The neighborhood school stigma: School choice, stratification, and shame

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Abstract

Social scientists have begun to document the stratifying effects of over a decade of unprecedented charter growth in urban districts. An exodus of students from traditional neighborhood schools to charter schools has attended this growth, creating troubling numbers of vacant seats in neighborhood schools as well as concentrating larger percentages of high-need student populations like special education students and English Language Learners in these schools (Buras, 2014; Gabor, 2014; Knefel, 2014). In cities like Philadelphia, the maintenance of two parallel educational systems – one charter, the other district – has also strained budgets and contributed to fiscal crises that have further divested traditional district schools of critical resources (Popp, 2014). How are youth, teachers, and staff in neighborhood schools responding to these conditions and the moral associations that the "neighborhood school" has come to invoke within an expanding educational marketplace? What does it mean to attend and/or work in a traditional neighborhood school in the midst of the dramatic restructuring of urban public education? Using frameworks developed in anthropological and sociological studies of social stigma, I explore in this paper how the power of market stratification has come to influence the intensification of institutional stigmas around the traditional neighborhood school (Anyon, 1980; Goffman, 1963; Link and Phelan, 2001). Drawing on ethnographic data from a neighborhood school in Philadelphia, I center youth perspectives on their aspirations and life chances given their status as students in a non-selective neighborhood school in my analysis. I ultimately interrogate how notions of race, educational quality, and [lack of] school choice, impact this neighborhood school community's sense of worth and future as individuals as well as an institution.

Keywords

Institutional stigma, neighborhood schools, privatization, shame, stratification

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Introduction: "We've become holding ponds"

> We've become holding ponds for the kids nobody wants. They create the conditions for us to fail and then punish us when it happens. They devalue the work we do with the toughest kids, the ones that are hardest to get to, the ones that nobody is looking out for. I don't see society getting behind us. From my seat, it feels like we're being abandoned. We're dismantling public education piece by piece. We've made it into a commodity and the irony of it all is that the kids at the bottom don't have any choice, even though we're supposedly all about "choice." The people making the decisions know nothing about this neighborhood, this community, and this city. They threaten to close me instead of just giving me teachers and money for supplies. There's no vision – just don't get sued, don't go broke, and screw the kids.
> Mr Keo, Principal, 28 January 2014

Mr Keo serves as a principal at Johnson High, a comprehensive neighborhood high school in Philadelphia that managed to survive the city's first round of mass school closures in 2013 and 2014 that shuttered 30 district-run public schools across the city (Jack and Sludden, 2013). Since 2013, the school has also weathered budget cuts that have created overcrowding in classrooms, deprived the school of a full-time counselor and nurse, and generated supplies and support staffing shortages (Popp, 2014; Ravitch, 2014). Mr Keo's testimony underscores the sense of "abandonment" he felt as the school's leader based on these recent developments as well as a more troubling existential issue: the devaluation of the neighborhood high school as an institution writ large. He tethers the turn to austerity in the district to longer standing district and state trends that have worked to expand charter school networks in spite of the peril it poses to the district's fiscal capacity (Butkovitz, 2014; Pew Charitable Trust and Philadelphia Research Initiative, 2011).

Critiquing the commodification of public education that he argues undergirds the school choice movement, Mr Keo points to a poignant yet relatively emergent phenomena within the literature: market stratification and issues of enrollment access and equity. Referring to the disproportionate enrollment of high need populations in neighborhood schools like special needs students and English Language Learners (ELLs), he understands performance-driven metrics like test scores, suspensions, and enrollment, mobilized to measure school "quality", as mechanisms that incentivize schools to exclude students that might damage their performance and ensuing reputations. Arguing that neighborhood schools "have become holding ponds for the kids [that] nobody wants", Johnson High's principal articulates a frustration with the school's non-selective mission in the midst of a growing educational marketplace of charters and special admission high schools that can selectively enroll their students.

While several studies have begun to quantitatively measure the stratifying effects of school choice markets along lines of race, class, and students' needs, particularly in Philadelphia (Jabbar, 2015a; Miron et al., 2010; Public Citizens for Children and Youth, 2015), this article explores how youth, teachers, and staff in neighborhood schools are responding to the conditions and the moral associations that the "neighborhood school" has come to invoke in an era of school choice. I specifically ask here, what does it mean to attend and/or work in a traditional neighborhood school in the midst of the dramatic restructuring of urban public education? Further, how do the stratifying effects that accompany the growth of education markets influence student and staff perceptions around the "quality" of the education they are receiving within neighborhood schools? Drawing on ethnographic data from three years of data collection in a comprehensive

neighborhood high school in Philadelphia, I interrogate how notions of educational quality and stratification impact school communities' sense of worth and futures, as both individuals and institutions. In light of the turn to charterization and mass school closures as tandem reform strategies to address school "failure", in what ways does school choice reproduce and internalize understandings of personal failure in vulnerable neighborhood school communities?

My data suggest that stratification within urban education markets strengthens institutional stigma around the neighborhood school, producing a climate of shame that staff, but more importantly, students, take up through association with and attendance of these schools. Using theoretical frameworks developed in anthropological and sociological studies of social stigma, I examine changes in students' and staffs' sense of belonging to their school as they absorb messages through popular media, neighborhood discourse, and peers that characterize neighborhood schools as "dangerous", "failing", and or worthy of closure. Texturing these conversations are value judgments around the degree to which "choice" around school selection inform the "quality" of the neighborhood school.

Large bodies of research have explored the complex relationship between school environments, student belonging, and academic engagement (Archambault et al., 2009; Wang and Eccles, 2013). These studies point out that perceptions of school "quality" shape how and how much students, especially high school students, participate socially and academically in school life. While I include teachers' and administrators' voices in this article, I center youth perspectives on their aspirations and life chances given their status as students in non-selective neighborhood schools in my analysis. My findings show that school stratification does not only have consequences for equity in service provision. The resulting degradation of the neighborhood school brand, both discursively and materially, as a result of the school choice movement, exacerbates students' sense of pride in their school, confidence in their academic trajectories, and self-esteem. My ultimate aim is to begin unpacking the relationships between stigma, stratification, and student and staff demoralization in this advanced era of school choice.

Literature

The contemporary plight of the urban neighborhood school

Fifteen years ago, with the passing of No Child Left Behind, charter schools became a key reform strategy to improve the quality of district-run neighborhood schools (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Hursh, 2007). Reformers posited that charter schools, as independently governed entities with the autonomy to run their schools innovatively, would improve the overall efficiency, costs, and quality of failing urban school systems. Through the market laws of competition, choice and deregulation, charter schools had the potential to transform urban districts into educational marketplaces where charter and neighborhood schools alike were evaluated and sustained by their performance (Ravitch, 2011). Schools that did not demonstrate evidence based gains in test scores would shutter and those that did improve would receive more funding and opportunities to scale their models through expansion, effectively "lifting all boats" through the systematic closure of failing schools (Bagley, 2006; Smarick, 2010; Woods et al., 2005).

Federal and state policymakers have clung to these market logics in spite of a growing body of evidence that the expansion of charter schools, particularly in cities with large percentages of poor youth of color, have consistently produced mixed results. While a

review of the literature on charter school "effectiveness" lies beyond the scope of this article, I focus specifically on studies that underscore growing stratification along lines of race, class, and student type between charter and neighborhood schools (Buras, 2014; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Lubienski, 2007). Research at both the national level as well as district level in cities experiencing dramatic charter expansion have found that charter schools serve lower proportions of ELLs and special needs students (Christianakis and Mora, 2011; Dudley-Marling and Baker, 2012; Estes, 2009; Garda, 2011; Miron et al., 2010). Charter schools are also heavily segregated by race and income. At the national level, students are segregated in charter schools either by very high income or very low income (Brooke, 2015; Miron et al., 2010). Overlapping with income, charters also tended to segregate students along racial lines. Only one fourth of charter schools nationally have a racial composition relatively similar to that of sending districts (Miron et al., 2010).

These inequities become amplified in urban districts where conflicts over the direction of education reform have intensified. Researchers have identified some of the policy mechanisms and incentives driving student stratification both between charter and neighborhood schools. Some have underscored the negative externalities of serving high need students like ELLs and special needs students. Supports for these students in terms of staffing and curriculum tend to be greater, therefore creating a perverse incentive to admit them (Robertson and Dale, 2013; Stern et al., 2015). These students also tend to depress standardized test scores, further discouraging either their admission or retention (Lubienski, 2005). Other studies point to the marketing strategies that charter networks engage to attract higher performing students from better resourced backgrounds (Jabbar, 2015a; Leitner, 2014; Public Citizens for Children and Youth, 2014). Targeting high achieving students with involved parents, many charter schools have organized their outreach to effectively shape their lottery entries toward more "desirable" families (Jabbar, 2015b; Kasman and Loeb, 2012). A surge of editorials and articles have decried charters' "no excuse" disciplinary policies that have contributed to the purging and/or "counseling out" of disproportionately Black and Brown students for behavioral issues (Gabor, 2014; Garda, 2011; Greene, 2014; Knefel, 2014).

These studies collectively point to the pooling of advantage within the charter system vis-à-vis marketized incentives, leaving a network of increasingly divested neighborhood schools to educate many cities' most vulnerable youth. Similarly to other large urban districts nationally like Chicago, Washington DC, and New Orleans (Buras, 2014; Jabbar, 2015c; Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2013), in Philadelphia, the site of this study, two "separate but unequal" educational systems have emerged, tasking neighborhood schools with educating the majority of ELLs and special needs students in the city as charter and magnet schools serve, on average, three to five times smaller a share of these same students (Public Citizens for Children and Youth, 2015). As budgets have stretched to accommodate charter schools' expansion, these same districts have concomitantly experienced enormous fiscal strain, often closing schools and trimming neighborhood school budgets to accommodate per capita payouts to charter schools for exiting students (Jack and Sludden, 2013; Strauss, 2013).

Stigma and choice

The school choice movement has thus contributed to real material changes for neighborhood schools, draining them of students and resources and leaving high need populations and educators scrambling to stay afloat amidst the rising tide of institutional uncertainty.

As scholars and researchers begin to document these stratifying effects, the social and psychological tolls exacted by these reforms have remained under examined.

Drawing on theories of social stigma, I analyze the construction of stigma around the neighborhood school as well as how that stigma translates from the institution to the individual. The study of stigma formally began with Erving Goffman's work in the 1960s where he defined stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" and that reduces the bearer "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1963: 3). This definition was initially taken up by psychologists to understand the negative impact of mental illness (Angermeyer and Matschinger, 1996; Corrigan and Penn, 1999), unemployment (Walsgrove, 1987), and disability (Cahill and Eggleston, 1995) on individuals' lives but has undergone contemporary theoretical renovations by other social scientists to consider the production of stigma in local contexts.

These studies have moved beyond definitional understandings of stigma to the epistemological conceptions, considering how stigma construction translates to both organizations and individuals (Jensen and Sandström, 2015; Link and Phelan, 2001; Yang et al., 2007). Jensen and Sandström (2015) recently asked how is stigma socially constructed but individually experienced? What moral connotations accompany stigma within these contexts and how does stigma link to institutional racism and gender? I follow sociologist Brene Brown (2006) in her conceptualization of stigma as an "unwanted identity" that inherently produces feelings of intense shame. She defines shame as "an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" (45). Whereas stigma may be an unwanted identity, shame results from the labeling and accompanying treatment as a member of stigmatized groups. Individuals internalize messages about that group, believing they "are bad", leaving individuals feeling diminished (Ferguson et al., 2000).

Though Brown studies shame around gender roles, I see her notion of the "double-bind" as useful in thinking through the stigma and accompanying shame of attending a neighborhood high school. Brown defines the double bind as the "trapped" feeling that emerges when expectations heighten and choices narrow, leaving individuals feeling powerless to change their situation. As urban school systems stratify, relegating disproportionate numbers of special needs students and ELLs to neighborhood schools, the institutional stigma around neighborhood schools heightens as widespread stereotypes follow these students into their schools. Framed by legislators, local policymakers, and the media as "bad schools" with "bad kids" that "fail" in their academic pursuits, students and their families by extension receive a steady diet of negative messages about their schools and themselves. These stereotypes also carry a racialized valence, hinting at the pooling of Black and Brown children whose "apathetic" families did not opt to find them better opportunities in charter schools.

Returning to Mr Keo's opening quote, he characterizes the "choice" for many students to attend schools outside of their neighborhoods as severely constrained by costs, barriers to application, and limited seats. Neighborhood schools' students, and staff, bear the "mark" of attending neighborhood schools where dominant cultural beliefs link these students to negative stereotypes, yet students often cannot exercise the "choice" expected of them to attend charter or magnet schools. Caught in the "double-bind" between expectation and narrowed options, the shame of having an "unwanted identity" as a neighborhood school student accompanies remaining "behind" in increasingly underfunded neighborhood schools.

Critical race theory, school belonging, and engagement

Before I move to findings, I encourage us to think about the ramifications of stigma and shame for "school belonging", or students' emotional and social connections to their schools and the people that serve them (Neel and Fuligni, 2013). As students in neighborhood schools experience status loss as a result of their association with "failure", what implications do stigma and shame have for their feelings toward academic engagement and confidence in their trajectories? Large bodies of research suggest that students' perceptions of their school environment have an enormous impact on students' social and academic engagement (Anyon, 1980; Erickson, 1987; Mehan, 2000). When students are associated with a negative label or stereotype vis-à-vis their schools, they tend to internalize the stereotype and perform worse (Steele and Aronson, 1995). Students who tend to feel connected to their teachers and school environment maintain engagement with their academic values, seeing education's intrinsic value (e.g. they enjoy learning) as well as utility value (that it will help them in their future lives) (Neel and Fuligni, 2013; Payne and Kaba, 2007; Wang and Eccles, 2013).

Critical race theorists point out that racialized tropes undergird this stigma, characterizing the disproportionately Black and Brown students that attend urban schools as deviant, violent, underperforming and lazy (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Leonardo, 2009; Milner, 2013; Noguera, 2003). Shaun Harper's (2015) recent study of young men of color in New York City's public schools underscores the mapping of these tropes onto the institutions that serve them, further reinforcing notions that urban schools are inherently inadequate, unstable, unsafe, and failing. As the media circulates images of Black and Brown youth as criminals, it ossifies the associations between Blackness, violence, and disorder, shaping negative perceptions of these schools both within and outside of the communities in which they are embedded.

Critical race theorists also point to a longer trajectory of framing of segregated urban schools as chaotic, illegitimate, and therefore undeserving of investment. As Erickson (1987) notes, "School achievement and culture [are] political processes in which issues of institutional and personal legitimacy, identity and economic interest are central" (341). Legitimacy and institutional trust are linked school processes that serve to spur and sustain community and student investment in neighborhood schools (Bryk, 2010; Bryk and Schneider, 2002). Crenshaw (2011) argues that school choice advocates, in the spirit of advancing the market as an instrument of post-racialism, have "banished" the racial situatedness of urban school deterioration. Erasure in turn sanitizes how racialized troping of neighborhood schools has historically served as both a product as well as a driver of their disinvestment, undermining legitimacy and public trust in their efficacy. The school choice movement plays on these stereotypes by positioning charter schools as the antidote to institutional failure. Yet by advancing racial segregation and stratification in neighborhood schools along ability and income, how are students' and families' sense of school belonging affected? How do negative perceptions of "school quality" shape student engagement, aspirations, and self-concepts? While I only begin to tackle these questions in this article, the relationship between students' shame and their engagement is worthy of further exploration.

Methodology

Study context

The data to answer these questions stem from a three-year vertical ethnographic case study in a diverse comprehensive neighborhood high school, Johnson High,[11] in Philadelphia from

2011 to 2014 (Vavrus and Bartlett, 2006). This high school was caught in the midst of dramatic restructuring in the school district. The district had experienced dramatic growth in its charter sector, serving just 2% of the city's students in 1999 to 30% in 2013 (Butkovitz, 2014). Such growth contributed to an exodus of 50,000 students from district schools to charters, straining district finances as the district paid charters per capita for serving these students while also maintaining the fixed costs of district schools (Jack and Sludden, 2013). To consolidate students and space, the district began rolling out plans to close district schools en masse in 2011, targeting schools like Johnson High, with low enrollments and test scores, for closure.

Though Johnson High managed to avoid the mass closures that shuttered 30 neighborhood schools between 2012 and 2013, it suffered from large budget cuts stemming from a reduction in state aid in early 2013 (Gabriel, 2013; Popp, 2014). Closures and fiscal crisis converged in 2013, emptying district schools of further resources and diminishing morale. Johnson High, like many schools across the district in academic year 2013/2014, had no counselor, school nurse, or support staff, and struggled to accommodate overcrowded classrooms of 35-plus students. Johnson had also lost half of its population, going from a school of approximately 1400 in 2006 to less than 700 in 2013. The school was unique in its demographics at the time of the study: 52% Asian, 10% White, 27% Black, and 11% Latino. Among the first-generation immigrant students, ethnicity broke down across 22 groups, providing a rich context to understand how students of different backgrounds framed their perspectives on neighborhood schools. Almost 65% of the school fell under the category of ELLs and another 15% qualified as "students with disabilities." The rising enrollment of students of these types over the course of the decade also made the school an ideal site to explore how stratification shaped students' understandings of school quality.

Methods and data analysis

Throughout this three-year study, I conducted over 200 interviews with district officials, teachers, school staff, students, and community members to learn how policy discourse around school choice and failure intersected with local discourses around school quality. I spent over 800 hours as a participant observer at Johnson High in classrooms, school assemblies, and events in the neighborhood and larger community as well as attending district and state level meetings that pertained to charter school expansion, school closures, and other pressing education reforms. I further carried out document analysis of national and local media coverage of the closures and how Johnson High's plight fitted into citywide debates.

For this article, I relied on Dedoose, qualitative coding software, to develop etic codes from my conceptual framework such as "shame", "school stratification", and "stigma" and etic codes such as "loss of motivation", "school hierarchies", "disappointed dreams", "no resources", emergent from a round of open coding of my fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and documents (Maxwell, 2005). Collapsing these codes into larger categories with sub-codes, I reanalyzed my data with a more cohesive coding schema. Those categories were then organized to speak to my research questions: 1) What does it mean to attend and/or work in a traditional neighborhood school in the midst of the dramatic restructuring of urban public education? 2) How do the stratifying effects that accompany the growth of education markets influence student and staff perceptions around the "quality" of the

education they're receiving within neighborhood schools? To reiterate, while I include teachers' and administrators' perspectives, I am largely interested in the degree to which students feel connected to their schools and see them as contributing to promising futures. While staff and students attitudes and relationships come to constitute school climates, I will also focus on the ways in which district and city-wide discourses around choice and quality permeate school spaces, shaping student and staff perceptions of their school's quality and promise.

Findings

Image management and stigma: Views from administrators and staff

Throughout my time at Johnson High, I attended meetings where community non-profits would meet with Mr Keo, the school principal. While these meetings served to coordinate the services that these providers brought to the school, students, administrators, and teachers were often invited to attend in order to elicit their input for "improving" the school's "reputation" and "turning the school around" in conjunction with providers. Fears over the school's potential closure if it didn't raise its enrollment informed these conversations, but at the same time, frustration arose among many that the reputation was unwarranted. One teacher, Mr Roberts, exasperated by the steady assumption that the school needed to change, explained:

> A lot of our students are wonderful, dedicated students. We have knuckleheads, not that many, just like any other school. We know that this is a great school here, but from the perception outside, every time we send representation from our school to other schools and they introduce themselves as Johnson students, other children look at them like, "Really? You're from Johnson? You're the ghetto one?" We need to break that stereotype perception. A lot of students are upset with that and want to change the culture here. But I don't think that it's the culture here that needs to be changed. I think it's the perception that needs rejecting out there. We as a school need to educate people outside of this building that we are not fighters, that we aren't the lowest form of human being because we come to Johnson.(Partners Meeting, 11 March 2014)

To situate Mr Robert's frustration, two charter high schools had opened in recent years in the larger neighborhood around Johnson High. Students had left for these high schools, contributing to dramatic drops in Johnson High's student body as well as two other neighborhood high schools nearby. Choice, in turn, created a hierarchy of schools, elevating perceptions of charters as inherently better options. Teachers questioned what Johnson High had actually done to deserve the stereotype as "ghetto", arguing that it is the "perception out there that needs rejecting."

However, like Mr Roberts, many staff resentfully acknowledged the deck as stacked against them in a district climate where enrollment became a key metric for measuring school "failure" and consideration for closure. Though undeserved, the onus remained on them to educate the larger community about the opportunities and positive culture of the school, even if they couldn't control for school stratification's contribution to the growing stigma against attending neighborhood schools citywide. Yet as more teachers either watched their students apply to charters, morale among staff declined further. Ms. Betty, another teacher, was heartbroken after one of her students threatened to leave in her senior year for a charter school.

> I feel like a failure everyday. I feel like a failure because I get sucked in emotionally too . . . Today a student is telling me that she's going to transfer next year. She tells me she wants to transfer as a junior so that she doesn't have to graduate from Johnson even though we were good enough for the first three years. Now she wants to graduate from somewhere that's not Johnson, and I took a giant offense to that. I said, why?
> (Interview, 17 December 2013)

Later in the year, when news broke that 20 other students had sent in applications to another charter school, emotions among teachers and especially Mr Keo, erupted. Following the news, Mr Keo discussed the issue with a teacher, Ms Link, who taught a significant number of the students leaving.

> [In tears] People keep telling me that if there are opportunities, they should be taken by the more advanced students and we shouldn't be preventing them from going to charters because it makes our lives easier to have them here. Well, I take that personally, and so does Mr Keo. Just because we're a neighborhood school doesn't mean we're a bad school. We are losing students but I don't think they're going to get better opportunities at the charter. I want them to get their awards here, their diplomas here! I want them to get their scholarships here and finish their careers here! I invest my heart and soul into these kids. These charters wants the quiet, high-achieving students, that do well on [standardized tests]. What happens to everyone else when our school closes? Where do they go? Do they get warehoused somewhere where they won't be part of a community or acknowledged for who they are? I'm an invested teacher here and I take it personally when these schools take my kids away from me. I feel like they're taking the last hope that we have and it feels like an assault – like we're being used and dumped because we're not good enough. As they close schools and open charters, this is a real issue and I don't think they see it that way. They're advocating for a very select group of kids, but what about the rest of the kids that those schools don't want? What happens to them? I believe that equitable, nurturing public education is what's best for all of the kids, and it's a philosophical difference that we have.
> (Fieldnote, 29 April 2014)

Many teachers voiced a profound sense of defeat and rejection like Ms Link. In addition to students leaving, many teachers were reacting to an environment of austerity that deprived Johnson High and neighborhood schools across the city of critical resources and staff at the time of this incident. Teachers and administrators convinced themselves that "the kids" deserved their personal sacrifices in terms of funding more of their own supplies, running after-school programming unpaid, and enduring a five-year freeze to their salaries. As students and families left the school for charters, a fatigue and hopelessness befell the staff and leadership. Existential questions also arose around the ultimate consequences for those students and families that didn't have the option to exit to charters. With the mass closure of 30 schools in 2012 and 2013, the conspiracy of eventual district school collapse circulated. Ms Link's testimony not only underscores this pervasive concern, but points to a "philosophical difference" that she felt governed the stigmatization of Johnson High: that a public education in a non-selective neighborhood school was no longer a viable option in the expanding school choice market.

The "hierarchy" of schools: Student perspectives

Of the six classes that I observed regularly at Johnson High, I spent almost every day in the College Dreams sponsored class of 25 sophomores. The group was a mix of higher-level

ELLs and native-born students, and the ratios fluctuated throughout the year pending the attrition and transfer rates of the students. Of the 25 students, there was one 15-year-old, White student, James. James was an anomaly in a school that was less than 10% White. Of the White students, many had been ejected from parochial schools and charter schools for behavior and disciplinary infractions. James was quiet and generally kept to himself, completing work and quickly retreating behind his textbook to sleep. James was born and raised two blocks from the school. His mother also attended Johnson High but became pregnant at 17 with his brother and subsequently did not finish high school. On a day in late September 2013, as Johnson High roiled in the chaos imposed by the budget cuts, James described to me his predicament as a student attending a "neighborhood school."

> I mean, I really wanted to go to charter school but they're like hard to get into. I mean, I don't mind it here that much. Like you have the magnet schools and Catholic schools up here [gestures with hands high], and charters are here [lowers hands down] and then there's the neighborhood school here at the bottom of the barrel [lowers hands further]. I mean, Johnson High isn't as bad as [other neighborhood high school], not as dangerous, but it's still down here because it's a neighborhood school. And then with all of the budget cuts, it sucks even more.
> (Fieldnote, 26 September 2013)

Delineating the rungs of school "quality" in Philadelphia, James placed his Johnson High at "the bottom of the barrel." In turn, he echoed Mr Keo's sentiments, describing an overarching perception that neighborhood schools are "bad" because "bad kids" go to them. James distances himself from the school's reputation by pointing out that he himself "wanted to go to a charter school" but struggled to gain acceptance, citing his lack of choice in attending Johnson. In a system where charter schools have further injected "choice" into the marketplace of urban school options, James points out that those at "the bottom" do not enjoy that same choice for prohibitive tuitions at Catholic schools or losing in a charter school lottery ultimately relegates them to non-selective high schools. Further exacerbating his plight, he feels, are the budget cuts that have disparately affected district-run neighborhood schools that rely solely on state and city-level tax revenues. When I asked James whether he had plans to apply to college, he told me that he probably would not. In spite of his placement in the College Dreams cohort, he explained:

> I mean, I go to Johnson High right? Didn't I just explain that to you? Like, I'm not that smart. I'm tryin' to just find a job now down at Modell's so that I can pay for my shoes and stuff. With mom not working, I gotta pay for my own stuff
> (Field note, 26 September 2013)

Many students in addition to James felt compelled to transfer to "better schools" like charters and magnet schools, particularly when stressful situations arose regarding the building's infrastructure and the lack of cleaning staff. A bed bug problem descended on several classrooms mid-year, but with no funds to hire a fumigator, the students and teachers had no choice but to bring personal repellent cans (Fieldnote, 5 February 2014). With a leaking roof, asbestos-ridden fourth floor, disintegrating dry wall, and only two part-time cleaning staff to cover a building large enough to accommodate 2000 students, the air quality suffered enormously (Field note, 4 May 2014). I sat with two native-born Asian and Latino male students, discussing the possibility of transferring; Brian, the son of Vietnamese

refugees; Tony, the son of two Lao refugees, and Leo and Joseph's parents were from Mexico.

> Leo: I applied to charters in the 8th grade but I didn't get accepted.
> Joseph: I wanted to, but my parents didn't know what to do. They don't speak much English.
> Tony: I really want to transfer though. This school is so gross with all of the shit on the floor and stuff. Like, kids ain't even here because it's makin' them sick. I want to transfer to an arts charter school or somethin'. Johnson, it's just not me. I'm better than this so I want to graduate from a better school.
> Brian: Yeah, it's too late though. I mean, we are in 10th grade.
> Joseph: My parents can't really help me so I guess I'm staying here.
> (Fieldnote, 1 October 2013)

In the middle of this conversation, Joseph turned to me and asked, "Do you think you could help me apply to a charter school? We don't have the counselor this year to help us." As I responded that I was not familiar with the charter school lottery process but that I would do some research for him, I felt conflicted. Privy to the principal's worries that students might leave, I didn't want to encourage students to flee the school in search of the greener pastures at a charter. At the same time, I wanted them to know that their grievances with the "shit on the floor" and their perceptions of the quality of the education they were receiving did not fall on deaf ears.

This conversation however pointed to a larger problem – that students like James and Joseph felt the stigma of attending a "neighborhood school" based partially on the fact it was non-selective and also because budget cuts had contributed to a decline in infrastructure and school maintenance. Their feelings reflected Mr Keo and the teachers' views that the school's non-selectivity and disproportionate enrollment of ELL and special needs students made it difficult to market as a valuable institution. Most students expressed conflicting feelings around their school community. While many voiced appreciation and satisfaction with the school's staff and their peers, they felt maligned as individuals by association with their neighborhood school. This inner conflict was pervasive as budget cuts precipitated losses in sports and extracurricular programming in 2013. Similar to James, students felt that a neighborhood school limited their opportunities for attending college and becoming upwardly mobile.

For first-generation immigrant and refugee youth, a significant population at Johnson, the notion that the "quality" of their education at a neighborhood school would prevent them from capitalizing on the "immigrant bargain" or the sacrifices that their parents made to come to the country so that they might have a "good life" achieved vis-à-vis educational attainment, troubled many (Louie, 2012). Many students echoed the "hierarchy of schools" discourse deployed by many native-born students, citing the shame they felt for attending a neighborhood high school. David, a recent Tunisian immigrant, explained his disappointment when he discovered the meaning of a "neighborhood school."

> I have a lot of friends in charter schools and I feel like they have their education. I think that their students are different in that they are chosen. But in here, it's a neighborhood school, so whoever wants to come, Mr Keo has to accept them. It's like the reputation of the school you see? So when I first came here, a lot of my father's friends were like, "David, what high school are you going to?" and I was like, "Johnson High School." And they were like, "Johnson? It's a bad school right?" But the thing is, like when I came here, I wasn't so excited to be honest

because they made me feel like I was going to a horrible school, but I didn't know about the schools here.
(Interview, 10 April 2014)

David "didn't know about the schools" but learned through interactions with other students and family friends that the non-selectivity of his high school qualified it as a "bad" school. Thus, he entered Johnson High feeling like he was not going to receive a good public education. However, in later conversations and informal interviews with David, an active member of several partners' programs as well as the National Honor Society, he said that his experience at Johnson High did not warrant its reputation. Describing his caring, hard-working teachers, and the numerous programs that Mr Keo established through non-profit partnerships with the school, David said that he felt the opportunities were available if students applied themselves.

Negotiating media stereotypes

Collectively these responses raised questions not only about the ways in which school "choice" is constrained at the aggregate level, but also the diminished feelings of pride and possibility that students feel in attending increasingly stigmatized institutions. Media coverage of negative developments within the school and neighborhood schools citywide only aggravated these feelings. Shannon, an African-American senior, described how media seemed to "target" neighborhood schools like Johnson, not only focusing on its problems, but also unmooring them from the larger context of tumultuous district reform.

> The media makes you feel worthless, like you're a bad kid who goes to a bad school. They play on the worst stereotypes about inner-city kids. In my 10th grade year, things started to get worse because of the budget cuts. They stripped out the programming; everything that would make kids want to come to school: art, sports, clubs, teachers that care about you. There were a few more incidents and the media is right here, focusing on our problems that the district created by cutting our resources. It was portrayed as normal but it's not normal. From there we lost our principal, twice. In the beginning of 11th grade, I actually left to go to World Communication Charter School. I was there for four days and came back. It wasn't any better than here and it was all the way downtown. It took me an hour to get there. There are opportunities here if you keep your head down and just be yourself. I'm headed to Norfolk University next year and I'm going to become a pediatric neurologist. And I'm a Johnson grad. (Interview, 21 January 2014)

Shannon articulated a profound sense of frustration with reporters that entered the school to cover a fistfight, but not Johnson's graduation. Critical race theory helps to illuminate yet another dimension of what Shannon perceives as "targeting" Johnson High and exploiting the "worst stereotypes of inner-city kids." Returning to Harper's (2015) notion of the obsessive framing of Black youth and their schools as "failing", Shannon is able to highlight the discrepancy between stereotype-enforcing media of Black and Brown students in her school and the moments of joy and achievement that are sorely lacking in media coverage. Her experience leaving for a charter school that she claimed "wasn't any better" increased her resentment of the media for telling a partial story, one that labeled and diminished her and her school without considering the gamut of systemic issues like chronic defunding, staff and program loss, and widespread demoralization that contributed to the rise of incidents. Again, this critique brings into relief Crenshaw's (2011) argument that in

the current post-racial moment, a focus on students' cultural deficiencies and undeservingness functions to sterilize the ways in which institutional racism and education policy historically have constituted the current political moment for urban neighborhood schools disproportionately serving Black children.

While Shannon offered a diatribe of the media, adopting a critical stance on Johnson's status as a "failing school", many students provided evidence that students across the school had begun to internalize the label, particularly when community members would ask them where they attended. Jacob, an African-American senior, told me:

> If I were talking to a 9th grader today, I would tell them not to go to Johnson. It doesn't make you feel like anything will happen for you – like you'll just be on the street like everyone else. It changes people. We ain't got no books up in here. You see a book from so many years ago, all scribbled in and you're like, we ain't shit. They ain't even buyin' us books up in here. I don't know how that happened. How did they stop carin' about us? They say that the district is broke. Where did all of the money go? We used to have so many more kids but they know the district ain't got nothin' so they leave. They leave for the charter schools. I would never go – this is home. When I tell people where I go, they say, "Aw man, that's a bad school. That's a TERRIBLE school." And I say that you don't really know. The teachers really care. It ain't fair that the media plays us like that. I don't think this school deserves to close – it just needs help. We need to get our staff back. But people will still think we bad. I don't know how to change that.
> (Interview, 12 February 2014)

Johnson students, especially seniors, harbored conflicting feelings like Jacob. They struggled to allocate blame for population loss and the school's reputation as a "terrible school." Like Jacob, many voiced anger that the district had deprived the school of resources, therefore removing essential "extras" like sports, music, and extracurricular that gave students a purpose for coming to school. As Jacob explained, the bone-dry nature of school life post-budget cuts made them feel like they "ain't shit." However, media portrayals of violent incidents at the school intensified the shame they felt when neighbors, many of whom had opted to send their children to charters, often chastised them for remaining at Johnson in light of the increasing number of charters. Some students admitted that community members' slights bred more indignity than negative news broadcast because they expected their neighbors to know and treat them with more respect than an anonymous reporter. Many students confirmed that they worked to disassociate themselves from the school by avoiding peers that attended charters, telling people that they attended a charter school instead of Johnson High, or covering the emblem on their uniform so that others might not see their association.

Jacob's closing line, however, suggests a deeper grappling with the racialized targeting of the school and the ingrained belief of its unworthiness. Even if funding were restored to the school, Jacob states, "But people will still think we bad. I don't know how to change that." This insight goes beyond ephemeral policy changes in the last ten years to reveal a continuity in perceptions of schools attended by children of color as "bad." Anti-Blackness thus becomes the fulcrum on which understandings of "quality" education hinge (Dumas, 2016). While infrastructural neglect and negative troping have historically textured discourses around neighborhood school, Jacob and his peers now contend with the implied blame for remaining at such an institution when offered other options (i.e. charters). Jacob is therefore gesturing to the historical situatedness of Johnson High as a

segregated high school in a divested neighborhood, a status that has only worsened in an advanced era of school choice.

Conclusion and implications: "A lost opportunity"

> Everyone is afraid of the school closing, so people want to make notes of the bad things. I'm pretty sure more good things happen than bad things. If they closed us, it would be bad for the neighborhood because the school plays an important role in the how people relate to one another. It would be a lost opportunity to know your neighbors. The school is the meeting ground, the connection place. It would be that missing [pause] like if everybody goes to charters, nobody cares about the place that they're from. That's why I go here. I can say, hey, that's MY school in [Johnson High's neighborhood]. But if I go up to North Philly, it's just another place. I pay more attention to what's going on in my neighborhood and my school if I feel like they're mine. The school enlightens people. In this city, not many people leave their neighborhoods. The school presents the opportunity to know different kinds of people and see through their eyes. You need knowledge to fight ignorance. Kids know of each other, and that's a good thing. (Interview with Eric, 20 February 2014)

Eric was an 18-year-old African-American senior at the time of his interview and extended Mr Keo's fears that stigma is a socially constructed phenomenon that has grave effects for neighborhood schools, particularly when students and staff begin to internalize that stigma and vacate for charters. In an era of school choice where closures accompany precipitous drops in enrollment, legitimate anxieties emerge from declining faith in the neighborhood school. Both Eric and Mr Keo embed two existential questions in their testimonies. First, what happens to the students in neighborhood schools if they close, especially when these are students not being accepted or retained in charters? Second, what happens to the community around a school when these institutions are no longer rooted in a sense of place? When I asked Eric to imagine the feelings he would have should Johnson High close, he insightfully addressed the implications that a closure would have for not only his own sense of belonging, but also the macro-level relations of the larger neighborhood. Describing the school as "the meeting ground, the connection place," Eric invokes notions of a community and place building through an educational space. A school, according to Eric, establishes bonds between diverse neighborhood constituencies through children. Embedded within his quote is a critique of the ways in which the expansion of charter schools erodes feelings and understandings of neighborhoods as places of belonging and family history. "That's why I go here," he explains, "I can say, hey, that's MY school . . . but if I go up to North Philly, it's just another place."

    This article has argued that the intensified stigma around attending neighborhood schools has emerged from charterization and the ensuing stratification of school along brand "hierarchies", where neighborhood schools become the generic option for the neediest students after charters and magnet schools meet their quotas and/or shut their doors. The students and staff at Johnson High have described the political and social construction of that stigma as divestment has accompanied population loss and vice versa, exacerbated by decontextualized media depictions of neighborhood schools as "dangerous" and full of "bad kids." As many students argued, schools are porous, influenced by conversations outside of them between the state and district levels that write the policies that govern them, as well as among community members and families that currently grapple with their uncertain fates as

public institutions. The shame they feel when these conversations map institutional stigma directly onto their sense of personhood and self-worth, as I argued earlier, shapes not only their perceptions of education's intrinsic value but its utility value for their future aspirations.

Critical race theorists explicate this discontinuity, highlighting that rhetoric around school choice has distorted the racial histories pertaining to and shaping problems of divestment, neglect, and segregation (Crenshaw, 2011; Dumas, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2005). While it would be inaccurate to assume that there was ever a "golden age" for urban public schools, Johnson High's students and staff provide evidence that the school choice movement has not delivered on its promises to improve educational outcomes and experiences for students in the aggregate (Neckerman, 2007). In fact, school stratification and the development of two parallel education systems in many cities has not only strained budgets, but also fractured communities' capacity to imagine the role of the neighborhood school in facilitating sustained relations and collective futures for the cities' children.

Given the turn to mass school closures in urban districts across the country, educators' and students' fears around continued negative perceptions of neighborhood schools are not unfounded. Their testimonies raise a normative question worthy of consideration for all who believe that education is a village endeavor: whose responsibility is it to combat the damaging stereotypes of neighborhood schools and the children they serve? Though many of my participants took it upon themselves, they also acknowledged that their efforts could not stymie the deleterious effects of austerity and "failure" discourse circulating outside their walls. If we understand stigma and its ensuing shame as socially constructed, it is the task of scholars and citizens to initiate a public discourse that deconstructs these stereotypes and their racialized undertones as well as to begin to undertake the questions around neighborhood schools' futures as democratic, inclusive institutions for all.

Note

1. I replaced all of the participants' and the school's name with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

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