obtaining a seat has not been felt equally by all students. Pohlmann (2008) detailed a trend in school choice wherein these schools "us[e] procedures that make it easier for better-off parents to navigate the maze necessary to attain the limited number of seats available" (p. 154). The Shelby County optional program received criticism for creating policies that acted to deter low-income families, even when their student met the requirements for placement (Pohlmann 2008). Families would wait in line for sometimes days, camping outside to secure a seat for their child. Policies such as this one clearly disadvantage single-parent families, those with limited access to childcare, and families that work evenings. While the optional program now offers an online application, this history is indicative of a lack of concern for equitable access to a higher-quality education that should be available to all students in Shelby County.

Discriminatory School Discipline

Cultural misunderstandings between teachers and students have tangible consequences for the low-income students and students of color who are most often affected. When teachers misattribute student behaviors and fail to provide culturally responsive classroom expectations they distance students from their educational environments and diminish their ability to develop close relationships in their schools.

For example, Morris (2016) details a tendency for White teachers to interpret the facial expressions of Black female students as disrespectful. Students are denied rightful access to their education due to the cultural biases of educators. Cunningham et al. (2019) found that "most punishment referrals originate within the classroom, and more times than not, the referrals are for students of color and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. … [A]s students are being pushed out of the classroom, they are not experiencing opportunities to learn" (p. 15). These students are being removed from the classroom and alienated from their prosocial learning environments due to cultural differences between teachers and students in urban schools (see also Morris, 2016). In this sense, normative or mainstream conceptions of positive classroom behavior are not neutral, and, by extension, neither are optional school admissions criteria based on conduct.

On the gaps in educational achievement between White and Black students in the American public school system, Ladson-Billings (2006) theorized that the compounded nature of oppression, both economic and social, contributed to generations of deprivation, creating and deepening inequitable educational experiences. Rather than use deficit-based language, Ladson-Billings instead posited that the "achievement gap" should be better understood as an educational debt, as

> each effort we make toward improving education is counterbalanced by the ongoing and mounting debt that we have accumulated. That debt service manifests itself in the distrust and suspicion about what schools can and will do in communities serving the poor and children of color. (p. 9)

Gaps in achievement, therefore, are far more indicative of inequitable distributions of

educational resources than gaps in potential between Black and White students. Educational tracking, such as the optional program, reinforces the inequitable opportunities that students had access to before the start of public education. Students are keenly aware when they receive less support in their schools, as well as when their teachers harbor racial biases that manifest as low academic expectations.

There is also a clear connection between disproportionality in discipline practices and "achievement gaps." Exclusionary discipline practices, often executed discriminatorily, contribute to gaps in academic achievement according to race. Morris (2016) found that

> One of the most persistent and salient traits among girls who have been labeled "delinquent" is that they have failed to establish a meaningful and sustainable connection with schools. The missing link is exacerbated by the increased reliance of public schools on exclusionary discipline, at present one of the most widely used measures to deal with problematic school behaviors. (pp. 2-3)

Our modern approach to school discipline, referred to as classroom management, originates from the history of American plantation owners managing the people that they kept in slavery (Casey et al. 2013). This White supremacist context infiltrates classroom environments and continues to produce discriminatory outcomes. Discriminatory school cultures, therefore, reify the gaps in achievement and behavior that they expect between students of differing class and race identities by unfairly targeting non-White students for behavior-based deficiencies and removing these students from their classrooms. Exclusionary discipline, therefore, limits access to instructional time as well as restricts close relationships with educators for students of color, further distancing these students

from high quality educational experiences. These factors demotivate students and continue to push them out of school and away from educational opportunities, such as the optional program in Shelby County.

Across the country, White students are 1.8 times as likely to be enrolled in at least one AP class than Black students (Miseducation, n.d.). Additionally, Black students are 3.9 times as likely to be suspended as White students. These national trends in discriminatory school discipline are replicated in the public schools in Memphis. Gifted and talented identifications in Shelby County are incredibly disproportionate according to racial divisions. While 76 percent of all students in Shelby County are Black and 8 percent are White, 39 percent of gifted and talented students are White, but only 36 percent are Black. Similarly, Shelby County suspends over 37 thousand students per year, a disproportionate number of which are Black students (Miseducation, n.d.). These data show that not only are Black students in Memphis suspended at higher rates than their White peers, they were also more likely to be punished for subjective actions, whereas White students tend to be punished for more objective infractions (Pohlmann, 2008).

This discrepancy in suspension rates and rationale between White and Black students suggests that teachers and administrators harbor a fear of Black students and remain unfamiliar with the cultural heritage of the students that they teach. For example, Morris (2016) explained that

> Black girls' nonconformity to traditional gender expectations may prompt educators to respond more harshly to the negative behaviors of Black girls. For example, a 2007 study found that teachers often perceived Black girls as being "loud, defiant, and precocious" and that Black girls were more likely than their

White or Latina peers to be reprimanded for being "unladylike." (p. 11)

The compounded nature of being Black and female functions to make Black girls feel unwelcome in their classrooms. Both formally and informally, Black students face disproportionate criticisms for subjective behaviors. In many instances, teachers unintentionally enforce dominant cultural expectations which dictate appropriate behavior. This misalignment between teachers and the students they serve contributes to gaps in discipline. These gaps have serious implications for academic potential, as students that feel uncomfortable in their learning environment are at higher risk for failure.

In the American public educational system, the adultification of Black children in schools begins at a young age and further contributes to the disparities in educational quality that students receive (Nebbitt & Lombe 2010). Morris (2016) found that

> some of the most egregious applications of punitive school discipline in this country have criminalized Black girls as young as six or seven years old, who have been arrested for throwing tantrums in their school classrooms, yelling and screaming at a teacher, and being disruptive to the learning environment. (pp. 3-4)

These findings indicate that Black children are held to high standards of behavior that disallow for and criminalize childlike behavior, such as tantrums. These children are not given compassion, understanding, or support as transition into a structured learning environment. Therefore, even beginning programs like optional education in the early elementary grades is not enough to overcome the pervasiveness of racial prejudices against youth in the United States. Any program seeking to track students based on their behavior or academic achievement will likely lead to further segregation within our

public schools.

Expectations for student behavior require children to maintain the composure of a meek adult for the majority of their waking hours. Rather than accommodating instructional practices to meet the needs of students, we attempt to accommodate our students into docile vessels for easy transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. Kirk & Kirk (2016) studied the academic performance of 54 African American preschool students from low socioeconomic backgrounds as one teacher changed her instruction to meet the needs of her students. After introducing ample physical activity into her instruction, this teacher noticed much more engagement and fewer problem behaviors, which are generally attributable to boredom and physical restlessness, than her colleague teaching in a control classroom. This study indicates that student academic performance falters when elementary school students are provided inadequate opportunities for active engagement within their classroom environments. This further suggests that any attributions of malbehaviors may be more easily remedied by meeting students' needs, rather than punishing or excluding these students from more rigorous, and therefore stimulating, curricula.

Educational Tracking and Low Expectations

Oftentimes, students that are perceived to be difficult or poorly-behaved are assumed to lack the academic capacity to master rigorous work and treated accordingly within their educational environment. The implicit and structural biases created by centuries of oppression function through tracking in the public education system to heighten existent segregation. Hatt (2016) argues that “giftedness is a social construct

that works to resegregate schools, wherein White students attend gifted programming while students of color are tracked into "regular" educational programming. … Whiteness and giftedness can be framed as inherently connected in schools" (p. 441). In other words, the concept of giftedness is constructed within the social context of the racism and classism in our society, resulting in racist and classist tracks of students within schools. This use of educational tracking as a tool to enhance within-school segregation is evident given consideration of the history of public education in Memphis. In Memphis, "slavery postponed the education of African Americans. Jim Crow laws left their subsequent educations separate and unequal. Then, court-ordered school busing to achieve school desegregation instead encouraged many more affluent people to leave the city limits altogether" (Pohlmann, 2008, p. 160). Pohlmann (2008) argues that the Shelby County optional program was created in an effort to reduce White flight. Optional classrooms within larger schools were seen as a viable alternative for families looking to keep their students in segregated classrooms without leaving the city altogether or turning to private schooling. While Memphis is no longer under de jure segregation, it remains one of the most racially segregated cities in the nation (Pohlmann, 2008). A lack of racial integration over time required active resistance to integration, suggesting that the White population of Memphis has an interest in keeping the city segregated.

Even if tracking did not function to keep classrooms racially segregated, in general, tracking only benefits the children who are already academically successful. Hatt (2016) explicates:

> students in the lower tracks are more likely to receive teachers poorly prepared in their subject matter and new to teaching … students in the lower tracks are also

more likely to experience pedagogy based upon rote memorization and an emphasis on learning the 'basics.' (p. 1144)

These attributes of students in the lower tracks align with the expectations that Anyon (1980) outlined of working-class schools, designed with an effort to push students through the educational system with the skills necessary to replicate their parents' professions. The process of identifying students for various tracks is highly subjective and leaves students' academic futures vulnerable to teacher biases. In practice, students who are tracked into remedial classes typically are not actually given additional support but are taught 'down' to and assigned less-skilled teachers, ensuring that they remain comparatively behind their classmates (Morris, 2016).

The confluence of race-and class-based prejudices as they relate to educational expectations and opportunities has been detailed by Morris (2016) and others as the school-to-prison pipeline, also referred to as the cradle-to-prison or school-to-confinement pathway (Cunningham et al., 2019). Working-class schools, especially in urban areas, face difficulties with teacher retention, which leads to repeated hiring of inexperienced teachers ill-equipped to recover the compounded educational losses working class students accumulate over years of inferior public education and inequitable access to educational resources before formal schooling (Anyon, 1980). For students who have become victims of the school-to-confinement pathway, educational prospects are even more dire. In her book, *Pushout*, Morris (2016) relates the stories of girls in detention. One girl, Malaika, described the unchallenging educational environment perpetuated in juvenile hall: "We're not really learning anything. [Our teacher] is not even going over it with us. We're just doing the work and put it in our folder. She don't

even check the work" (p. 150). While quality and engaging education could work against the educational debt owed to students like Malaika, the opportunities to do so simply are not available. Students recognize when they are not receiving adequate educational challenge and perform accordingly, contributing to the low expectations of students excluded from more rigorous educational tracks such as optional classes (Deplit, 2012; Hatt, 2012).

School choice can be particularly detrimental to students that face marginalization within our traditional public schools, as programs like Shelby County's optional track allow schools to more easily push out students that they find less desirable. This is evident in our nation's charter schools, as charter schools are extremely selective in the students that they accept in an effort to avoid the sanctions imposed on schools that fail to produce adequate yearly progress. Relative to traditional public schools

> charter schools have disproportionately low enrollments of special education students, English language learners, and boys, populations generally known to perform more poorly on standardized assessments … leav[ing] traditional public schools to educate a comparatively high-needs student population that the newly created schools has deemed unsuitable. (Scott, 2009, p. 130)

Tracking based on academic performance ensures that students who struggle the most in reaching standardized benchmarks of academic success will be trapped in increasingly underfunded public schools or the traditional and remedial tracks of public schools as they become increasingly under-resourced and overwhelmed with high-need students.

In reference to the justification of low expectations predicated on the belief that intelligence is fixed and therefore objectively measurable, Delpit (2012) analyzes a study

of taxi drivers in London (Maguire et al., 2006 as cited in Delpit, 2012). This study found that the longer a person had been driving a taxi the larger their hippocampus, which is the part of the brain that deals with spatial recognition. Delpit concludes that "this finding shows that not only ability but the actual brain structure was changed as a result of an environment that required practicing a skill. … [E]very human brain has the built-in capacity to become, over time, what we demand of it. No ability is fixed" (pp. 153-4). Realizing Delpit's critiques would require an abdication of any programs, like the optional schools in Shelby County, that encourage the further education of students that are perceived to demonstrate an early competence at the expense of their peers. We should engage all students, especially those who struggle, in the practice needed to be successful. Furthermore, we should be incredibly critical of the biases through which we come to identify students as either gifted or intellectually lacking. Traditional and optional ability tracking creates a framework in which a student that presents as naturally gifted is encouraged to practice this skill more than their peers, which is untenable within the construct of the growth mindset.

Theoretical Framework

In order to analyze the optional school data and relative equity of admittance guidelines I draw on Beth Hatt's (2012) theories of smartness as a cultural practice and Jean Anyon's (1980) social reproduction theories that schools function to replicate the socioeconomic status of the students that they serve. An essential perspective that I draw from both authors is an understanding of intelligence as socially constructed. Students are identified for gifted instruction within their schools based on shared conceptions of what

it means to be smart, generally derived from characteristics most commonly exhibited by middle-class Americans in close alignment with the class-based delineations that are present in the American public school system that Anyon (1980) outlines.

Anyon posits that there are four types of schools that exist in the United States: working-class, middle-class, affluent professional, and executive elite. Students receive radically different instruction in each of these environments, with the expectation that the process of educating students will prepare them for work similar to their parents. Expectations for student behavior and academic output, therefore, are dependent on their socioeconomic status. For instance, Anyon relates that, in the working-class school achievement was characterized by rote memorization and an ability to follow routine procedures. These pedagogical practices, however, also occur within schools through tracking. In this way, academic ability, including notions of giftedness, is primarily a measure of a student's social class and, most dangerously, masked as some way to gauge a child's inherent ability as if it is objectively measurable. Intellectual ability is predicated on many environmental aspects of life beyond formal schooling, such as infant nutrition or quality of childcare available to the family (Hillier et al., 2012; Jukes, 2005).

Hatt (2012) furthers the work of Anyon (1980) through her argument that "smartness or implicit intelligence is something done to others as social positioning" (p. 439). Standards of student behavior and academic performance vary depending on students' socioeconomic backgrounds (Anyon, 1980; Hatt, 2012). Students that do not assimilate to these standards of behavior are often mischaracterized as unintelligent by teachers unfamiliar with and disinterested in the students' cultures. Conceptions of implicit intelligence masquerade as objective facts and function in schools to reify the

unconscious biases of teachers and administrators. The justification of inherent smartness, or a lack thereof, allows students to be tracked and encourages academic stagnation. Hatt (2012) argues that students on the low tracks often disassociate themselves from school, as these students perceive the rote instructional styles of their teachers to be in discord with their self-perceptions as efficacious people. Therefore, tracking students can produce the expected results of each track, whether or not these students are in fact capable of more advanced academic work.

In this study I will examine whether these theories are observable in the composition of the Shelby County Schools optional program. Variance in enrollment and demand for available seats, congruent with the socioeconomic status of an optional school's surrounding neighborhood, is indicative of the sorts of class-based pedagogies observed by Anyon (1980) as well as the social positioning according to race and class posited by Hatt (2012).

Methodology

In order to understand what bearing the measurements of student academic performance and conduct have in accordance with social class delineations, I analyzed the admissions requirements for elementary students interested in joining an optional classroom in Shelby County with respect to the relative demand for these programs as determined by participation, or lack thereof, in the lottery process. In Shelby County, there are 108 schools that serve elementary students. Of the 25 schools that offer optional curriculums, 11 are entirely optional, meaning that every student in every classroom within that school is considered optional and was required to demonstrate some

competencies to be admitted ("Types of Optional Programs, n.d."). There are 14 "school-within-a-school" optional programs serving the elementary grades in Shelby County. These optional classes exist within a school that may also offer traditional or remedial classes to students. Students in these optional classrooms must still meet the program requirements for admittance.

Data regarding the optional schools, their students, and the requirements for admission are available on the Shelby County Schools website (available at https://www.scsk12.org/optional/). I analyzed demand between optional schools across Shelby County by comparing available spaces per year and whether a school was required to participate in the lottery selection process with their district scorecard rating. For this study, I focused this district-wide analysis on data for the second-grade availability, as these data are least likely to be influenced by disproportionate first-year availability in the kindergarten or first-grade years. As one might expect, many more seats are available in the first year that schools offer optional programs, thus second-grade seats are more likely to capture average availability than the first year a school offers optional classes.

I elected to do a comparative case study (CCS) to "attend simultaneously to macro, meso, and micro dimensions of case-based research" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 6). Following, Bartlett & Vavrus (2017) I was interested in moving past the more common "compare and contrast" logic and instead focused on a "tracing across" of cases. Bartlett and Vavrus further argue CCS should be seen as a heuristic from the Greek "to discover… how much we might achieve through comparison" (p. 6, emphasis in original). In comparing optional schools within the context of Memphis, I was interested

in coming to understand how these schools, connected through their district and curriculums, provide varying experiences to students dependent on their race and class identifications.

When categorizing optional schools for analysis (N=25), I utilized participation in the lottery process to be indicative of the relative demand, or lack thereof, for the available seats in the program. In this process, I found that there was a substantial difference in the quantitative requirements for the standardized test scores of applicants. I calculated the average school performance for optional schools according to lottery participation and testing requirements. First, I calculated the second grade available spaces, which ranged from 0-40. Next, I examined the percentile requirement for each school (the percentile students needed to score in in order to be able to qualify). Of the 22 schools that had a percentile requirement, they ranged from 50 percent to 80 percent. Notably 3 schools had no percentile requirement, but only examined behavior evaluation. 8 of the 25 schools had a lottery system. Next, I compared the overall school performance rating, a metric on a five point scale, where 4-5 is excellent, 3-3.99 is good, 2-2.99 is fair, and 1-1.99 is needs improvement. Of the 25 optional schools, only one was deemed as in need of improvement, 5 scored fair, 13 were seen as good, and 6 were rated excellent.

Seven optional schools do not specify a standardized test score requirement for admittance into their program; however, four of these schools had average grade requirements in the place of standardized test scores. To better focus my analysis, I chose to compare the school with the lowest overall rating and highest overall rating. This selection is not intended to be representative of the entire optional program, but, rather, to provide two examples worthy of analysis (Stake, 1995). Further, Stake (1995) described

an approach to case study research focused on a case being "intrinsically" worthy of study. Thus this study is meant to elucidate the relative experiences of students at these specific optional schools, rather than to provide insight into the entirety of the Shelby County optional experience.

I focus on Cummings K-8 school in Soulsville and Idlewild Elementary in Central Gardens as a CCS of the variance in optional schools in Shelby County. The schools are both entirely optional and share a dedication to a STEM-focused curriculum. These schools vary in terms of their historical and present day racial and economic backgrounds, which seemingly presents itself in the relative demand for each school, as Idlewild Elementary has fewer open positions beyond kindergarten than Cummings K-8 School. Cummings K-8 School has a minimum threshold for standardized test score performance, whereas Idlewild Elementary is entirely reliant on conduct. In the section that follows, I provide an overview of the optional program in Shelby County Schools, detail school performance ratings, compare and contrast admissions requirements, school racial demographics, free and reduced-price lunch, and lottery participation of all 25 schools before turning specifically to a CCS of Cummings and Idlewild.

Discussion

Overview of the Optional Program in Shelby County

In order to understand the implications of the findings of this study, I first provide an overview of the SCS optional program, then discuss the districts' school performance data, and finally present a comparative case study of two of the district's optional schools. The optional program in Shelby County is a tuition-free program that offers

creative and rigorous coursework to students. Each optional school has a specialized pedagogical focus, such as STEM or Creative and Performing Arts ("Optional schools," 2020). The Shelby County School district outlines the types of optional schools that are in the district as well as the potential available spaces per grade level for the upcoming school year. The optional schools function as a subset of Destination 2025, the district's mission of ensuring that students graduate from SCS college and career ready. The district shares data regarding optional students' relative preparedness for college, as "optional students exceed ACT College-Readiness benchmarks in all subjects with 23.8 average composite score" ("Optional Schools," 2020). In this way, the optional programs can be understood as an effort to distinguish between the students that should be focused on college and those who should prepare for a trade. Interestingly though, Shelby County situates the optional schools within the framing of school choice, suggesting that students and families can independently choose to enroll their student in any optional school in the district.

There are 106 elementary schools in Shelby County. For students in grades K-6, there are thirteen schools that offer entirely optional curriculums and fourteen school-within-a-school optional programs. Shelby County states that optional schools may differentiate their criteria for student admittance but that schools may take into account grades, conduct, skills, behavior, and attendance. Every optional school shared the admissions requirement that "applicants must have satisfactory skills and behaviors and achieve mastery in all academic and support subjects on the most recent report card" ("Optional School Entrance Requirements 2020-21," 2020). This statement generally reflects that students will not meet criteria to enter or remain in an optional classroom if

their report card shows anything below satisfactory (S) for classroom and support conduct. This means that a student could meet the requirements for their chosen school but would be precluded if their participation in gym class was deemed unsatisfactory (U) or not acceptable (N) decided at the whims of that support educator. The vagueness and subjectivity of the term satisfactory, as opposed to a benchmark on a standardized test, limits the ability of families to know exactly what these schools require in order to advocate for their students. Applicant and renewal students were also required at every optional school to have no more than 15 absences, tardies, and/or early dismissals per year.

The application process is now done online, with priority given to students with siblings already in attendance and those that live in close proximity to the school ("Optional Schools Lottery Selection Process," 2020). Applications are first evaluated to determine whether a student meets the requirements to attend their chosen school. When demand overwhelms available seats in the optional classrooms, students are chosen through a combination of 80 percent first-come first-serve and a lottery for the remaining 20 percent. For the 2020-21 school year only 15 schools participated in the lottery process. Eight of these schools serve elementary students.

School Performance Ratings

The district rates school performance on a scale of 1-5 with consideration for student academic growth, academic achievement, and school climate ("School Performance Scorecard," n.d.). Academic achievement is characterized by the percentage of students mastering or on-track to master the ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies

standards and accounts for 40 percent of the overall rating for elementary schools in the district. Academic growth is measured by the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) of student growth year to year, and also accounts for 40 percent of the overall rating. The school climate rating is determined by attendance rates, suspension rates, and expulsion rates and accounts for 20 percent of the overall rating for elementary schools. SCS indicates that a school awarded between a 4-5 is considered excellent, 3-3.99 is deemed good, 2-2.99 is fair, and a school rated 1-1.99 needs improvement. Of the schools that offer optional curriculums, 1 is rated needs improvement, 5 are fair, 13 are good, and 6 are rated excellent.

Shelby County Schools provides data detailing projections for available spots in optional programs across grade levels, which the district states is intended to inform parents interested in enrolling their student in an optional classroom ("Optional transfer tentative spaces available by school and grade for 2020-21," 2020). In Table 1 below I have compiled the optional schools which serve elementary students in Shelby County, their available spaces in the second grade, whether these schools were required to participate in the lottery, their overall school performance rating, and the percentile on the requisite standardized tests of math and reading ability required for attendance. Additionally included is the percentage of students at each school that qualify for free or reduced price lunch (FRPL), as well as the percentage of students who are Black and White (Civil Rights Collection Data, 2015). I chose to compare Black and White students because of the distinct history of racism in the United States, and especially in Memphis. The majority of students served in Shelby County schools are Black; however, the majority of students enrolled in the optional schools are White. This disproportionality is

directly attributable to racism directed at Black people within the context of enslavement and segregation in the American South.

Table 1

SCS Elementary Optional Schools Data

School	2nd Grade Spaces	Percentile Requirement	Lottery Participation	Overall School Performance Rating	Percentage of FRPL	Percentage of Black/White Students
Balmoral-Ridgeway Elementary	15	70	no	3.9	76.3	85.6/4.2
William H Brewster Elementary	10	60	no	3.1	98.6	73.3/1
Brownsville Road Elementary	20	60	no	3	85.1	81.4/4.1
Cordova Elementary	12	65	yes	3.2	59.9	57.7/21.9
Cummings K-8 School	20	50	no	1.6	96.2	98.5/0.7
Delano Elementary	5	50	no	4.3	91.4	92.2/3.2
Double Tree Elementary	20	n/a	no	3.1	84.9	96.7/0.6
Douglass	0	c average	no	2.8	96.6	95.7/0.0
Downtown Elementary	10	65	yes	4.1	79.3	91.8/4.4
John P Freeman	10	65	yes	4.2	66.7	97.8/0.4
Germantown Elementary	8	70	yes	3.9	52	59.2/20.5
Grahamwood Elementary	10	80	yes	4.1	64	23/33.4
Idlewild Elementary	3	n/a	yes	4.3	50	64/26.2
Keystone Elementary	25	60	no	2.8	92	92/1.7
Oak Forest Elementary	15	65	no	3.9	78	82.6/2.9
Peabody Elementary	3	60	yes	3.8	72.5	76.2/19.4
Riverwood Elementary	30	70	no	4	61.8	54/23.6
Rozelle Elementary	25	c average	no	3.9	84.5	95.6/0.7
Sherwood Elementary	40	55	no	2.9	93	77.6/2.3
Snowden School	20	70	yes	3.9	71.1	67.4/18.5
Springdale Elementary	25	n/a	no	3.4	96.6	95.9/0.0
Treadwell Elementary	0	c average	no	2.5	95.4	55.3/2.7
Vollentine Elementary	20	c average	no	3.2	95.6	91.1/1.6
Whitehaven Elementary	13	55	no	2.8	88.6	94.2/0.8
Willow Oaks Elementary	10	60	no	3.7	92.3	55.9/5.9

Admissions Requirements

Optional schools that participated in the lottery required mean test scores of 68.57, whereas the mean requirement for non-lottery optional schools was only 59.55. These data show that optional schools that participated in the lottery required test scores to be ten percentile points higher than schools wherein seats were not in high enough

demand to require participation in the lottery. This difference in the test score requirements indicates that schools with fewer seats in their optional classrooms with high demand are generally interested in filling these seats with students of privileged backgrounds, rather than seeking to create equitable educational opportunities for students in Memphis. When demand for an optional program is high, these schools often take the opportunity to raise the threshold for standardized test score requirements in order to accommodate their preference for high-performing students. This results in higher overall school performance ratings, as these schools choose students with high rates of attendance, low rates of discipline, and high standardized test scores.

Free and Reduced Price Lunch

As a district, 81.7 percent of students served by Shelby County qualify for FRPL. Schools with a higher than average percentage of students eligible for FRPL had an average district rating of 3.08, whereas schools serving a lower than average percentage of students eligible for FRPL had an average rating of 3.94 ("School Performance Scorecard," n.d.). These data align with Anyon's (1980) findings regarding variance in educational rigor and substance related to socioeconomic status. The percentage of students eligible for FRPL is indicative of the relative wealth of the families served by the school, and the tendency for school ratings to increase as the percentage of eligibility for FRPL decreases suggests that students of higher socioeconomic status have access to more highly regarded educational environments.

Racial Demographics

Districtwide, 75.9 percent of students in Shelby County are Black and 7.6 percent

of students are White (Civil Rights Collection Data, 2015). There were 7 optional schools with an above average and 18 with a below average presence of White students. The optional schools with a below average presence of White students had an average district rating of 3.29, while those with an above average presence of White students had an average of 3.89 ("School Performance Scorecard," n.d.). These findings are congruent with Hatt's (2012) theories regarding smartness as culturally aligned with Whiteness. The fact that schools that are disproportionately White in comparison to this district tend to be more highly ranked is indicative of a cultural bias towards interpreting Whiteness, wealth, and intelligence to be interconnected. This tendency serves to further privilege these students at a detriment to their non-White peers. The highly segregated nature of our cities, and our schools by extension, allows for heightened inequity of educational resources and experiences.

Lottery Participation

There was also a difference in the average rating of schools according to the distinctions of lottery participation and test score requirements. Schools that participated in the lottery had an average rating of 3.9 whereas schools that did not had an average rating of 3.2, placing these groups on either end of the good rating. This indicates that on average, there is higher demand for optional schools with higher ratings. Schools that utilize standardized test scores for admissions criteria had an average rating of 3.4, whereas schools that do not utilize standardized test scores or average grade requirements for their admissions criteria had an average rating of 3.6. This difference, while less severe, suggests there may be a connection between schools that are less reliant on testing

as an admissions criteria and higher district ratings leading to increased demand for available seats. While charter schools are accused of being overly selective when choosing students, the same phenomenon is apparent between optional schools in Shelby County. With limited enrollment and high demand optional programs can be highly-selective, especially those situated in affluent neighborhoods. Given that optional schools that are not reliant on standardized test scores are ranked higher than those that are, it would appear that these programs utilize additional, more subjective criteria to admit students.

Comparative Case Study: Cummings K-8 School and Idlewild Elementary School

To further investigate the differences in optional school admission in Shelby County, I share a CCS of two schools: Cummings K-8 School and Idlewild Elementary School. Both schools are entirely optional, and each boasts a strong STEM focus. They are situated in different neighborhoods in Memphis that vary most notably in economic class. Data shared by SCS regarding these optional schools suggests that students cannot expect comparable educations from different optional schools across the district. This is in accordance with variance in demand for seats in optional programs across the district, as demand for seats at Idlewild required use of the lottery system while Cummings did not. Based on SCS data showing tentative spaces available for optional students per grade level, it is significantly more difficult to enroll a student at Idlewild beyond kindergarten, as Kindergarten availability is at 40 seats and drops to either 3 or 5 at each later grade level. For comparison, Cummings availability shifts between 5, 10, and 20 seats through each grade level. The results of this CCS indicate that the differences in optional schools

across the district provide vastly different educational opportunities to students, exacerbating inequitable opportunities already present in Shelby County.

Cummings K-8 School is located in Soulsville, a predominantly African American neighborhood serving as a center of art, music, and tight-knit community in Memphis home to the Stax Museum, Stax Music Academy, and Memphis Slim Collaboratory. Soulsville has also faced decades of economic decline (Stennett, 2019). Conversely, Idlewild Elementary was a predominately White institution in the Central Gardens neighborhood designed to resemble a suburb within the city of Memphis ("History," 2017). Rhetoric detailing the experience of the civil rights era in the Central Gardens neighborhood frequently mentions a fear of encroachment of crime and criminals from the city into their suburban development. The history of the neighborhoods that these schools are located in is relevant, as it provides insight to the resources that were likely available to past generations. Educational debt owed to the Soulsville community is felt more strongly than in Central Gardens, and current data suggests that this disproportionality in community investment has continued (Ladson-Billings, 2016).

The Department of Education collected data for each of these schools through the Civil Rights Data Collection program in 2015. Both schools hold Title 1 classifications, meaning that they receive additional federal funds to educate large populations of low-income students. However, their percentages of these students differ significantly. At Idlewild, 50 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, whereas 96.2 percent of students at Cummings qualify. Idlewild serves 484 students, of which 26.2 percent are White, 2.1 percent are Latinx, and 64 percent are Black. Cummings serves 537 students. 98.5 percent are Black 0.7 percent are Latinx and 0.7 are two or more races.

Of the 1-5 rating awarded to every school in Shelby County based on academic achievement, academic growth, and school climate, Cummings is rated 1.6 and Idlewild is rated 4.3. Cummings, therefore, is deemed needs improvement, whereas Idlewild is rated excellent ("School Performance Scorecard," n.d.). Of all the optional schools in Shelby County, Cummings K-8 School is the lowest rated and Idlewild Elementary is one of two schools with the highest rating. The variance in district rating in these optional schools suggests that the higher concentration of low-income students presents a disproportionate strain on the schools' resources, lessening the ability to effectively serve all students.

Although the schools overlap in many respects, data collected through the Civil Rights Data Collection program affirms that there are significant differences with respect to race and school discipline in these schools. Of Idlewild's 484 students, 26.2 percent are White, 2.1 percent are Latinx, and 64 percent are Black. However, of their 19 out of school suspensions 78.9 percent of students disciplined were Black, 10.5 percent were Latinx, and 10.5 percent were White. Of the 537 students that attend Cummings K-8 School, 98.5 percent are Black 0.7 percent are Latinx and 0.7 are two or more races. All 98 students disciplined with in school suspensions, out of school suspensions, and expulsions were Black. While Cummings had much higher rates of exclusionary discipline than Idlewild, Idlewild's use of exclusionary discipline was disproportionately felt by their Black students. These findings are in accordance with national school discipline trends, as Black students are overly-scrutinized in any environment and disproportionately disciplined in less-segregated school environments (Miseducation, n.d.). These data, showing racial disproportionality in school discipline practices,

suggests that Black students, even when admitted into an optional program, are not served with fidelity to the same degree as their White and Latinx peers.

While only 24 percent of teachers at Idlewild were absent more than 10 days per school year, this number was 60 percent at Cummings. Teachers at Cummings were almost five times more likely to miss more than 10 days of school per year. This suggests that students at Cummings experienced less consistent instruction and had diminished opportunities to foster trusting relationships with their educators. Educators at Cummings were less present to implement and deliver a rigorous curriculum to their students. This is in accordance with data that suggests that students at Cummings are receiving a lower-quality education than their optional counterparts at Idlewild. Although students at Cummings are deemed optional, an important distinction is that they are optional for their socioeconomic status. These programs vary substantially in accordance with their students' socioeconomic status, as predicted by Anyon's (1980) analysis of social class and the hidden curriculum.

Program Demand and Available Seats

Additionally, Cummings K-8 school and Idlewild Elementary School show variance in the relative availability of seats in each grade level. This variance is indicative of the schools' philosophies regarding student potential. Cummings serves students in Soulsville from kindergarten to eighth grade with optional classrooms beginning in first grade. Idlewild serves students in Central Gardens from kindergarten through fifth grade with optional classrooms beginning in kindergarten. The table below shows the tentative available spaces for the 2020-21 school year for each school ("Optional transfer tentative

spaces available by school and grade for 2020-21," 2020).

Table 2

Available Spaces by Grade Level

	kk	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Cummings		20	20	20	5	5	20	10	5
Idlewild	40	5	3	3	5	5			

The decision to begin the optional program in kindergarten, and the fact that the vast majority of the seats offered from Idlewild are in kindergarten, is not without consequence. Pohlmann (2008) noted that poor children "tend to start school at achievement levels that are roughly two years behind their non-poor counterparts and are less than half as likely to achieve proficiency at designated junctures" (p. 2). While Shelby County is in the process of providing Pre-K to all students, kindergarten is currently the first year of formal education. Students from families unable to enroll their child in Pre-K are at an immediate disadvantage as they attempt to accommodate to a formal educational environment. If a student is unable to demonstrate high levels of achievement at the outset of their educational career it becomes very unlikely that they will be able to enroll in Idlewild. The inclusion of an optional classroom at the kindergarten level and the high concentration of availability in this grade functions to preclude students who are more school reliant from admittance into Idlewild's optional program, and due to Memphis' history of racism and systemic discrimination, Black students are far more likely to be school reliant than their White peers (Delpit, 2012).

This is further evidenced by the disbursement of seats across grade levels at both Cummings and Idlewild. Cummings does not offer optional kindergarten and provides

many more opportunities for students to enter the optional program later in their educational career. At Idlewild, however, optional classroom seats are much more competitive, as availability drops by 35 seats after kindergarten and does not increase to accommodate students at higher grade levels. Idlewild beginning the optional program in kindergarten, in tandem with the relative difficulty a student would face transitioning into the optional program at Idlewild, communicates an interest in favoring students from privileged backgrounds as well as a disbelief in the growth mindset. The organization of the program wherein students are admitted at the very outset of their educational career with little fluctuation as they mature suggests a perspective in which students are either born optional or not. Few students will enter or exit the program beyond kindergarten; once in the program, students will retain their status as optional, bolstered by the exclusivity of the title within their educational space. The exclusivity of the optional program at Idlewild and the difference in desirability of the programs further suggests that optional programs do not offer equally rigorous educational experiences to students in Memphis.

Conclusion

Black students account for 76 percent of students served by schools in Shelby County, but only 36 percent of students identified as gifted and talented within the district (Miseducation, n.d.). In Memphis, this identification of gifted and talented includes both students enrolled in optional programs as well as students enrolled in the CLUE program. This alarming disproportionality between the overall student population and those identified as gifted and talented suggests that the district's optional programs are strongly

influenced by the deeply entrenched racism in American society. I drew on the work of Anyon (1980) and Hatt (2012) in order to understand how these systems of educational tracking embedded in our public educational system function to recreate the existent socioeconomic status of students. Recognizing that this inequity likely stemmed from a confluence of many factors, I analyzed school data, such as school performance ratings, available spaces, demand for available spaces, admissions requirements, the relative poverty of the students served by each school as measured by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch, and the percentage of Black and White students at each school. I found that school performance ratings increased in tandem with factors such as increased standardized test score requirements, lower percentages of students eligible for FRPL, and higher enrollments of White students.

I then examined in more detail two optional schools, Idlewild Elementary and Cummings K-8 School, as a CCS of the variance in the optional schools within Shelby County. Most notably, these schools demonstrated disproportionate disciplinary tendencies according to race, which invariably contribute to systematic disidentification of Black students as smart and capable of the rigorous curriculums offered in the optional programs. These findings indicate that programs like the Shelby County optional schools contribute to the social construction of intelligence and function to enforce racism and classism in America's public schools.

Implications

While resources tend to follow White students, it would be a mistake to suggest forced integration, such as transferring students from Cummings to Idlewild, would

resolve issues of educational inequity (Brown & Lissovoy, 2011). The history of the Memphis public schools suggests that these efforts result in heightened inequity, as the Shelby County Schools optional program was itself an effort to encourage White students to remain in the public schools following educational integration. We have a societal responsibility to ensure that all students are supported within their educational spaces (Anyon, 2014). Pohlmann's (2008) study of the schools in Memphis led him to posit that "output gaps have more to do with the academic disadvantages that low-income students bring to school with them than the quality of the educational resources available once they arrive" (p. 160). This suggests that low income students arrive at school performing at lower levels of achievement not because of inherent differences in academic potential or learned cultures of poverty, but because the nature of America's capitalistic society ensures that these students will be less prepared than their privileged peers who had consistent access to good nutrition, highly stimulating and trauma-averse environments, and early educational resources. Therefore, programs like the Shelby County optional schools, regardless of their admissions criteria, continue to privilege those who can arrive at school without the aforementioned educational disadvantages of poverty. For these reasons, Shelby County should abolish the optional program, and instead seek to invest comprehensively in all students, as we recognize that ability level and academic performance are not objectively measurable or inherent to our students.

Unfortunately, parents cannot trust that their student will receive an equitable education throughout Shelby County. In Shelby County and across the nation, parents should be cognizant that not all schools are provided equal resources, and that these resources tend to be concentrated in schools that serve wealthy communities. Parents

should recognize their collective power and demand better for their children and their community. School board members are elected officials, meaning that their employment is tied to their job performance through voting. Concerned parents and community members should organize and contact their representatives, both at the local level and at the state and national levels, as well as ensuring to research those up for election and vote for representatives they feel will endeavor to meet their needs. Ultimately, obtaining a seat in an optional classroom is a competitive process that requires meeting a minimal academic threshold, avoiding discriminatory educational discipline, and having familial advocates with navigational capital (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). Rather than acting as though test scores, classroom behavior, and school attendance are color-blind and class-blind occurrences, the Memphis educational system has a duty to respond to the underlying causes of these differences in order to serve all students, not merely those who perform on tests or are perceived to be well-behaved. No student should be required to conform to racist notions of intelligent behavior in order to be deemed worthy of a high-quality, rigorous education. Programs like Shelby County's optional schools function to divert educational resources away from students that disidentify or are disidentified with culturally constructed conceptions of smartness.

The meaningful disparities found between the optional programs at Idlewild and Cummings schools is indicative of the problematic nature of optional programs as a whole. While both schools are housed under the school choice section of Shelby County's schools, there is much higher demand for the seats at Idlewild Elementary than Cummings K-8 School. This difference in demand is attributable to the differences in the quality of education offered by each institution, as measured by their district ratings and

rates teacher absenteeism, as well as the disciplinary practices held by the schools. While both schools used exclusionary discipline, Black students at Idlewild were disproportionately affected in comparison to the White students enrolled in the optional program. This suggests that even when Black students are given access to seats in these exclusive programs they are not fully accepted in their classrooms. With Idlewild's emphasis on behavior as the main determinant of admittance and retention this disproportionality is especially alarming and could account for student pushout and turnover.

Education is not equal in this nation, and therefore adopting practices widely held within our educational system is unlikely to result in the equitable experiences that this district strives to provide. While programs intent on educational tracking and ability grouping should be abolished in the nation, Shelby County has the opportunity to serve as an example for how this can be accomplished. Pursuing justice in education means pursuing the equitable distribution of educational opportunities and resources. At the national level, this means responding to the needs of students and schools equitably, taking into account educational debts owed to predominantly Black communities in the United States, as resources have been systematically denied to these communities. At the national level, the secretary of education has a responsibility to foster a narrative of investment in the public schools, rather than continuing to invest in school choice. This should ensure that each school is somewhere they would be excited to send their own children, rather than forcing parents to either send their students to receive an inadequate education or spend an inordinate amount of time, money, and effort attempting to find and enroll their students in high-quality schools.

At the local level, Shelby County has the opportunity to serve as an example for raising overall student achievement through equity. When making policies and designing education at the local level, educators and policymakers can look to examples of systemic issues in education at the national level and seek to solve these problems within the district. For example, Shelby County's school ratings should serve as a tool for the district to determine the relative need for resources and support at each school, rather than acting punitively. It is the responsibility of Shelby County to set a precedent that encourages teachers to perceive all of their students as competent by abolishing prejudiced systems of educational tracking, such as the Shelby County optional program.

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