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Nothing's Too Good for My Baby

Black Parents and Legitimate Advantage Conferral through Elite Education

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Abstract

Scholars rightly argue that partiality towards one's children hinders justice and that some expressions of partiality constitute illegitimate conferrals of advantage. Some have extended this critique to elite educational experiences as a form of unjust advantage conferral. In this paper, I argue that for Black parents, the pursuit of elite educational experiences for their children may function as legitimate partiality and advantage conferral. I motivate my argument in the corrective capability of elite education, both its ability to redress past exclusion and its potential to protect Black people from some societal disadvantage, as well as the operationalization of Blackness that suggests that educational advantage conferral might promote racial advancement. Ultimately, I argue, the provision of elite education for Black families remediates past injustices while mitigating present disparities in ways that redistribute opportunity towards educational justice.

Keywords: Parental Partiality; Elite Education; Educational Inequality; Black Families; Racial Justice

Introduction

Education is the putative “great equalizer,” (Mann 1848) providing opportunities and knowledge to those in our society. The operationalization of education systems, however, falls short of this aspiration. Between schools, students are subject to vastly different educational experiences based on the neighborhood they live in. Within schools, students are placed on different academic tracks as early as elementary school. And these disparities continue even within individual classrooms where Black students receive disproportionately higher disciplinary responses from teachers and administrators (Gilliam et al., 2016) and less rigorous instruction (Croft and Schmader, 2012). Due to these practices and others, educational institutions have become sorters rather than equalizers, launching some while restraining others.

In the context of these disparities, the family plays a crucial role as an institution that can either support or hinder broader justice. Scholars argue that the family has the power to promote justice if those steering the unit make intentional choices to combat inequality but can hinder justice when they place the needs of their unit over the needs of the collective. Injustice in schools and injustice between families meet when parents provide their

children with educational opportunities that confer advantages upon them. By making sure their children have not only an adequate, or even good, education but rather an exceptional one, parents work to position their own children higher in the social hierarchy via educational opportunity.

Scholars rightly argue that partiality towards one's children generally hinders justice and that some of these expressions of partiality constitute illegitimate conferrals of advantage. Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift (2014) argue this point while elevating the provision of elite educational experiences as a form of illegitimate advantage conferral. In other works, Swift (2003) argues that while parents understandably want the "best" for their children, justice only demands that they provide their children with adequate educational opportunity. The shape of adequacy, however, is not universal; rather it is contextual. The assemblage of social facts surrounding school choice for Black families force us to think critically around the differing forms of adequacy for racial groups as compared to broader society.¹

In the wake of the 2023 SCOTUS affirmative action ruling, more specifically, Black families are abruptly contending with a seismic shift in social facts. One can imagine how, particularly for Black parents, the relationship with educational opportunity has been significantly altered. As mentioned earlier, though presumably an "equalizer," marginalized communities use education as a mobility launcher (Bowen and Bok, 1998; Chetty et al., 2014). Where society's narrative of Black inferiority persists, educational pedigree stood, at times, to challenge perceptions in ways that translate into material advantages (Espenshade and Radford, 2009; Wooten 2015). By overturning affirmative action, the Supreme Court dismantled a key structural mechanism for ameliorating historical and ongoing racial inequality in education. This fundamental restructuring of the educational access landscape forces us to reconsider what all families, but especially Black families, might legitimately do to secure educational experiences that offer corrective potential and mitigate the societal disadvantages linked to race and class.

Previously, selective educational institutions provided targeted pipelines that Black students could leverage to confer advantage. These pipelines have since been discontinued or restructured, leaving Black students, and by extension Black families, without the same avenues of opportunity they once had. Early data from the first admissions cycle post-SCOTUS ruling shows declines in Black student admittance and enrollment at several selective colleges and universities including Amherst College, MIT, and Harvard—a trend to presumably persist (Svrluga 2024). The upending of affirmative action as a decades-long corrective measure compels Black parents to rethink their approach to securing educational access. In this new landscape, pursuing selective, elite schooling at earlier stages of education for some Black families becomes a more urgent strategy—not to secure unjust advantage, but to ensure favorable life outcomes for their children in a society that continues to reinforce racial hierarchies.

In this article, I argue that Black parents can pursue elite educational experiences for their children as a function of legitimate partiality and advantage conferral.² I motivate my argument in the corrective capability of elite education, both its ability to redress past exclusion and its potential to protect Black people from some societal disadvantage, as well as the operationalization of Blackness that suggests that educational advantage conferral might promote racial advancement. This latitude, I argue, mitigates a particular kind of injustice rooted in continued educational exclusion and inadequacy, ultimately contributing to a more equitable redistribution of resources and quality. In turn, this redistribution stands to, through increasing access and opportunity, redress injustice and precipitate mobility.

It is important to clarify that my argument, rather than focusing on institutional mechanisms for access, engages normatively the question of whether Black parents can

legitimately pursue elite educational opportunities, which leverage unequal access to confer societal advantage, for their children. This language is normative: I am concerned with which forms of advantage conferral are morally legitimate in a society committed to redressing historical and ongoing educational exclusion. This article is not about who controls access to elite schools, but about whether and when Black families' pursuit of such access constitutes a legitimate corrective or protective act.

I begin by reviewing parental partiality and advantage conferral as outlined by Brighthouse and Swift (2014). I then delve into the constitutive features of elite education and explain how education, elite and otherwise, positions people within society. I then proceed with my argument, first reviewing the historical absence of educational choice and quality for Black people in the United States, then discussing the corrective potential of elite education before arguing the role that third-party interests play in Black uplift. Finally, I address key objections to my argument before concluding.

Parental Partiality and the Conferral of Advantage

We know that parents are partial. John Dewey famously wrote, "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children" (1907, p. 3). Dewey knew then, as many of us know now, that parents want the best for their children and will go to great lengths to secure the wants and needs of their children. The latter half of the quote, however, suggests that parental partiality fails to facilitate the collective thriving of our society's children.

From an evolutionary standpoint, we know that parents stop at little to ensure their children's survival. Chemical rushes hijack parents' brains and facilitate the process of bonding with their child (Saturn 2014). Parent-child bonds, in turn, prompt parents to protect their children at all costs, at times even at their own expense (Graham 2004).

In modern society, however, this parental instinct goes beyond mere survival as parents now work to ensure their children's ability to thrive. They do so in myriad ways including cultivating academic and leisure activities (Lareau 2003). Parents rearrange their finances, schedules, and lives to maximize their children's potential and enjoyment of life, even beyond childhood. While keeping children fed, happy, and stimulated through age eighteen might have once been the standard, parents now support their children into adulthood. Some studies suggest that over half of parents with college-going children plan to finance their child's tuition in its entirety (Holstrom et al., 2011; McCormack 2022; O'Donnell 2023). A report also found that over half of parents surveyed across the United States, Germany, and Italy reported helping their adult children financially and nearly 90% of parents surveyed reported that they found helping their children rewarding (Pew Research Center 2015). This suggests that many parents across different national and economic contexts find value and importance in their children's growth and development, even into adulthood.

Even beyond evolutionary reasons, parental partiality serves a purpose. Brighthouse and Swift (2014) detail the important role that partiality plays in the development of the parent-child relationship. Parents cultivate a unique relationship with their children by showing them partiality. They find reward in seeing their children's needs met, and their children feel secure knowing that their parents will meet their physical and emotional needs.

The reward parents find and the security their children experience because of parental partiality comprise part of a range of goods that Brighthouse and Swift (2014) term *familial relationship goods*. Familial relationship goods are the aspects of well-being that derive from participation in parent-child relationships and function as a fundamental part of Brighthouse and Swift's (2014) conception of what makes families uniquely valuable. Examples of

familial relationship goods offered by the authors include children's enjoyment of the bond with a particular adult; a sense of continuity with the past, mediated by acquaintance with their own family members; a sense of security associated with someone with a special duty of care for them. Furthermore, the authors offer the example of parents' enjoyment of a distinctively valuable relationship with their children, one that is intimate and mutually loving, but in which the parent acts as a fiduciary for her child's non-developmental interests and for her interests in physical, cognitive, emotional, and moral development, which include, usually, the interest in becoming an adult who is independent of her parents, capable of taking over responsibility for her own judgment and for her own welfare.

Brighouse and Swift (2014) place a premium on the development of these goods. However, the difficulty lies in the fact that parental partiality, while yielding desirable familial relationship goods, also furthers inequality by conferring advantages on some children while leaving others in want. Here, Brighouse and Swift (2014) employ the example of bedtime stories with one's children. Consistently exposing one's child to books at bedtime may strengthen the parent-child relationship in ways that produce familial relationship goods; and still, the same practice confers an advantage that widens the gulf between children whose parents have the opportunity and resources (monetary and otherwise) and those whose parents do not. When one child begins kindergarten with the skill set connected to frequent exposure to books (decoding, reading comprehension, inferential skills, etc.) and another child begins kindergarten without said skill set, the child who was read to at bedtime has already been exposed to vocabulary, concepts, and skills that will help them succeed in school (Duursma et al., 2008; Farrant and Zubrick, 2012; Kalb and Van Ours, 2014; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002). As a result of their preparation, children might be identified early as "talented" or "gifted" and tracked accordingly.³ With time, the space between the academic tracks of these two children widens and the permeability of the advanced track dissolves.

The authors outline various instances for readers of both legitimate and illegitimate parental partiality that confers advantage. Two examples of legitimate advantage conferral per Brighouse and Swift (2014) include reading bedtime stories to their children and introducing them to religious and other "communities of value" (2014, p. 124). Not all activities, however, that have the potential to foster familial relationship goods qualify as legitimate expressions of advantage conferral. For example, the bequeathing of trust funds and the transfer of estates have the potential to develop familial relationship goods, but according to Brighouse and Swift (2014), this does not represent a legitimate expression of partiality. The societal disparities that such acts cause outweigh the familial good that parents and children stand to gain.

Further, Brighouse and Swift (2014) also identify the provision of many instances of elite educational experiences as an illegitimate advantage conferral that constitutes an outgrowth of parental partiality. I explore an instance in which the advantage conferral through elite education is legitimate: in the case of many Black parents and families. I will explore this in more detail in the following sections where I concentrate attention on the advantage conferred by elite education for the parents and children centered in my account.

Elite Education and its Positional Power

What Makes Education Elite?

Before understanding the extent to which Black parents have a legitimate claim to placing their children in elite educational settings, we must first understand what "elite education" is and what, exactly, makes it elite. Elite educational institutions are best understood as those that combine academic selectivity, exclusivity, and abundant resources in ways that

grant outsized access to opportunity and social capital. While Ivy League universities and prestigious private schools are obvious exemplars, elite status is not limited to private institutions or formal rankings. Rather, it emerges from the cultural and institutional logics of scarcity, prestige, and closure, particularly within historically exclusionary elite institutions.⁴ Instead of defining elite status by fixed percentiles or rankings, I treat it as a relational category, honing my focus on those schools that function as status gateways through institutional scarcity, cultural capital, and concentrated opportunity.

While elite education is often most visible at the college level, sociological research has shown that elite K-12 institutions also function as powerful sites of social reproduction and advantage conferral (Cookson and Persell, 1985; Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Khan 2011). It is this early terrain of K-12 schooling, where elite status is largely cultivated, that this article most directly engages. However, while I focus primarily on decision-making around elite K-12 education, given that this is when most parent-led education decisions are made, insofar as parents play a role in the higher education decision-making process, the justification for conferring educational advantage applies there as well. The moral legitimacy of advantage conferral, then, is not exclusive to any one stage of schooling but operates across multiple educational junctures.

This article attends to how such institutions operate not only through tangible metrics, but also through symbolic and social mechanisms of closure and reproduction. Sociologist Agnès van Zanten (2010) characterizes elite educational institutions as sites of “social closure,” where status is secured through gatekeeping, symbolic capital, and restricted access. These institutions do not simply confer academic knowledge but also serve as engines of cultural reproduction, channeling students into elite colleges and labor markets. Their legitimacy is reinforced through what institutional theorists describe as “myth and ceremony”—ritualized performances of excellence and tradition that both reflect and perpetuate their perceived prestige (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

Educational institutions earn elite status through an ongoing interaction between selectivity, exclusivity, and resources. These dimensions, working in concert, produce environments that are not only academically rigorous but also socially privileged, offering students access to opportunity structures largely unavailable elsewhere. Academic selectivity, as a mechanism for creating and maintaining elite status in schools, manifests in a few key ways. Most obviously, schools exercise selectivity by choosing who attends.⁵ Entrance exams, letters of recommendation, and academic records often factor into the selection process. Through this process of information gathering, school admissions officers decide who has the potential to be an ideal institutional fit. Recently, many school programs have attempted to decouple their names from the academic selectivity from standardized tests (Brace 2021; Garg et al., 2020; Korn and Belkin, 2021; Svrluga 2017). Despite these efforts, academic selectivity remains as admissions representatives assess qualifications through other criteria.

Financial selectivity too plays a role in students’ ability to gain access to elite educational institutions. Albeit not a form of direct selectivity, private schools engage in selectivity by advertising tuition prices and fees that are most certainly prohibitive for some students and families. High tuition furthers selectivity in some cases by deterring students and families from applying (Sanchez 2022). While elite schools often provide generous scholarships for economically disadvantaged students, many prospective applicants are unaware of these scholarships, how they work, and whether they are eligible (Sanchez 2022). In many cases even “need-blind” and “need-aware” institutions selectively determine how much aid they offer each student. However, even when a school offers a full scholarship, the price itself might inadvertently signal to students in need of aid the disparity between their financial situation and that of their peers. Reflection on this disparity might energize some students (i.e., “I was selected without access to the resources of my peers, so I *know* I’m the goods!”)

and discourage others (i.e., “How could I ever hope to learn alongside people who can afford this tuition and therefore must have the resources to run intellectual circles around me”). The latter may lead students to self-select out of the application process or matriculation.

Selectivity in the admissions process breeds exclusivity. Exclusivity, or the lack of accessibility of an institution for those outside of its physical and figurative walls, in conjunction with the selectivity of a highly sought-after institution, furthers its elitism. Schools maintain their exclusivity through gatekeeping mechanisms (e.g., ensuring enough legacies, furthering esoteric traditions, ensuring low acceptance numbers, or indoctrinating students to believe their admission is based solely on merit and that the inverse applies to those not accepted). Ultimately, selectivity gives way to an atmosphere of exclusivity in that most of those who desire admission not only lack physical access but are also prohibited from engaging in cultural access due to the insular and exclusive nature of the school.

Beyond selectivity and exclusivity, the resources to which elite schools have access function as the active ingredient in the recipe for their elitism. While selectivity and exclusivity act in service of protecting and securing more resources, resources propel much of the elite status. Financial resources in the form of endowments or gifts facilitate rare and often otherwise unattainable experiences for students. For example, school resources may make it possible for students to take unpaid internships to pursue their interests and passions. These opportunities do not exist at every, or even most, educational institutions—the schools that provide students these opportunities are able to boast this rare, elite offering.

Perhaps even more pointedly, monetary resources convert into human resources in the form of highly sought-after educators, administrators, and staff by attracting those at the top of their fields. Students in elite high schools learn from teachers with advanced degrees; students at elite universities conduct field-defining research with highly regarded scholars. The monetary resources to which these institutions have access facilitate the caliber of educational experience and the caliber of the experiences secure more resources in a symbiosis of sorts that furthers and reinforces status and exclusivity.

While many people associate elite education with private institutions, numerous public schools comfortably fit within the realm of elite status. Public institutions like Stuyvesant High School, Walter Payton College Prep, and universities such as UCLA and the University of Michigan exhibit high levels of selectivity, resources, and prestige. In other words, elite status is not bounded by funding structure or private designation. Additionally, elite education operates along a continuum. Institutions vary in their degree of selectivity, exclusivity, and resources, and elite status is better understood as a position along a social scale—recognized and reproduced through both formal mechanisms and informal cultural logics.

Selectivity begets exclusivity, exclusivity begets resources and opportunities, and these opportunities reinforce status, which then garners more resources. Insofar as schools can leverage aspects of this cycle to improve themselves, they will likely do so. The cycle continues in part because schools must not only achieve elite status but maintain it. However, schools also engage in this cycle because elitism is not dichotomous, but rather continuous—this scale of elitism means that each school falls somewhere on the scale of least elite (and therefore least socially desirable) and the most elite. Society then positions educational institutions and their affiliates according to this scale which in turn affects their power. This phenomenon does not only occur within elite educational spaces but throughout the educational landscape. Understanding how elite status is constructed and maintained provides the foundation for the article’s core normative claim: that under conditions of racialized educational exclusion, access to elite schooling can serve as a morally legitimate form of redress. For Black students who attend elite schools, association with such

institutions of privilege and power provides them access to opportunities that they have both historically and presently been excluded from. Access facilitates further access, offering a potential avenue for social and historical redress and upward mobility.

Elite Education as a Positional Good

The complexity of education, and, by extension, elite education, lies in its dual status as both an absolute good and positional good. Education functions as an absolute good by providing benefits regardless of who has it or how much of it they have. Once someone knows how to read, it does not entirely matter whether everyone around them can read or if no one can, as they are able to enrich themselves and access knowledge through their ability to read. Similarly, when one learns how to write, it provides them with a mode of self-expression that is an intrinsic good.

Education as a positional good, on the other hand, gains or loses its value depending on its prevalence in society. As education becomes more prevalent, its relative advantage decreases, making exclusive, elite education particularly valuable in terms of signaling status and securing access to scarce resources. Scholars have long debated the positional nature of education and its role in society. Martin Hollis (1987) explores the ways that the positional aspects of education function to maintain social hierarchies. Brighthouse and Swift in other work (2006) also critique the credentialing of education and the resulting societal divide along lines of educational privilege. More recent scholarship further argues that social reliance on educational credentials reinforces socioeconomic stratification and reinforces gaps between the privileged and disadvantaged in society (Durst 2021; Schouten 2022). For these and other reasons, scholars like Brighthouse and Swift rightly problematize elite education as a precipitant of inequality.

The positional nature of education breaks down into two facets: education as sheer knowledge and skill, and education as a credential. The medical field represents a clear example of the positional nature of educational knowledge and skill. Medical doctors attend medical school followed by residencies and then in some cases pursue fellowships to develop a specialization. The knowledge doctors acquire through their specialization can qualify them for competitive positions in high demand and subsequent competitive compensation. Demand and compensation are functions of the scarcity of their expertise—they have a valuable knowledge and skill set, the value of which is based on the difficulty of attaining it.

Education as credentials (i.e. educational pedigree) is also positional. In U.S. society, one's educational background correlates with the opportunities to which one has access. For example, continuing with the example of the medical field, imagine two candidates of similar experience and pedigree vying for a position at a hospital. One candidate, however, also holds a master's degree in public health. Even though this master's was not listed as a requirement in the job description and is largely irrelevant to performing the job, the additional degree increases the candidate's competitiveness. This competitiveness arises from the increased credentialing of U.S. society (Collins 1979), as educational credentials, through signaling certain skills and knowledge, carry weight. Whether someone who holds a given degree indeed has the signaled expertise may be unknown or irrelevant to an employer. Nevertheless, the quantity of one's educational credentials can position them above those with fewer credentials, all else being equal.

Aside from the quantity of one's educational credentials, the perceived quality⁶ of the credentials also factors into positioning. In many instances, this positional strand of putative quality eclipses quantity. To return to our example, imagine that the candidate without a master's in public health graduated from a top ten medical school and then attended a top-ranked residency for her sub-field. The candidate's competitiveness

increases due to the perceived quality of her educational credential. Her degree not only signals a particular quality of education received but also gestures towards access to spheres of influence. Insofar as U.S. society values competition and exclusivity, degrees from competitive universities with low admission rates place individuals into a higher tier in society, the value of which is mediated by the gatekeeping mechanisms in place.

Elite educational experiences, therefore, contribute to and even maintain the gulf between those in the upper echelons of society and those outside of them. Indeed, schools that specialize in producing extraordinary experiences for their students exacerbate educational, and thereby social, inequality. For Brighouse, Swift, and many scholars of inequality, the advantage conferred upon this small subset of students, cannot be justified—it represents an illegitimate, even unjust, form of advantage conferral. This argument holds and succeeds in its goal of reducing inequality and thereby injustice when one sets aside the critical societal factors that I outline in the next section. However, the disparate social, economic, and historical contexts across groups demands a more complicated calculus.

The critical examination of advantage conferral via elite education leads us to interrogate whether the legitimacy of the conferral varies based on recipients' pre-existing arsenal of capital. Based on the racial hierarchy of U.S. society, many Black children stand at a de facto capital deficit, resulting in qualitatively different outcomes despite similar inputs of advantage in the immediate term. For this reason, among others, I present an argument for the legitimacy of advantage conferral through education for Black children.

The Legitimacy of Advantage Conferral for Black Parents

Brighouse and Swift (2014) offer a solid, albeit incomplete picture of the legitimate and illegitimate conferral of advantage. To develop an even more incisive and instructive theory, we must take into consideration historical and sociological factors to frame our understanding of both parental partiality and advantage conferral. In this section, I argue that Black parents cannot justly be held to the same restrictions on advantage conferral as White parents, particularly as it pertains to school choice. The constitutive facets of elite education outlined previously have the potential to precipitate mobility and correct historical exclusionary practices levied against Black people in the United States. The development of a theory tailored to the experiences of Black people in the United States necessitates a contextual review of this exclusion and corresponding societal disadvantage.

Through this analysis I argue that Black parents can legitimately seek to confer educational advantage upon their children.⁷ I motivate my argument by explicating two primary contextual considerations for Black people that render their lived realities sufficiently different to justify opting for elite education and legitimate advantage conferral. First, I explore the corrective potential of elite educational opportunity as it pertains to redressing historical exclusion and counteracting current societal disparities for the Black community. Subsequently, I overview how the operationalization of Blackness facilitates individually gained advantages to accrue at the collective level, facilitating racial uplift. By grounding the concept of advantage conferral in the unique systemic conditions affecting the Black community, past and present, I arrive at a differentiated theory of legitimate partiality and deliberate conferral of advantage that extends beyond the individual to promote communal advancement.

The first part of my argument for educational discretion for Black parents and families is founded on the historical exclusion of Black people from the U.S. education system and current socioeconomic outcomes for the Black community. Since arriving on American soil, Black people have historically been institutionally denied the right to adequate,

let alone exceptional, education. Therefore, the provision of educational choice for Black parents is a corrective one. Additionally, despite the progression of time, the continued prevalence of anti-Blackness results in disparities across social realism for the Black community. Therefore, the corrective potential of elite education also stems from its protective properties for socioeconomic status. In this section, I address these two facets as corrective-redressive and corrective-protective educational advantage. I outline how Black people have been denied not only educational choice but also quality education by this nation. Elite educational settings possess significant corrective potential by offering Black families both the educational choice and the high-quality opportunities that have been systematically denied to them for generations. This choice and quality then extends into improved socioeconomic outcomes for Black students, thereby offering a measure of redress for past and current harms.

Elite Education as Corrective-Redressive

We cannot understand the legitimacy of Black families' choice to attend elite schools without first analyzing the way in which the United States has withheld educational choice and quality from the Black community. Throughout the history of Black people in this nation, White people have historically taken measures to limit their access to education. We observe these measures as early as the antebellum period in the South and they weave their way throughout the Black experience through the present. Below, in brief, I review the history of educational exclusion of Black people in the United States to motivate elite education choice as corrective of past injustices.

The institution of slavery largely depended on the illiteracy of enslaved people. Slave masters not only refused to provide educational opportunities to enslaved Africans but furthermore forbade the enslaved to learn to read and write. Anti-literacy laws throughout the Southern United States made it illegal to teach slaves, and in several instances, free Black people. Breaking such laws was punishable by fine, jail time, and in some cases, floggings (Sambol-Tosco 2004; Span and Anderson, 2005; Tolley 2016). Educational choice for Black people was but a dream at this moment in history given that those who oppressed enslaved people also denied them education in its simplest forms. Despite the risk of losing limbs, being sold and separated from their families, and even death, Black people circumvented these laws and learned during clandestine meetings outside of their masters' long gaze (Williams 2005).

With few options and avenues to obtain an education, enslaved Blacks persisted in their pursuit of self-education, even though they had to learn in the dark of the woods, by moon and starlight, in constant fear of being caught. Learning was not the only thing done in secret as enslaved people stealthily acquired second-hand learning materials from their masters and the masters' children (Williams 2005). Frederick Douglass's (1845) narrative poignantly portrays the complexity of this process by detailing how slaves surreptitiously learned from the used or discarded readers and other materials of White students (Span and Anderson, 2005). In addition to the diminished, hand-me-down quality of the materials themselves, the knowledge itself was handed down with little recourse other than for enslaved communities to lean on one another to collectively decode their newly acquired content and pass it on to others, often without being able to ensure their own proficiency (Span and Anderson, 2005).

Post slavery, the newly-free Black population prioritized education as the primary way to better themselves and solidify their freedom (Tyack and Lowe, 1986). One of their first collective efforts involved the establishment of a universal public school system in the South. However, the White planter class, along with other Whites whose power exceeded that of the formerly enslaved, forced Black people out of the very system they incepted

(Anderson 1988; Du Bois 1935). They were further and more formally excluded from the education system when segregationist laws and policies became the rule of the land. The severity of constrained educational choice for Black people throughout this nation's history was amplified by the paucity of government resources provided to Black schools to realize the "equal" aspect of the segregation doctrine.

During this time, despite the legal mandate for Blacks and Whites to learn in separate and purportedly equal facilities, choice in the matter was notably absent. Black students had no real choice in their schooling as they were not legally permitted to attend White-only schools. This legal separation coincided with a reduced quality in resources alongside substandard learning spaces as Black schools received old, worn, and slur-ridden editions of textbooks from White schools (Brooker 2020) and buildings that were largely in disrepair, if available at all (Brooker 2020). The extreme gap in quality of materials was often remediated by community members who donated their skills and resources (Cecelski 1994; Walker 1996). Not unlike during slavery, those in power opposed Black students' and teachers' learning and sought to limit their educational growth by closely monitoring what teachers taught. Black teachers resisted by switching between approved content and methods and unapproved, subversive pedagogy. When monitored, all their instruction aligned with mandates; when their instruction fell outside of the White gaze, in opposition to mandates, their pedagogy would enhance students' self-worth and criticality (Givens 2021).

Additionally, while Black teachers abundantly supported their students, structural barriers challenged their practice. Like Black students, Black teachers received virtually no support from the government for their own educational edification (Fultz 1995). As such, not only did many of their physical materials for students (e.g., textbooks, writing materials, etc.) leave much to be desired, but the lack of resources marked another obstacle to the endeavor of Black education. Undeniably, Black teachers and students capitalized on the little they had, but one can only imagine what they might have accomplished had the nation delivered on its promise of equal educational resources.

Even with the federal mandate of desegregation, Black learning continued to be plagued with constraints with respect to choices and quality—including in the North, where zoning laws and discriminatory housing policies directly impacted Black people's access to adequate education. In fact, during and after desegregation Black communities had even fewer choices and the quality of their education rapidly declined. During desegregation, an entire generation of Black leaders lost their jobs as the state displaced over 38,000 teachers (Oakley et al., 2009). As a result, the state forced Black students and communities to exchange the aspiration and advocacy provided by Black teachers with access to schools that would thoroughly strip them of the beauty of Black education pre-desegregation (Walker 2018).

In both the North and South when schools were "integrated," Black students' experiences were riddled with racial aggression that affected their ability to learn (Fitzgerald 2007). White teachers, students, and families leveraged intimidation tactics, excluded Black children in desegregated schools, and acted in other overtly racist ways to voice their dissatisfaction with the mandate (Farrell 1984).

White community members also communicated their refusal to integrate in far more insidious ways. On both sides of the Mason-Dixon, many urban areas that had previously been inhabited by White families experienced "White flight" as White families "voted with their feet," flocking to neighboring suburbs and in doing so creating enclaves of all-White public schools (Renzulli and Evans, 2005). At other times, White people further obstructed integration by exiting public schooling systems altogether and establishing private schools with prohibitive tuition and admissions processes (Andrews 2002; Clotfelter 1976; Greene 2019). Such schools popped up throughout the country specifically as an enactment of

White refusal to integrate. In each of these instances, White people exercised voice and exit (Hirschman 1970) along with withdrawing their monetary resources from schools that became increasingly Black. Many of the schools that now brandish elite badges were conceived on a foundation of White flight and Black exclusion. Offering, if not prioritizing, Black student access to these spaces serves as a correction of historical injustices. Given that, unlike their White counterparts, Black students and families across the nation could not leverage voice and exit as tools of recourse, the desegregated schools in their communities became enduring symbols of constrained choice and inferior quality of resources.

Constrained choice and diminished quality of education still affect Black communities today. While desegregation occurred over a half-century ago, schools remain segregated and the extent and quality of school resources fall along racial lines (García 2020; Stanford Graduate School of Education 2022). After 400 years in the United States, Black families have scarcely been provided adequate educational opportunity—I argue that they are owed that and then some.

The injustice of withholding quality educational experiences from Black people is magnified when we realize that educational quality directly correlates to educational opportunity (Ladson-Billings 2006; Orfield and Lee, 2005; Vanneman et al., 2009). Given the history reviewed above, one way we might differently understand the provision of elite educational experiences for Black children is a past due payment on an educational debt (Ladson-Billings 2006) plus interest. I propose that one of the ways to repay this debt lies within the realm of elite education, as one of several ways that society might redress the harm done to Black families and communities.

This kind of redress naturally raises questions about which Black families are implicated, and how structural exclusion continues to shape access today. While my argument speaks to Black families broadly, its scope is not limited to those below a certain income threshold. The legacy of educational exclusion cuts across class lines, and economic mobility has not reliably translated into institutional access, especially in elite educational spaces shaped by racialized gatekeeping. My argument foregrounds the intergenerational exclusion that continues to constrain educational pathways. For families whose trajectories reflect that history, the pursuit of elite education constitutes a legitimate conferral of advantage—not an unjust gain, but an effort to correct long-standing inequities.

Historically, affirmative action policies served as a genre of corrective-redressive educational opportunity. These policies, which are measures designed to improve access to education and employment for historically marginalized groups by considering race, gender, and other factors in admissions and hiring processes, aimed to account for differences in academic preparation due to ongoing discrimination against marginalized groups, particularly Black students. The implementation of affirmative action policies between the 1960s, following the Civil Rights Movement, and 2023 when they were overturned resulted in significant gains for the Black community, particularly in higher education and economic mobility. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), between 1976 and 2022, the enrollment of Black students at U.S. colleges and universities surged by 125%, significantly outpacing the 63% increase among students from other racial and ethnic groups. Consequently, the proportion of Black students in higher education grew from 9% to 13%, roughly reflecting their share in the U.S. population as of 2022 (Hatfield and Anderson 2024; NCES 2023a, 2023b). And while the White-Black income gap continued to grow, the median income for Black households grew by approximately 74% between 1967 and 2023 (U.S. Census Bureau 2024).

Affirmative action, as it stood, aligned with my conception of corrective educational opportunity. It acknowledged and sought to redress longstanding inequities that sometimes manifested as disparities in conventional measures of academic achievement among

Black students. With the Supreme Court's decision to abolish affirmative action, Black families and institutions that remain committed to correcting these disparities are now contending with ways to legally do so. Highly selective educational opportunities at younger ages for Black children might now be considered more deeply as avenues for broader educational and social access.

Scholars conceptualize and propose corrective societal and governmental policies aimed at correcting systemic discrimination against Black Americans as reparations, generally understood as efforts to redress past harms to a group of people. Much of the discourse around reparations has to do with repayment in the form of money and/or property. William A. Darity and A. Kirsten Mullen (2020) explain reparations as "a program of acknowledgment, redress, and closure for a grievous injustice" and note that in the case of Black or African Americans, "the grievous injustices that make the case for reparations include slavery, legal segregation (Jim Crow), and ongoing discrimination and stigmatization" (p. 2). They argue that a reparations program for African Americans would place the United States on the road to achieving racial equality since many of the other historical opportunities to close the divide in opportunity (i.e., the New Deal, G.I. Bill, Civil Rights Act) were either designed to exclude Black people or afforded those in power the latitude to implement these programs in manners that would further discrimination (Feagin and Ducey 2018; Katznelson 2005; Mettler 2007).

At its core, reparations in the case of the U.S. constitute repayment for the ongoing exclusion that resulted in a lack of opportunity. The educational narrative of Black people in the United States certainly adheres to the pattern of systematic exclusion and minimized opportunity. A reparatory response through educational opportunity represents a path forward and appropriately begins the process of acknowledging the educational malpractice committed against Black people in this nation and redressing this wrong by providing exceptional opportunities.⁸

Education, while not always included in reparational propositions, is a promising avenue for beginning societal repair. Nayzak Wali-Ali's (2019) account of reparations includes education, proposing that Black students should receive "free education (from kindergarten to graduate school)" and "preferential admissions into higher education" amongst other measures such as "subsidized housing...allotted land, and stipends from the government" (para. 11). And while neither Wali-Ali's (2019) nor Darity and Mullen (2020) focus solely on repair through education, they both view reparations as a response to injustice that eradicates divides in opportunity and power between Black people and Whites in this nation. This gulf in opportunity is prominently displayed in the realm of education—we widely observe the lasting effects of Black exclusion from educational opportunity with gaps in educational achievement, educational attainment, and school disciplinary response varying by racial demographics (Gregory et al., 2011; Ramirez and Carpenter, 2007; Vanneman et al., 2009). These disparities and the clear compounding effect of educational exclusion on all facets of life for Black people justify the implementation of educational reparations.

The aim of this article is not to sketch out a full program for educational reparations. Nor is it to posit elite education as reparatory in and of itself. However, I argue that accessing elite educational opportunity and the corresponding benefits is a corrective measure of institutionalized educational exclusion and is akin to reparations. Insofar as corrective educational offerings are based on quality and choice that yield increased opportunities for Black people, such offerings might include preferential acceptance to educational institutions, including elite institutions, free education from preschool through graduate school, increased governmental support for homeschooling or home learning pods, and free participation in certification and licensing programs. Historically, affirmative action policies, which sought to provide Black students with access to higher education,

served as a partial enactment of these suggested corrective educational initiatives. Though these policies have been legally dismantled, any series of initiatives structured to address systemic educational exclusion should include principles of historically and socially aware preferential acceptance to maximize choice, quality, facilitating corrective educational opportunity for Black families. For the purposes of this article, I focus on the subset of corrective educational opportunities that involve matriculation through elite educational institutions.

As detailed above, Black communities have historically been robbed of educational quality and choice. While quality is a fundamental component of any satisfactory education, choice, in this context, serves as a corrective mechanism to address long-standing inequities. Providing both quality and choice is necessary to redress the historical exclusion the Black community faced. Furthermore, the corresponding conferral of advantage through elite education moves beyond simply meeting long-overdue standards. Elite education's potential as a corrective measure of institutionalized education exclusion makes it reparatory in essence though distinct from reparations as discussed in the literature outlined above and beyond. Nevertheless, by conferring advantage, elite educational opportunity marks one way to offer repayment in both the short and long terms.⁹

Providing Black parents with the latitude to act partially in ways that confer educational opportunity, as well as advantage, is a path for redressing harms enacted against the Black community. Not only can the provision of elite education result in better preparedness for higher learning, but it will simultaneously grant Black students access to spheres of influence. When Black parents place their children in elite schools, doing so should be understood as a legitimate conferral of advantage—a corrective measure to address entrenched exclusion and denied access.

While many highly selective, prestigious schools' origins and practices are rooted in racist, exclusionary practices, Black parents can utilize the reputations amassed from decades, if not centuries, of gatekeeping to confer educational advantage and opportunity upon their children. Of course, elite educational experiences are not the only (or even the best) way to redress the intentional withholding of educational choice, quality, and long-deserved educational opportunity. Indeed, this path may not even be desirable for all families, a point which I address in more depth in a subsequent section. Instead, I argue that this choice cannot and must not be removed from Black parents. Any solution, educational or otherwise, that seeks to be corrective-redressive, if not reparatory, for Black communities should expand opportunity and options for its beneficiaries—my account is just that, an expansion of options. By affording Black parents an array of choices around educating their children, we provide these families with the educational autonomy and agency they have been denied for so long. Ultimately, by broadening options and opportunities for Black families, society allows Black parents the choice to legitimately confer educational advantage upon their children. We should understand this expansion as corrective-redressive—the repayment of a long-overdue educational debt with interest—rather than an unearned advantage.

Elite Education as Corrective-Protective

It may well be that the very depiction of elite educational experiences as advantages indicates a crucial misunderstanding in this context. Perhaps they are more aptly framed as tools that allow Black youth to successfully navigate society. Indeed, even with “advantages,” Black children and families are at significant risk of suffering backward mobility. Research demonstrates that, despite economic stability and comparable resources in childhood, Black men do not achieve comparable intergenerational mobility when compared to their White male counterparts (Chetty et al., 2020). More alarmingly still,

Black families are at a higher risk for suffering backward mobility (Akee et al., 2019; Shapiro 2017).

Seven of ten Black children who are raised in the middle-income quintile will end up being in the bottom or second-to-bottom income quintile as adults and this all occurs against the backdrop of persistent gaps in wealth, net worth, and unequal access to housing (Meschede et al., 2015; Orfield 2013; Rodrigue and Reeves, 2015; Shapiro et al., 2013). Therefore, this “conferral of advantage” is a raising of the floor so that many Black children might be able to have a shot at the socioeconomic stability available to White children and those who have benefitted from privilege (racial, social, economic) across generations and in the present.

Including sociological conditions in our analysis supports the conceptualization of elite education as corrective-protective and further motivates the legitimacy of Black parents’ conferral of educational advantage. Given that structural racism plays a role in backward mobility for previously stable Black children into adulthood, our analysis of legitimate or illegitimate parental partiality must be differentiated across racial contexts. Brighthouse and Swift’s work (2006, 2014) views the provision of elite or privileged educational experiences as illegitimate conferral of parental advantage but neglects to acknowledge that this conferral of advantage for Black children can fundamentally alter their later life outcomes by protecting them from societal ills that manifest in downward mobility, among other undesired consequences.

While these schools secure favorable life outcomes for most of their students, the magnitude of this boost likely varies by race and socioeconomic background. For instance, studies show that elite schools offer some of the best mobility prospects for minoritized students. In their mobility report cards, Raj Chetty and colleagues (2017) track the role of various types of colleges in securing economic mobility for students and find that across higher education institutions in the United States, elite universities (i.e., Harvard, MIT, Stanford, etc.) precipitate the most drastic mobility jump for students. They find that attending one of these institutions propels 60% of low-income students from the bottom to the top quintile and 13% of low-income students from the bottom quintile to the top 1%. However, these schools are overwhelmingly populated by affluent students. As a result, the raw number of low-income students who experience a launch in mobility from elite universities remains relatively small. Paul Tough (2019) similarly affirms elite schools’ ability to secure significant boosts in mobility for low-income and racially minoritized students.

Black parents, therefore, are justified in their pursuit of elite educational experiences. In these cases, advantage conferral is legitimate because it places Black students on a trajectory a) to which they likely would have had no other way of accessing due to a difference in monetary, social, cultural, and even human capital in the forms most legible to those in power; and b) without which their quality of life in society as it is currently structured might be significantly worse. Yet and still, the longevity of these mobility boosts across generations remains tenuous, but these corrective-protective efforts to raise the floor are still necessary.

Collective Uplift and Third-Party Interests

A less apparent justification for the conferral of advantage on Black children lies in the constitution and operationalization of the Black community in the United States. Brighthouse and Swift (2006, 2014) discuss third-party interests in their work, stating that parents, children, and third parties (presumably the state), have claims on the child and therefore have interests in the child’s future that affect the expression and manifestation of parental partiality. In the case of Black children, the broader Black community serves as a

third party with strong interests in the child's trajectory as part of a collective value system. In this way, when Black parents act in ways that confer educational advantage on their children, they are not just exercising partiality towards their child, but the advantage extends to the broader Black community.¹⁰

Dating back to the rule of hypodescent, better known as the "one-drop rule," differentiations in Blackness have been elided to construct a larger Black community. Functionally, this means that despite variations in pigmentation or complexion, ethnicity or nationality, wealth or socioeconomic status, society binds Black people together in a meaningfully distinct manner. In part because of this societal elision and in part because of cultural orientations, Black people have a sense of linked fate that binds their successes and challenges to those of the community (Dawson 1994; Harris-Perry 2011; Kinder and Winter, 2001). The theorization around linked fate in extant scholarship suggests that this sense of collective destiny would impact the distribution of benefits acquired from elite educational opportunity. I argue that this collective orientation, a function of both social marginalization and communal values, further justifies elite educational advantage for Black people.

Externally, despite their gradations, Black people have a shared experience—one of exclusion from mainstream society—in the United States. Part of this shared experience means that group characteristics are attributed to individuals. Society sees Black individuals and immediately sees their race. As such, they are viewed as members of a collective race initially rather than being first viewed as individuals.

Internally, a shared connection and sense of shared fate create a sense of collectivity that unifies the racial community (Ogbu 2004; Shelby 2002). Now, I am in no way suggesting that the Black community is a monolith, nor do I mean to overly romanticize community dynamics. However, with roots in West African traditions, many Black people in America undeniably share a sense of connection and collective responsibility for those in their community (Dawson 1995; Nobles 2006). Collective responsibility creates another way for us to understand the legitimacy of educational advantage conferred upon Black children. Black children, in community programs, church, and family settings, are socialized with this sense of collective responsibility (Warfield-Coppock 1992). Socialization around the collective means that a sense of linked destiny and shared fate is more probable among Black children, which also means that the children themselves and those that view their educational accomplishments are more likely to positively attribute this success to the community over time rather than being viewed solely as individual successes.

The operationalization of collectivity means that Black children stand to grow to be community-invested individuals, likely to disperse their successes among the community. For instance, in 2019 businessman and investor Robert F. Smith made headlines by donating thirty-four million dollars (used to pay off student loans for 396 graduates) to the graduating class of Morehouse College, a historically Black college (HBCU). Smith, however, was neither a Morehouse nor HBCU alumnus. His educational path, rather, is paved with exceptional and elite schooling experiences in some of the nation's top institutions. Nevertheless, Smith leveraged his privilege for the benefit of the Black community. Like Smith, many other Black individuals who have achieved conventional success make a concerted effort to give back to the Black community specifically. For instance, Richelieu Dennis, founder of Sundial Brands, created the \$100 million New Voices Fund to support Black women entrepreneurs; John W. Rogers Jr., founder and CEO of Ariel Investments, invested heavily in financial literacy and educational opportunities for Black youth; and Ken Frazier, former CEO of Merck & Co., co-founded OneTen to create one million jobs for Black Americans.

While these are large scale examples, a collectivist orientation and commitment to community uplift can manifest across the socioeconomic spectrum and extends beyond the

world of highly successful entrepreneurs and corporate leaders. Linked-fate and collectivism, while not serving as the primary motivation, provides secondary justification for Black parents' ability to legitimately confer advantage through elite education.

Objections and Qualifications

My argument primes several objections and additional considerations. I have identified several objections around Black identity, class, and broader considerations for justice that require further explication. After responding to these objections largely pertaining to identity and positionality, I turn to address broader normative implications and concerns raised by my argument.

To begin, one might question the extent to which the theory of legitimate conferral of educational advantage applies based on varying identities, social positions, and family configurations. We know that despite society's homogenization of Black people, the community is dynamic with myriad backgrounds, values, and lived experiences. Below I address how my theory applies in instances across the several facets of the community including 1) families in which parents and children have different racial identities 2) families of immigrant Black origin, and 3) Black families of relative socioeconomic privilege.

With regards to the first scenario, one might imagine families in which one or more parents are Black and the child is biracial, families in which one or more parents are non-Black but have Black children or families in which one or more parents are Black and have non-Black children. My response to this centers the child. According to Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital (social, cultural, etc.), what makes something categorizable as capital lies in its ability to be transmitted or reproduced. One way that we might think of cases in which my outlined theory applies to any family constellation involves analyzing the extent to which parents can transfer capital (in its various forms) to their children. Wealthy, well-resourced, non-Black parents might be able to provide a great deal of educational support and access to their Black children. Like other forms of advantage conferral involving education, Brighthouse and Swift might object to this conferral. However, given the minimal transferability of the parents' Whiteness (or non-Blackness) and the privilege therein, my theory remains applicable to a degree.¹¹ In other situations, in which race, and thereby societal advantage, differ between parents and children, the degree to which my account applies will depend on the extent to which the child stands to be educationally and socially disadvantaged in society.

Relatedly, the historical context on which I base my argument is one distinct to Black people who have descended from enslaved people in this nation and experienced the subsequent educational exclusion. How then are we to think about Black people in this country whose lineage deviates from the one just mentioned but still face similar societal disadvantage and contemporary inadequate educational quality? Scholars have noted that African and Caribbean immigrant families often navigate elite education differently than U.S.-descended Black families, revealing important heterogeneity in both access strategies and perceived outcomes (Kasinitz et al., 2008; Waters 1999). While this article focuses primarily on the historical exclusion of U.S. Black communities, these distinctions warrant further attention in future work.

Due to anti-Blackness and the homogenization of Black people in the United States, Black parents from immigrant backgrounds may pursue elite education on grounds of its corrective-protective potential but not on corrective-redressive grounds. Therefore, these families have a weaker claim to legitimate advantage conferral through elite education.

My argument is most directly aimed at those within the Black community who have felt the compounded, generational effects of racism in the United States. Should Black parents

with histories that differ from this reality seek to confer advantage on their child on corrective-protective grounds, they should encourage a collective orientation in their child such that they utilize educational advantage for the uplift of others, not just themselves. It is not unreasonable to think that parents can influence this orientation—there's a reason why we find families to be one of the primary vehicles through which we instill moral, cultural, and societal values because they are foundational and that is often where people garner the base for their values.

Beyond immigrant origin and ethnicity, my argument elicits considerations involving socioeconomic status, as noted in earlier sections. The Black community is no more a socioeconomic monolith than it is an ethnic one. How does my theory apply to Black families who are not economically disadvantaged or have access to other forms of social privilege? In the instances of these Black families who have faced educational exclusion in this nation for generations as outlined above, they may seek elite education on corrective-redressive grounds and, to a lesser extent, corrective-protective ones. The right to discretionary choice as a function of corrective-redressive educational opportunity applies across socioeconomic strata. Educational agency, per my view, is essential for all Black families as it facilitates broader corrective justice. Regarding their right to elite education on corrective-protective grounds, they too have a claim here, though it is weaker than those of similar racial and ethnic background who are also economically disadvantaged.

However, due to the operationalization of race as a master status (Hughes 1945) in the United States, all Black people in this country, despite class or ethnic background, are a kind of “least advantaged.” Though there might be within-group variations, structural racism can tend to elides these differences in significant ways as evidenced by the fact that even Black people from advantaged class backgrounds do not experience the same inter-generational mobility as their White counterparts (Akee et al., 2019; Chetty et al., 2020; Meschede et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2016; Shapiro 2017). That said, it is unarguable that the differences in background within the community manifest as disparate life opportunities, experiences, and outcomes. Therefore, one might rightly have questions about the extent to which my theory can be applied to those in the higher echelons of the Black community who benefit from relative privilege. Ultimately, I argue that depending on a family's place in the social hierarchy—based on ethnic background, class, or other dimensions of privilege—the strength of their legitimate claim to advantage conferred through elite education will vary.

Finally, anti-Blackness can be internalized by members of the race itself, especially those of relative privilege (Pyke 2010; Speight 2007). It is therefore important that those from more privileged backgrounds within the Black community leverage and cultivate a collectivist orientation to facilitate racial advancement rather than allow internalized anti-Blackness and proximity to Whiteness to guide one's worldview and subsequent actions. Without the collectivist orientation, the legitimacy of the claim to advantage conferral weakens and, in an applied sense, the community suffers from exacerbated within-group inequality even while a subset of its members experience socioeconomic mobility.

Another set of considerations arise when exploring the extent to which my theory applies to disadvantaged, non-Black people. Of course, Black people are not the only people who have been systematically excluded or disadvantaged educationally, nor are they the only people who encounter structural barriers to their educational thriving. Therefore, why localize my argument to Black families? Can my theory be applied more liberally to the parents of children disadvantaged in other ways?

My response is “yes and no.” Firstly, my argument is predicated on three primary layers of legitimacy: 1) historical exclusion from educational access, without resources or effective recourse that has congealed into generational disadvantage; 2) sociological factors that impact life outcomes where education can make a fundamental difference in life trajectory

and outcomes; 3) the potential for group uplift through collectivist orientation. If these three layers of legitimacy apply to other groups, though I have not explored that here, I imagine that a similar version of my theory might apply. That said, anti-Blackness globally, but specifically in the United States, interacts with other forms of marginalization to structure various manifestations of disadvantage across groups. Therefore, lending legitimate conferral of educational advantage first and foremost to Black parents has the potential to positively influence the outcomes of other disadvantaged children as many of these issues are outgrowths of broader anti-Blackness.

In addition to questions about to whom this theory applies, one might argue that we have good reason to be skeptical about whether the conferral of educational advantage to one's children is the most direct route to precipitate the uplift of others and bring about justice. Brighthouse and Swift (2014) make this very argument and claim that when we justify the conferral of advantage on our children by saying, "our kids will be the ones to change society," we avoid using the more direct route for social change which would be providing educational advantage to the least advantaged.

I agree with Brighthouse and Swift that this kind of moral justification allows parents to reproduce inequality under the guise of pending social uplift. In the case of Black people in the United States, however, the justification is in part based on uplift, yes, but is primarily predicated on elite education as a corrective mechanism for past and current disadvantage to Black people in this country.

A closely related objection pertains to the potential for societal change via this vision of uplift. Some might argue that using the conferral of educational advantage to change society is not truly fixing society, but rather contributes to maintaining social institutions. Replacing affluent, educated White people in power with assimilated, newly affluent Black people is not a "fix." With that, I concur. It is not a fix, and yet, it still achieves a measure of justice in our severely unideal terrain. This measure of justice is bolstered when collective orientations are leveraged for communal uplift.

Nikole Hannah-Jones (2016a), a preeminent journalist who engages with civil rights issues particularly around race and education, grapples with the tensions between the individual success of one's child, the manifestation of structural racism in the education sphere, and societal change on a personal and public level in her work. Her perspective and experience helps refine and clarify my argument. In her piece "Choosing a School for My Daughter in a Segregated City" Hannah-Jones relays:

True integration, true equality, requires a surrendering of advantage, and when it comes to our own children, that can feel almost unnatural... Even Kenneth Clark, the psychologist whose research showed the debilitating effects of segregation on black children, chose not to enroll his children in the segregated schools he was fighting against. "My children," he said, "only have one life." But so do the children relegated to this city's segregated schools. They have only one life, too (Hannah-Jones 2016a).

In a video further explaining her choice to send her daughter to an under-resourced, segregated school, Hannah-Jones (2016b) reflects: "those of us who have choice and privilege and some power keep avoiding these schools then we have accepted that this two-tiered system is inevitable, and I don't accept that." Hannah-Jones, I imagine, might appeal to the line of objection to my argument. In response, it is not that I believe that Hannah-Jones is wrong, indeed, the opposite is the case. However, though I am not able to ask Hannah-Jones, I imagine that the rhetorical choices she made had to do with her audience. People who read *The New York Times* are overwhelmingly White and middle-class (Pew Research Center 2020). As such, Hannah-Jones's appeal was decidedly not directed toward the Black community in the ways that I am directing my argument.

Secondly, I believe that she and her family occupy a socioeconomic stratum that is inaccessible to most Black people. That is not to say that the majority of Black people in the United States suffer from abject poverty—on the contrary, the majority are middle class (US Census Bureau 2021). Nevertheless, despite middle-class status, being Black in America puts one in a precarious position vis-à-vis mobility. The choice that Hannah-Jones made for her family is certainly commendable and moves us closer to a just society. However, I argue that her path is not the only just path for Black parents and families.

Those who think along the same lines as Hannah-Jones might also argue the fact that parents have a fiduciary duty to their children to ensure that the world, not just their child's individual situation, is better for them. Given this, wouldn't it be irresponsible for parents to allow their children to participate in existing unjust structures? To that, I would respond by first emphasizing the importance of incrementalism, or the approach that recognizes the time it takes to restructure and remedy society's many ills (Halpern and Mason, 2015; Lindblom 1959; Quinn 1980). Black parents' decision to take incremental, intentional steps towards a more just social configuration represents a legitimate form of the conferral of educational advantage. That said, my support of incrementalism does not necessarily extend to power structures or those in power throughout society. Furthermore, it is not disproportionately the responsibility of persistently disadvantaged groups to be the ones to fix society. The collective and transformational upbringing of the child is essential to ensuring that the conferral of educational advantage remains legitimate for Black parents and families.

Beyond this, some Black parents might outright reject the notion that elite educational spaces can be corrective at all given their histories and constituting factors. These spaces are often marked by their longevity, seemingly bottomless resources, and their exclusivity. For most of them, Black people were either barred entry or admitted in infinitesimal numbers for the majority of their existence. These institutions, therefore, were not erected with Black children in mind, nor are many of them populated with Black children. While some predominately White educational institutions maneuver through this terrain better than others, many of them have not learned how to navigate these circumstances towards the betterment of their Black students. Without confidence in elite, predominately White institutions' ability to curate an intellectually and personally safe space for Black students, many parents would opt out of these forms of corrective educational opportunity and even patently reject the underlying theory of change. Indeed, proximity to Whiteness is not corrective or just in and of itself, but insofar as this proximity equates to opportunity and mobility these avenues should remain options for Black families. The refutation of parents concerned with a premise predicated on proximity to Whiteness as just are well within their right and my account does not aim to propound said proximity as just. However, independent of the concerns around proximity to Whiteness, I offer that Black parents have the right to make the decision they deem best fit for their children.

But, if we take third-party justifications and linked-fate similarly, does that mean that Black parents have a responsibility to secure the educational opportunities most closely tied to socioeconomic mobility and stability for their children in the name of facilitating collective social advancement? While this is an important question, again, it's imperative to underscore that my argument is first and foremost about the discretionary choice of Black parents as a corrective measure for past and present injustices. The agency to choose an educational path for one's child—elite or otherwise—serves as a corrective measure to perennial educational exclusion and present inequities and legitimate conferral of advantage. Third-party considerations, such as collective uplift, serve as additional justification for Black parental choice, but do not compel Black parents to select elite education.¹² Therefore, while my argument offers parents the latitude to choose elite educational paths for their children, they are not obligated to do so.

Even so, my secondary reliance on third-party motivations for elite education may feel reminiscent of long problematized theories of racial advancement dating back to W. E. B. Du Bois's conception of the "talented tenth" and his later revised "guiding hundredth" (Du Bois 1903, 1948). Ideologies for social change predicated on the success of a select few, one might argue, bypass true remediation of societal ills and rely on undemocratic leadership models that deprioritize collective agency, further marginalizing the least advantaged. This point is one that requires serious interrogation that is beyond the scope of this piece. My emphasis on third-party considerations serves to support my justification of parents pursuing advantage for their children. It is not prescriptive; the elite educated of the Black community, in my view, are not its rightful leaders. I posit, however, that an understanding of collective orientation helps us contextualize how elite educational attainment might lead to notably different manifestations within the Black community.

That said, to take this concern further, some might understandably worry that my argument permits the redistribution of injustice within the Black community rather than ensuring opportunity is distributed justly. This raises concerns about whether my theory allows the exacerbation of within-group inequality by disproportionately advantaging Black families who already have access to relative privilege, ultimately widening disparities within the Black community. One might say that manifestation of "creaming" and other reinforcements of meritocratic and supremacist mindsets make it so that the Black children who stand to materially benefit the most from this conferral of advantage are not the ones who will realistically fill these seats. Further, one might say that to successfully navigate elite educational institutions, it is near impossible to maintain any kind of collectivist or transformational disposition that one might have as the clash in cultural values makes it too difficult to maintain one's adherence to these values. While these objections are reasonable, they are mitigated by the transformational disposition imparted from Black parent to child as an outgrowth of a collectivist orientation and understanding of linked-fate. Black parents and families who take advantage of elite educational opportunities should continuously support the development of the child's collectivist and transformational commitment to further promote broader justice.

That said, navigating a racist society as a Black person, let alone as a child, is challenging enough without also being expected and reminded of your responsibility to make the world more livable for your race. I close by acknowledging that this theory is profoundly unideal and based on the unideal circumstances in which we find ourselves. My conception does not seek to confuse elite schooling with justice itself. However, I argue that advantage conferral with elite schooling as the vehicle is legitimate for Black families for the reasons explained.

Conclusion

Families can indeed, and often do, stand as barriers to broader justice. There are few realms in which this truth is more apparent than education. While it is understandable that parents desire to provide their children with exceptional educational experiences, this is not always justified due to the ways in which these differential experiences position children in a hierarchical society. Elite educational experiences, therefore, are illegitimate forms of advantage conferral in most cases. When we analyze the historical and sociological conditions to which our society has subjected Black families, however, we begin to understand that this illegitimacy does not translate across all contexts.

In this article, I argued the legitimacy of Black parents' choice to confer educational advantage on their children. While I localized my argument to the realm of education, one might imagine ways in which this argument might transfer to other discussions of limits on parental partiality. More analysis is needed around the extent to which we might differentiate our standards for limits on the family based on racial factors. For instance, a similar

line of arguments might be made about proponents of wealth and estate taxes. Such restrictions are necessary to bring about justice but might be differently held across racial contexts.

This article demonstrates the ways in which a lack of racial analysis in theorizing can undermine our praxis. By tailoring our normative analyses to the experiences of Black people, and those on society's margins more broadly, we understand the ways in which our extant theories of justice stand to inhibit our ultimate goals.

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Notes

- ¹ My argument is rooted in the social and historical context of the United States. The principles discussed here might apply to other countries and contexts, but the justifications would be grounded in different social facts and histories.
- ² Though my argument does not categorically apply, throughout the paper I use the term “Black parents” because it succinctly captures most of the cases I am concerned with. In the “Objections and Further Considerations” section, I explicate when and how my argument might apply to Black families with diverse racial and ethnic configurations, as well as under varied socioeconomic conditions. Additionally, I focus my argument on Black parents rather than Black children because parents are often the decision makers in the instances of school choice that I address in the paper.
- ³ In a subsequent section, I will explore more why it matters that children start at such different places and how education positions them within society.
- ⁴ Some might rightly point to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as elite spaces for Black students. However, they fall outside the scope of this analysis. The institutions I examine are elite not only due to their selectivity and resources but also because of a history of exclusion, particularly of Black Americans. HBCUs, by contrast, were founded to counteract that exclusion and have long been oriented toward racial uplift. While not without their own methods of social closure and gatekeeping, these diverge from the forms under analysis here. This article is concerned with elite educational spaces that have historically marginalized Black communities and now serve as potential sites of corrective redress.
- ⁵ While many of us think of elitism in the context of private schools, elitism is not bounded by designations of private and public, nor by funding structures. Myriad public schools comfortably fit within the realm of elite status. While elite public schools might not (though they often do) have some of the same cultural trappings, they still have influence and rely on the interaction between selectivity, exclusivity, and resources. For every Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, there is a UMichigan, UCLA, or Cal. Every Philips, Dalton, and Harvard-Westlake finds its public counterpoint in Bergen Counties, Stuyvesant, and Walter Payton.
- ⁶ I say “perceived” because while there are differences in educational quality, it is my stance that much of what we read as quality is heavily influenced by 1) social constructions around what a valuable educational experience entails and 2) the resources that cycle through elite schools that facilitate coveted educational experiences. These highly sought-after experiences may be coveted for empty reasons, or because the associated resources improve the quality of the experiences, or both.
- ⁷ I want to acknowledge that for the vast majority of parents in the U.S., including many Black families, decisions about elite education are not the norm. Instead, most families rely on their local public schools, where choices are often constrained by geography and socioeconomic factors.
- ⁸ Here I employ “exceptional” to mean “out of the ordinary” or quite literally “an exception to what normally occurs,” rather than “unusually positive or outstanding.”
- ⁹ Wali-Ali's (2019) argument of preferential admission for Black students into higher education institutions is necessary but not sufficient. Getting Black students into places of higher learning represents not even half of the battle. Academic, interpersonal, extracurricular, and professional preparedness constitute a much larger portion of success in institutions of higher learning. If institutions of higher learning grant preferential admission to Black students without those students being equipped to successfully navigate those spaces, it dullens the potential impact of this form of reparations. Similarly, free education from womb to tomb does not necessarily

guarantee reparational quality education capable of beginning to undo the effects of centuries of educational malpractice at the hands of leaders of the United States.

- ¹⁰ The collectivist orientation in and of itself is not necessarily self-sustaining. I acknowledge that if particular Black children and their parents have little to no collective orientation then this portion of my argument loses salience. That said, we cannot peer into the souls of parents and children and therefore have little way of regulating their orientation, though it should be encouraged.
- ¹¹ I use the word “minimal” to suggest that parents might be able to transfer the other forms of capital (social, cultural, and otherwise) that arise out of Whiteness to their children that would give them advantages that other Black children would not have. However, the child’s Blackness ultimately stands to greatly reduce the transferability.
- ¹² However, should Black parents select elite educational paths for their children, they do have a responsibility to socialize their children into a concept of mutual accountability and collective uplift to promote justice and lend further legitimacy to their choice.

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