The Social Contexts of High Schools

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Abstract

In addition to their roles as educational institutions structuring human capital development during a critical period of socioeconomic attainment, high schools organize the peer contexts in which young people come of age during a critical period of development. Consequently, understanding the peer processes that characterize the social contexts of schools sheds light on how schools are operating as formal institutions of teaching and learning. This chapter provides an overview of research from sociologists of education and scholars in other disciplines about the social contexts of high schools and their relevance to curricula, achievement, and other formal processes of schooling. After using three key books in this field to trace the historical evolution of thinking about the social contexts of high schools, we describe key components of these contexts (peer networks, peer crowds, school climate) and then discuss the value of greater attention to them in educational policy and practice.

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Of the core subjects within the sociology of education, the social contexts of high schools have arguably been the most prominently featured in popular culture. In hit movies like *The Breakfast Club* and *Mean Girls*, acclaimed television shows like *Glee* and *Freaks and Geeks*, and bestselling novels like *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars* can be found earnest depictions, scathing satires, and light-hearted lampooning of how high schools are socially structured. What this popular culture tends to get right is the complex social ecology of high schools—how they are organized around multiple groups with meaningful identities that define the prevailing norms and values to which adolescents entering the school are exposed. What it tends to get wrong is its overemphasis on the negative aspects of this social ecology—how it is enforced by intimidation and bullying, demands conformity and chokes independence, and leaves psychic scars long after graduation. The extensive social science research that both reflects and drives this public fascination with the dark side of high school, however, provides a much more well-rounded view of the social contexts of high schools, including how they develop and are maintained and why they matter to students in the short and long term—neither all bad nor all good but much closer to the everyday reality of going to high school.

In this chapter, we delve into this literature by describing the current state of the field and tracing how we got here. In one common view among

B. Schneider (ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Education in the 21st Century*, Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76694-2_14

sociologists, high school social context refers to the collective structure, organization, and tone of social relations within a school that influence the academic progress and general development of students. This view is conceptually complementary to the idea of the school as an educational context. In this sense, the school is an organizational mechanism of *human capital* development defined by *formal processes*, which refer to the concrete inputs and outputs of the official mission of the educational system to produce a skilled labor force and informed populace. As an educational context, the school is structured by curricula around pedagogical goals and is evaluated by quantifiable metrics of academic progress. Sociologists of education have played a substantial role in constructing the current knowledge base about how schools work as educational contexts and their impact on the socioeconomic attainment of students (Arum 2000). The social contexts of high schools, on the other hand, tap into the interpersonal underpinnings of schools, or what happens when large groups of young people come together for long periods and develop their own social system and how this system shapes their *social and cultural capital* development as well as their *psychological well-being*. As a social context, the school is structured by relationships and relational groupings and is evaluated by often esoteric assessments of what a school is like and what going to a school is like. Sociologists of education have also been a guiding force in building the literature on how schools work as social contexts and their impact on the basic adjustment and functioning of students (Dornbusch et al. 1996). Within the sociology of education, however, the focus on educational contexts has long held primacy over focus on social contexts.

We argue that consideration of the *informal processes* in the social contexts of high schools is fundamental to understanding the *formal processes* in the educational contexts of high schools. The two are clearly related. Although sociological research once largely ignored how formal processes help to organize informal processes, the research that has been done shows that relationship ties in schools are organized in part by the structural and curricular properties of schools (McFarland 2001). Indeed, because propinquity is one of the main drivers of relationship formation and maintenance, formal processes that bring students into the same orbit facilitate friendships and the construction of peer groups, especially when they bring together students of similar academic statuses and family backgrounds (i.e., propinquity x homophily). Examples include the role of course assignments in friendship formation, the link between the more flexible and open instructional programs and greater levels of social integration among students, and the tendency for friendship groups to be more racially segregated in schools that use curricular tracking (McFarland et al. 2014; Kubitschek and Hallinan 1998; see also Epstein and Karweit 1983). Sociological research has also examined the other direction (i.e., how informal processes shape formal processes), and we will cover such research in depth throughout this chapter. For now, we will say that it has shown how school-wide peer cultures and smaller peer networks and cliques can affect—positively or negatively—students' engagement in the formal curricula of schools through value-promotion, modeling, information-sharing, and other mechanisms (Crosnoe 2011; Tyson 2011).

Because of this bidirectionality between the different kinds of contextual processes in schools, research on both—speaking to and learning from each other, even when nominally independent—is necessary to effectively elucidate how schools work in society and the individual life course, perhaps the two major concerns of sociologists of education. In particular, research on the *informal processes* of schooling can inform major *educational policies* and *interventions*, which tend to target the *formal processes* of schooling, by demonstrating how social norms, rituals, and ideologies in a school may undermine seemingly straightforward academic agendas and messages. It also links sociology of education to an array of other sociological traditions (e.g., medical, life course, and cultural sociology) and to an array of other disciplines (e.g., developmental psychology and anthropology), which is important given

the value of cross-disciplinary dialogues to good theory and effective *policy* (Crosnoe 2012).

To support this argument, we take a three-fold approach, beginning with a historical review of research on the social contexts of high schools through the lens of three key books published at two-decade-plus intervals, each following a different theoretical tradition. Of course, there have been many other books written on this subject, so the choice of these three is arbitrary. They are key books, not *the* key books. We picked them because we believed that doing so would allow us to cover some of the main concepts, points of discussion, and challenges of this line of research and, more importantly, how thinking about this topic has evolved over the last six decades. Next, we turn to some of the core dimensions of the social contexts of schooling that have organized this field over that same historical period, dimensions that connect the dynamic intimate relations within schools that are most proximate to students' everyday lives to the more stable cultural traditions of the student bodies of schools that are more abstractly understood and experienced. Finally, we end with a discussion of how the contributions of sociologists of education and other social and behavioral scientists to our understanding of the social contexts of high schools have been or could be useful to the development and execution of educational *policy* and practice.

Before getting into these three parts, we should note up front our U.S.-centric focus. We mostly, although not exclusively, cover the literature on U.S. schools for practical purposes. Given the space constraints, we did not think that we could do justice to the rich international literature here (see Buchmann and Dalton 2002; Rohlen 1983; Rutter et al. 1979). We also focus on social relations among students in high schools, even though intergenerational relations within and around schools (e.g., teachers' relationships with each other and with students; parents' relationships with each other, their children, and their children's peers and teachers) are important aspects of the social context of any high school (Frank et al. 2008; Bryk and Schneider 2003; Carbonaro 1998; Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983).

14.1 A History in Three Books

Trying to trace the history of a rich social science literature in a short space is quite a challenge. Too many works could (and probably should) be covered that one never knows where to start or what to include. As already noted, we made the strategic decision to discuss the history of this field through three selected books from three different eras over more than half a century. They were chosen not because they are the most important works in the field but instead because describing them allows us to take readers through the evolution of thinking of scholars of the social contexts of schools—the main concepts that have organized the field and how they have evolved over the years in a cumulative fashion. Importantly, they also cover a range of methods, draw on a variety of disciplinary voices, and have distinctly different tones. Thus, they offer insight into how broad this field is.

Of the three selected books, the first, based on research in the 1950s, was written squarely in the sociology of education tradition, employed a primarily quantitative methodology, and focused on the ways that school social groupings were at cross purposes with the *formal processes* of schooling. The second, based on research in the 1980s, was grounded in linguistics and anthropology, employed a primarily ethnographic methodology, and focused on the dynamic nature of social groupings in high school and how they were shaped by powerful stratification systems in society at large. The third book, based on research in the 2000s, was guided by developmental science, mixed quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and focused on how developing youth adapt to the social groupings of their schools in ways that have implications for the *formal processes* of schooling. Again, these books were selected for strategic reasons, and our focus on them neither negates nor downplays the importance of books that were not selected. Key examples include Willard Waller's pioneering *The Sociology of Teaching* in the 1920s that really marked the beginning of sociological analysis of schools, Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor* in the 1970s that used British schools to show how

schools could be sites of counterculture, and, more recently, Murray Milner's *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids* that linked the social worlds of high schools to the broader consumerist youth culture in our new century.

14.1.1 Coleman's *The Adolescent Society*

In 1961, James Coleman published *The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and its Impact on Education*, perhaps the most influential work in the history of research on the *social contexts* of schooling. It was set during the apex of the industrialized economy and the post-World War II political climate in which education became central to national primacy in the new world order. In this setting, schooling had become time-consuming and disconnected from the home environment, leading children to spend less time with parents and more time with their same-age peers so that they ultimately created their own cultures—separate from *adults*—with unique norms of appropriate behavior, *status*, and social rewards.

Studying nine primarily White public and private schools of varying sizes in and around Chicago in the late 1950s, Coleman collected data from observations, interviews with parents and students, surveys, and school records. Perhaps most provocatively and memorably, this work revealed *anti-academic* values in high school *peer cultures* that Coleman characterized as universal. These universal values were out of sync with the educational mission of their schools, as peers devalued *academic achievement* and glorified non-academic pursuits, especially *athletics*, risky (but not too risky) behavior, and attitudes that were oppositional to adults. Gaining *status* in the social hierarchies organized around these values was the primary preoccupation of most students, and success in doing so was a major factor in adolescents' *psychological well-being*. Students who were not successful had to look elsewhere for confirmation and support, especially among deviant peer groups ostracized by young and old alike. These dynamics, however, were deeply *gendered*.

The story for *boys* was fairly simple. Their *peer networks* were straightforwardly organized and similar from school to school, and the same types of *boys* were socially prominent in every school. Coleman highlighted the strong connection between schools' athletic successes and school identity, which became the focal point for boys' self-assessments as well as how they were assessed by girls and other boys. The centrality of *athletic achievement* in the adolescent society was most clearly evidenced by the proportion of male athletes in leading *crowds*. Some school *peer cultures* that Coleman studied did stress the importance of the "all-around *boy*" who was both academically and athletically successful, but male students in all high schools had better *self-esteem* and were better liked and more admired by their peers when they were athletically successful.

For girls, *peer networks* were far more complex, crossed grade levels, and had a fluid hierarchy, with more groups jockeying for power. Social *status* was predicated on *popularity* with the opposite sex, physical *attractiveness*, and involvement in school activities. Although *academic achievement* had more social value for girls than boys, it was clearly less important than these other considerations for girls. Moreover, girls were forced into a tricky balance of doing well academically without being bookish. Across high schools, girls faced another strong double standard. Unlike boys, they were expected to maintain a good reputation socially and sexually. At the same time, being deemed as attractive to boys was key to their social success, and boys tended to find most attractive the girls who skirted the rules, had a "little fun," and were not too conforming to adult expectations. In the face of the mixed messages, the girls in the study enjoyed school less and had lower *self-esteem* than *boys*.

By shedding light on the consistently problematic values of high school *social contexts*, Coleman hoped to prescribe ways in which schools could positively shift *peer cultures* toward rewarding academic success and realizing

school goals. For example, he suggested that educators take advantage of the role of inter-school competition in sports to raise the value of academics by creating academic leagues. He also suggested that schools compete among themselves for students through entrance exams and other requirements so that students might take on the academically competitive personality of the school as their own. In these and other ways, adults could use the extant competitive relationships among schools to frame academic success as a *status* symbol and, in the process, shift student attention back to academics.

In sum, *The Adolescent Society* sketched out the key idea of the interplay between the *informal and formal processes* of schooling and how failure to attend to the former severely undermined efforts to promote the latter. This idea revealed the hidden weakness of many educational *policies*, academic programs, and school goals. In Coleman's rendering, this interplay was nearly always bad in practice (i.e., the *informal* undermining the *formal*) but could be leveraged in more positive ways. Other contributions of this work were Coleman's articulation of how different peer groups within schools were arranged into a social hierarchy, his demonstration of how *gendered* the social contexts of high schools were, his innovative use of school-based data collection techniques geared at giving adolescents their own voices, and his argument that adolescents were agentic architects of their own social worlds and worldviews.

14.1.2 Eckert's *Jocks and Burnouts*

In 1989, the publication of *Jocks and Burnouts: Social Categories and Identity in the High School* by Penelope Eckert was another milestone in the evolution of the field of research on the social contexts of high schools. Eckert essentially dug down into the peer groupings that made up the social contexts of high schools while also expanding her focus to connect the social structure of adolescent society within the school to the social structure of adult society outside the school. In the process, she demonstrated the diversity in norms and values within high schools and articulated how *status* could be gained through social systems both aligned with and in opposition to the educational goals institutionalized by schools.

Over the course of two years, Eckert—a linguist—conducted both participatory and non-participatory observations of school activities and interactions as well as group and individual interviews in four high schools in suburban Detroit. Across these diverse schools, she saw a great deal of similarity, much like Coleman did decades before in the Chicago area. Yet, the similar social contexts across schools were organized around two separate poles dominated by different social categories of students with different orientations to academics. Each category encompassed a large group of young people in the school who gravitated together, shared a similar social space in the school, and identified with each other. Moreover, they were generally connected to different *social classes*. The *jocks* were students who had a cooperative relationship with the school and its staff, shared the goals of the school, and centered their lives around school. In other words, they relied on the school to define their personal identities. *Jocks* were primarily from *middle-class* families, and their pursuits were well-aligned with the *middle-class* cultural emphasis on meritocracy and school as an institution for social mobility. On the other hand, *burnouts* had adversarial relationships with school personnel and kept their social identities separate from the school. Primarily from the *working class*, they saw the school institution as a factory for producing college-bound students who would eventually take on *middle-class* jobs, reifying the existing social order that had already marginalized them. Thus, they saw schools as devaluing and disempowering them, and they developed oppositional attitudes. Each of the two categories could be characterized by distinctive tastes in clothing, substance use, school territory, ideas about friendship, and attitudes about adults. Students primarily interacted with and were loyal to people in their same categories, and they developed in-group/out-group distinctions that divided the school along those social lines.

The important points to stress about the *jocks* and *burnouts* are, first, that they demonstrate how not all aspects of high school contexts are

anti-academic and oppositional to adults and, second, that such attitudes and norms do not emerge from a vacuum. The *jocks* were aligned with adult culture and its academic emphasis due to the socioeconomic stratification within public education and the link between education and future attainment. The school was an adult-facilitated environment in which adolescents had freedom to create their own rules, hierarchies, and ideologies. Students like the *jocks* capitalized on their greater access to teachers' trust and admiration to bargain for special privileges and information. Adhering to the academic priorities of school personnel only helped them, whether they truly cared about those priorities or not, while activities that could interfere with how they were favored *by adults were* avoided. The institution catered to *middle-class* students like them, which they used to get ahead. Students like the *burnouts* considered themselves left out of the educational mission of schools and looked down upon by school personnel, so they rejected schools' academic priorities, saw students who accepted these priorities as adult puppets, and granted social *status* in inverse relation to having *status* in the school at large. Not only did they de-identify with academic success, they identified with *anti-academic* pursuits, such as delinquency and substance use.

In sum, *Jocks and Burnouts* helped to undermine the idea that there was a monolithic *peer culture* that organized the social contexts of high schools, highlighted how social groupings within high schools were connected to larger *class* structures, and emphasized the power of *identity* (both in terms of group identities and how young people worked on their own *identity* development within groups). Eckert's rich description of high school life got us closer to the contemporary notion of schools as contexts of human development—organized by *class* and other stratifying systems—and potentially detrimental to or supportive of the educational missions of schools and the educational prospects of young people. Eckert spent less time articulating specific *policy* implications of this work, enforcing the idea that the social contexts of high schools are important to understand for theoretical reasons and not just because they can be leveraged to affect the academic bottom line of schools.

14.1.3 Crosnoe's *Fitting In, Standing Out*

The (2011) book, *Fitting in, Standing Out: Navigating the Social Challenges of High School to Get an Education*, was written by the first author of this chapter, Robert Crosnoe, so we apologize if its inclusion in this discussion seems self-aggrandizing. It was conceptualized specifically to build on the work of Coleman and Eckert in an interdisciplinary way that we thought that it would be useful for helping connect past to present in this field. Like *The Adolescent Society*, it is situated in a "new" historical moment with implications for what education represents for individuals and society. Its twenty-first century context is characterized by increased demographic diversity, greater differentiation in course offerings, rapidly developing *social media*, and stronger economic returns to schooling that have made schools bigger, more heterogeneous, more impersonal, more competitive, and less physically bounded. As a result, what happens in the social contexts of high schools can have short-term academic consequences that are then more consequential for the rest of life.

Using both quantitative evidence from a nationally representative sample and qualitative data from in-school interviews and observations in a single public high school in Texas, *Fitting In, Standing Out* sheds light on the importance of social development within the *peer cultures* of a high school during the hyper-social period of adolescence and how it can influence adolescents' academic trajectories with implications long after this period. Crosnoe marshalled this mixed methods evidence to describe a multi-step pathway. Students who felt like they did not "fit in" socially at school—regardless of the actual substance of the values and norms that defined their school social contexts—engaged in counter-productive coping mechanisms that decreased academic engagement in school and, ultimately, lowered their odds of attending *college* after

school was over. This pathway was initiated when adolescents gathered and processed information about their own *status* from direct and indirect social feedback, including in face-to-face interactions and on *social media*. If that feedback was negative, it could trigger uncomfortable *identity* discrepancies that students coped with through internalization, self-medication, and disengagement from school. These coping strategies brought relief in the short term but were academically disastrous in the long term, particularly by keeping students from making adequate progress in the highly cumulative curricular sequence that controlled their odds of being accepted to and prepared for *college* when they exited high school. Although the fitting in pathway was particularly relevant to two groups of adolescents at elevated risk for social marginalization, youth who were *obese* and/or *lesbian/gay*, it was generalizable to all adolescents who felt marginalized, whether these perceptions were accurate or not and no matter how academically oriented the peer groups were that they felt alienated from or desired to join.

Importantly, this book did not view the bad side of the social contexts of high schools as inevitable. Crosnoe highlighted several sources of resilience protecting adolescents from feeling marginalized or reacting to such feelings in counterproductive ways, including adult mentoring, activity participation, and religious affiliation. He also used both the vulnerabilities and resources that he identified in the study to discuss possible *policy* avenues for protecting students and more generally ensuring that the *informal processes* of schooling could be harnessed to support rather than undermine the *formal processes*. These avenues included expanding the *extracurriculum*, constraining the range of choices in the academic curriculum, building mentoring relationships in schools, and improving mental health services.

In sum, *Fitting In, Standing Out* reinforced Coleman's messages about the importance of understanding the connection between *informal* and *formal processes* and Eckert's messages about the multi-faceted group structure of high school social contexts and its links to larger social structures (including *gender* and *sexuality*). It built on both by demonstrating that the risks and rewards of the social contexts of schools go beyond the norms and values of the contexts to encompass all of the work that adolescents have to do to fit into those contexts, meaning that even pro-academic and adult-oriented contexts can undermine academic performance if adolescents' efforts to navigate these contexts distract them from their school pursuits or stress them emotionally. In doing so, it better articulated the mechanisms by which the *identity* development process and academic trajectories influence each other.

14.1.4 Lessons Learned

Across these three books about high school social contexts, we can see a microcosm of the much broader evolution of some basic ideas in the interdisciplinary literature on this subject. These ideas are not solely attributable to these three books, which were part of ongoing dialogues among social and behavioral scientists and should be understood within this diverse field rather than on their own. They include:

- The core unit of these contexts are peer groups with simple but widely recognized identities that are larger than any one student in them, influence students' concrete behaviors, and shape students' self-concepts during a critical developmental period.
- Some of these groups are aligned with conventional adult norms and the academic goals of the educational system, but some are not.
- Regardless, the act of maintaining one's position in these groups can be academically distracting as the work of the social interferes with the work of the academic.
- These influences mean that the *formal* and *informal processes* of schooling are difficult to separate, and educational policies must consider these connections to fully realize their goals.

- How adolescents find themselves in these groups and how they react to them are influenced by their *gender*, *social class*, *sexuality*, and other social and demographic positions, so the social contexts of high schools and their educational importance are part of the intergenerational transmission of inequality.

On this last point about inequality, we should stress that the intergenerational transmission occurs in part because schools tend to be socially organized in ways that reflect and reward some groups over others but also because some groups have more resources and supports to survive the social ups and downs of high school than others, regardless of whether they are favored or not. We should also stress that all three books covered here focused primarily on *gender* and *social class* while paying less attention to *race/ethnicity*, although *race/ethnicity* is clearly a major aspect of the social contexts of high schools and one of the fundamental organizers of schools in the U.S. Other important qualitative and quantitative research on the social contexts of high schools deals with *race/ethnicity* more explicitly (e.g., Harris 2011; Carter 2005; Moody 2001), and we draw on their insights later in this chapter.

14.2 Key Components of High School Social Contexts

During an interview with the first author of this chapter (Crosnoe 2011, p. 38), a 15-year-old boy spoke at length about what going to high school was like for an adolescent and then summed up his thoughts by saying, "The school is just a big building with people in it." His comments captured the lens through which many adolescents perceive and assess their schools—for them, it is all about the people. What matters, however, is not just some *collection* of people but a unique *collective* of people. What turns a number of individual students in a high school into the social context of that high school are the recurring and meaningful patterns of relationships and interactions that unfold over time. Social scientists explore these patterns in different ways on different levels. Below, we highlight some key conceptualizations of the basic components of high school social contexts within sociology of education and related fields, noting up front that they tend to be studied and discussed separately even though they are difficult to disentangle in reality.

14.2.1 Peer Networks

Social network research focuses on the study of the matrix of interpersonal ties within some group or setting. It is grounded in the idea that people in the same shared physical, social, or cultural space tend to become highly interconnected over time. Within that relational matrix, any one person is unlikely to connect to all others, but everyone is likely to be connected to many other people. Even as the matrix changes over time, and as people transition in and out of it, it provides a scaffolding to the social context that is sociologically interesting because of how it is shaped by macro-level forces and how it shapes micro-level processes (Lin et al. 2001; McPherson et al. 2001).

The social network field and the school context field have had a mutually beneficial relationship over the last several decades. As large and often diverse collections of people who remain together over long periods in a concretely bounded space, high schools are ideal settings for network analyses. Indeed, many of the most influential network studies have been in high schools, including the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which mapped full networks of over 100 secondary schools in the U.S. (Bearman et al. 1997). In turn, studying how patterns of social relationships in a school evolve over time, are influenced by schools' structural and compositional characteristics, and influence student behavior offers a valuable window into the *informal processes* of schooling at the heart of high school social contexts (Faris and Felmlee 2011). To give a sense of the richness of the literature on high school *peer networks*, we focus on four aspects of networks that illuminate how the social contexts of high schools work:

- Network structure, or the basic topographical features of a network, such as how densely connected people are to each other.
- Network composition, or the individual and collective attributes of the people in a network, such as how racially diverse it is.
- Network norms and values, or the prevailing behavioral and attitudinal patterns in a network that shape the status and integration of individual people, such as the emphasis placed on academic success.
- Network influence, or the degree to which a network shapes the behaviors and attitudes of individual people, such as the higher odds of drinking when surrounded by drinking peers.

As we discuss these four aspects of networks, we will occasionally cross "levels." In the broadest sense, peer networks capture the entire socioemetric "map" of a school—all possible social ties and the aggregate characteristics and patterns that encompass the entire school. In the intermediate sense, peer networks capture specific groupings within the student body, or smaller collections of people who share many ties among themselves. In the narrowest sense, peer networks capture all of the social ties of a single person (i.e., the ego network). For example, if two people attend the same school, any school-level network characteristic will be the same for both of them. They might have different intermediate-level networks, however, because they are in different social spaces of the school that they share. Even if they are in the same intermediate-level peer network in their school, they might have different individual-level peer networks because they each have their own friends within the same general social space.

First, *peer networks* have basic structures that are larger and more stable than any of the relationships (or people) embedded in them, and those structures help to define what a school is like. One structural feature is density, which refers to how interconnected network ties are. In dense school networks, more and more people are tied to the same other people, and the student body is not divided into specific groups that are disconnected from each other. School-level density, however, may subsume many students whose personal networks vary in density. The density of the network in a school or within certain segments of the school population is important in many ways because dense ties facilitate the creation and enforcement of norms (both positive and negative) while also reducing access to diverse resources and stifling innovation, creativity, and non-conformity. In one study, Falci and McNeely (2009) showed that, whereas *boys* suffered more depressive symptomatology when they were embedded in personal networks in their schools that included a large numbers of densely connected peers, girls suffered more when they were embedded in personal networks in their schools that included large numbers of relatively disconnected peers. Boys seemed to be reacting to a sense of being over-controlled, whereas girls were reacting to a reduced sense of belongingness.

Second, the compositional characteristics of networks offer insight into how schools organize diverse populations. They also illuminate how schools reinforce or break down sharp divisions in the larger society among sociodemographic groups, defined by *social class*, immigration, or *race/ethnicity*. Segregation—how the school network is divided into distinct sub-networks according to sociodemographic characteristics—has long been a focus of school network research. Segregated networks represent inequality, and integrated ones represent more fluid social systems that likely facilitate more equitable distributions of opportunities. The level of segregation also signals whether the social context of a school is characterized by trust and community rather than conflict and alienation. Along these lines, Moody (2001) showed that the *racial* segregation of school-level networks increased as school *racial* diversity increased but then eventually declined at high levels of diversity. These findings suggest that students took comfort in homophily when confronted with difference but only up to the point where doing so was feasible and would not unduly constrain their social ties. This work also demonstrated that *extracurricular activities* could be mechanisms of creating more integrated social contexts in diverse schools.

Another study—this one focusing on college students—offered insight into how peer networks can become racially segregated. Partly, segregation occurs because of racial homophily, but it also occurs because of the tendency for people to reciprocate friendships with each other and to become friends with the friends of their friends, regardless of homophily. In other words, network segregation can become self-fulfilling (Wimmer and Lewis 2010).

Third, the prevailing norms and values within a school network can affect the degree to which any one student is socially integrated (i.e., is widely connected with others) and/or popular (i.e., enjoys the esteem of others in the network and has a high status) in a school. Conversely, the average network positions of students and student groups with different behavioral and attitudinal profiles and changes in network positions among students or student groups who change characteristics or behaviors speak to the prevailing norms and values in school social contexts (Ueno 2005; Gest et al. 2001). If students who look or act a certain way are overrepresented among social isolates or among those who are well-connected, researchers can discern what tends to be valued or punished within a school. For example, Kreager and Staff (2009) used network analyses to provide concrete evidence of the oft-discussed *sexual* double standard in some high schools. Specifically, in those schools, the more that girls added sexual partners, the less likely other students in their schools named them as friends. The opposite happened for boys. As another example, Martin-Storey et al. (2015) exploited longitudinal network dynamics to show that *LGBT* students were seemingly more at-risk for being isolated within peer networks in predominantly White schools than in *racially* diverse schools. This pattern likely occurred because *sexuality* was one of the few ways to differentiate and stigmatize in the former but one of many potential dividing lines in the latter. Such research demonstrates how broad school networks are micro-cultures that amp up or downplay youth culture more generally.

Fourth, *peer networks* are a primary channel through which young people are influenced by others. Yes, much of the reason that students' behaviors and attitudes mirror those of the other students in their networks is because they seek out friends and social opportunities that reflect who they are, what they do, and what they want. This strong selection effect, however, does not totally explain that similarity. Peers socialize each other too through modeling, encouragement, and coercion (Dishion et al. 2015; Osgood et al. 2013). As such, carefully studying the links between network characteristics and student behavior can offer a window into how the strong peer influence of adolescence will vary across schools. In some schools, peer networks are characterized by anti-social attitudes. Consequently, transitioning into that school will expose students to negative influences that, over time, could facilitate more problematic developmental trajectories than if they had attended another school. In other schools, peer networks are characterized by pro-social attitudes, and the peer influence that a new student will encounter upon entering that school—relative to another school—will likely facilitate more positive trajectories over time. Consider the case of *drinking*. Although some schools have networks in which *drinking* is widespread, others have networks in which *drinking* is rare. In both cases, smaller and more specific peer networks within the school-level network might have drinking profiles that are discordant with those larger networks in which they are embedded. Not surprisingly, students tend to drink more when they attend schools in which the overall level of drinking among schoolmates is high and when their own personal *peer networks* are consistently high in *drinking*. This influence is not limited to the friends that students have within their own networks. Also important, sometimes even more, are the acquaintances that a student meets through their friends and romantic partners that characterize more intermediate-level networks. At the same time, *drinking* helps students meet new people and gains them entrée into parties and social activities. Thus, the social contexts of schools are a major factor in adolescent behavior, both because students' susceptibility to peer influences and their more agentic socializing are symptoms of their strong drive to

become socially integrated during this stage of life (Cheadle et al. 2013; Crosnoe 2011; Kreager and Haynie 2011).

Peer networks, therefore, are multidimensional systems of interpersonal relations and interaction that help to characterize the social contexts of schools and differentiate one school from another. They also shed light on the potential divergence in life course trajectories between students in the same school and in different schools. Students react to their network positions (i.e., stress over being marginalized) and are influenced by those in their networks (i.e., modeling the behaviors of others) in ways that shape their general socioemotional development, affect their academic progress, and moderate the links between the two.

14.2.2 Peer Crowds

Peer networks capture concrete aspects of school social contexts. They are defined by relatively tangible ties, such as self-identification as friends or frequent contact. As such, network positions and features can be quantifiably identified and linked to individual students, such as assessing individual students' *popularity* by the number of fellow students who claimed them as friends. Other research on school social contexts—as exemplified by *Jocks and Burnouts*—strives for a more general sense of the various groups of students who make up the student body, the different venues for socialization that they offer, and how they reflect or undermine the general norms and values of the student body as a whole. They are defined less by concrete ties between specific students and more by shared identities among certain types of students in a school, who may or may not be directly tied to each other.

Such groupings go by many names. We use a single term, *crowds*, here. This term refers to large groupings of students that cut across the student body, loosely linking many smaller *cliques* and friendships into a pool of potential friends and romantic partners. *Crowds* emerge as secondary schooling progresses—as schools become larger, more impersonal, and more diverse just as adolescents' developing brains, pubertal development, and normative individuation from parents increase their need to find supportive and tight-knit niches that enhance their sense of belongingness. Students in the same crowd are viewed by others as a group, tend to interact more with each other than with students outside the crowd, share some common *identity*, and tend to have behavioral and attitudinal similarities. Some *crowds* may be defined by particular activity orientations (such as *jocks*), others by common behaviors (such as partiers), and still others by demographic compositions (such as ethnic groups, like Asian-Americans, within diverse schools). Even though not everyone in a crowd knows each other, they are much more likely to be friends than any two other students randomly chosen from the student body (Brown and Larson 2009; Brown et al. 2008). Importantly, students can and do change their *crowds* over time, often through active strategic behaviors during times of transition, as documented so well in Kinney's (1999) ethnography titled *From Headbangers to Hippies*. Because *crowds* exist somewhat independently of the people in them, however, they are fairly stable over time and eventually replace all members over long periods (Milner 2013; Brown and Larson 2009).

Earlier, we mentioned the 1980s movie, *The Breakfast Club*, which explored some basic high school social archetypes—the *Jock*, Princess, Brain, Basket Case, and Criminal—and how they relate to each other. This movie perfectly illustrates the idea of peer *crowds*, as individual people are perceived and treated according to their group identities rather than their own selves. Indeed, the movie is so closely related to this line of research that a team of educational scholars incorporated it into their large-scale high school data collection. Adolescents were asked to self-identify their school *crowds* and associated identities according to the five *Breakfast Club* archetypes, and they were then followed over time. Not only were the adolescents in the various *crowds* behaviorally more similar to their same-crowd peers than to other peers during the high school years, they remained more similar

well after high school was over (incidentally, the *Jocks* and Brains turned out to be the best-adjusted in the long run) (Barber et al. 2001). This research echoed economic research on *identity* groupings in high schools, showing how peer *crowds* cluster liked-minded students together and make them more similar over time (Akerlof and Kranton 2002). Such studies also demonstrate how similar crowd structures are across schools.

Sociologists have argued that the level of peer *crowds*—not *cliques* or individual friends—is where the pressures towards conformity and the bullying that high schools have become famous for are most likely to occur. With longer shared personal histories and stronger affective bonds, friends typically are accepting of each other and are willing to tolerate differences and unconventionality. Absent those factors keeping them connected, students' positions in the peer crowd are much more vulnerable, as unusual or undesirable behaviors, unacceptable attitudes, and stigmatized traits could lead to marginalization and exclusion from the crowd. As such, *crowds* have strong influence over behavior (McFarland and Pals 2005; Giordano 2003). Indeed, one of the major qualitative findings of *Fitting In, Standing Out* was that students tended to view their own *cliques* in highly positive terms but the large peer *crowds* that organized the school in highly negative terms. In their minds, the internal policing of *crowds* and clashes among *crowds* in the school were what fulfilled all of the stereotypes of high schools as miserable places to be. Moreover, students embraced membership in specific friendship groups in their schools but consistently refused to place themselves in a particular crowd. Instead, they saw themselves as bridging multiple *crowds* or above the *crowd* structure altogether, no doubt influenced by the pejorative view of *crowds* as agents of conformity and social oppression in the school (Crosnoe 2011). Because *crowds* are typically defined by single identities related to specific characteristics (e.g., *academic achievement* = Nerds), they may strike adolescents as too narrow and simplistic, even as the everyday reality of high school social life speaks to how important they are (Milner 2013; Kinney 1999).

Compared to the literature on *peer networks*, the literature on peer *crowds* has paid less attention to the ways in which the structure and organization of a school influence the creation and maintenance of *crowds* in the school. Recent developments in sociology of education, however, have sought to better situate peer *crowds* within particular school and curricular settings. Specifically, instead of drawing on network data or self-reports of crowd membership, Frank and colleagues analyzed thousands of academic transcripts and course schedules across a number of schools to identify students who tended to move through school together—sharing similar academic *statuses* (and all of the background characteristics associated with those *statuses*), populating the same classes from year to year, and participating in the same activities. Conceptualized much like peer *crowds*, these local positions grouped together students who were having a similar experience of attending their high schools, regardless of whether they were friends or not or saw themselves as a group or not. Some were defined by an orientation towards math and science, some were organized by specific activities like band, and some were defined by being on a clear path to dropout. Unlike "*identity*" peer *crowds*, these curricular peer *crowds* varied in both number and nature from high school to high school. The local positions that students were in defined which particular pocket of the social contexts of their high schools that they inhabited, and the configuration of local positions within a school differentiated its social context from other schools. Given their *curricular* nature, this version of peer *crowds* appeared to have particularly strong associations with students' academic progress (Frank et al. 2008; Field et al. 2006).

In many ways, the concept of peer *crowds* better captures how the public thinks about the social contexts of high schools. With recognizable identities and names that divide the student body into a manageable number of smaller groups, peer *crowds* are straightforward, have face

validity, and are related to student outcomes in expected ways.

14.2.3 School Climate

Even more abstract than the concept of peer *crowds* is the notion that schools have a general *climate* of social relations among students—from conflictual, oppressive, and toxic to harmonious, affirming, and supportive and everything else in between. When scholars, educators, and parents talk about the *climate* of a school, they are simply trying to get at whether that school is a good place for students, both in terms of their academic prospects but also their general socioemotional development (Crosnoe 2011; Blum et al. 2004).

Beginning with the affective or interpersonal dimensions of school climate, Cohen et al. (2009) saw the concept as connecting a widespread sense of school belonging, perceptions of fairness and safety, and feelings of interpersonal connectedness. Not surprisingly, students tend to do much better academically and otherwise when they attend schools high on these aspects of positive *climate*. They feel comfortable and secure in such schools and encounter fewer stressors and, therefore, are better able to meet the challenges of schooling (Akiba 2010; Hallinan 2008). Contrary to popular opinion, smaller high schools do not necessarily foster more positive *interpersonal climates*, and large high schools are not significantly more likely to have negative *climates* (Gregory et al. 2011; Koth et al. 2008). Another dimension of *climate* is the general *academic climate* of the school. Some schools are defined by a clear push for academic success, where achievement is valued quite broadly, expectations are consistently high, and support is plentiful. That kind of *climate* scaffolds students' navigation of the increasingly differentiated curriculum of high school (including and especially in the face of academic challenges), opens up rather than forecloses academic opportunities more equitably, and facilitates the flow of information and resources more broadly (Smerdon 2002; Lee and Smith 1999; Shouse 1996).

One important theme of research on school *climates* (and related concepts like school culture) concerns the tendency for the *climates of schools* to become *racialized* in often counterproductive ways. For example, one of the strongest school-level influences on the *interpersonal climate* of a school is the *racial/ethnic* composition of the student body. Schools with heterogeneous student bodies tend to have less positive *interpersonal climates* and are especially low on feelings of connectedness among students and their perceptions of schools as fair and safe. Students of all *race/ethnicities* tend to like school less when they are not in a clear majority. As already mentioned, student bodies tend to divide down *racial/ethnic* lines, and, up to a point, the more diversity there is, the less students feel the need to cross those lines. Diversity also provides the opportunity for *racial/ethnic* discrimination and segregation to become apparent to students, and students from *racial/ethnic* minority groups may more fully grasp when they are being mistreated by the system if they are in a heterogeneous setting in which they can make cross-group comparisons (Benner and Graham 2013; Wells et al. 2009; Carter 2005; Johnson et al. 2001; Moody 2001). The fact that diverse schools may struggle building positive *interpersonal climates* does not provide evidence against the value of continuing school desegregation. Instead, it suggests that desegregation efforts need to attend to the special *climate*-related challenges of diverse student bodies in order to fully realize the benefits of desegregation (Crosnoe 2009; Wells et al. 2009).

The large literature concerning the much-debated oppositional culture thesis (see Ogbu 1997) delves deeply into the *racialization* of school climate. One key feature of this multifaceted thesis is the argument that Black and Latino/a peers de-emphasize school achievement and equate it with acting White, which is clearly relevant to the *academic climate* of predominantly *racial/ethnic* minority schools or schools with sizeable pockets of such students within a diverse student body. Sociologists of education have been particularly active in debunking this thesis (e.g., Harris 2011;

Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998). Ethnographers have also used it as a venue for making deeper arguments about *school climate*. For example, Carter (2006, 2005) has argued that the perceptions of an oppositional culture among Black and Latino/a students in schools are manifestations of the historical ways that school personnel have misunderstood minority group culture, including their tendency to imbue non-academic behaviors and attitudes (e.g., acting tough, rejection of White hegemony) with academic significance. As another example, Tyson (2011) has argued that acting White is a *race*-specific illustration of a general phenomenon that crosses *racial/ethnic* lines. Specifically, peers from a broad array of backgrounds denigrate trying too hard academically, if not academic success itself, and contribute to what might seem like academically apathetic or antagonistic *school climates* no matter the *racial/ethnic* composition of the schools. Her work demonstrates that *academic climates* are likely more similar across *racial/ethnic* groups (in separate and *racially/ethnically* homogenous schools or among different *racial/ethnic* groups in the same schools) than the oppositional culture thesis (and the scholarly and public debates on it) imply.

Much like the treatment of *social class* in *Jocks and Burnouts* and the exploration of *gender* and *sexuality* in newer school ethnographies (e.g., Pascoe 2011; Fields 2008), research on the *racialization* of school climate has tethered what is going on culturally in schools among young people to what is going on culturally outside of schools among adults, including their biases, prejudices, and inequities. As such, they illustrate how broader social influences are reworked and reimagined by young people into their own unique *school climates*.

14.3 Policy Challenges and Responses

As we have already argued, understanding the social contexts of high schools is important in its own right because doing so sheds much needed light on the ways schools work that is vital to theory. It is also important because the social contexts of schools are relevant to many programs aiming to improve the academic functioning of schools in an era of greater accountability. Many of these programmatic efforts have failed to change the *formal processes* of schooling in the desired ways or, at least, underperformed as a result of not taking the *informal processes* of schooling into account when trying to achieve those goals. Moreover, many of the other programmatic efforts aiming to improve the health and wellbeing of young people—rather than promoting academic performance—have also been disappointing because they did not harness the power of the *informal* processes of schooling. In this final section, therefore, we attempt to connect what sociologists of education and other researchers have learned about the social contexts of schools to "action" in the form of *policies* and *interventions*, educational and otherwise.

14.3.1 Changing Social Contexts

If the *peer networks* of a high school transmit anti-social values that deflate students' academic efforts, then reversing the *informal processes* within that school would help it meet academic benchmarks. If the most influential peer *crowds* of a high school are characterized by academic apathy that undermines students' course-taking trajectories, then improving the *informal processes* of that school should enable it to reach a higher level of academic performance. In both cases, the solution seems obvious—create programs to instill and spread more pro-social, academically-oriented attitudes and values among students, who would then influence each other. The problem with this obvious solution, of course, is that conceptualizing and executing such programs is exceedingly difficult.

The social contexts of high schools embody the *policy dilemma*, which refers to the inherent challenges when the factors most associated with desired outcomes are the most difficult to change. Peers powerfully influence students' behaviors, including academic progress, but manipulating

peer dynamics from the outside is a tall order (Crosnoe 2011). Past research from sociology of education, public health, and prevention science offers possible ways to overcome this challenge.

Recall Coleman's conclusion in *The Adolescent Society* that schools use academic competitions to harness the social contexts of schools for more academic endeavors. This conclusion speaks to the possibility of changing peer dynamics through indirect means. Time and again, the *extracurricula* of schools have been shown to influence *peer networks*, *crowds*, and other social relations in schools, including across *racial/*ethnic and socioeconomic lines. Also, *extracurricular* activities are much easier to manipulate through *policy* than interpersonal dynamics. Consequently, increasing *extracurricular* offerings, altering requirements for participation, setting standards for the composition of participants, and using *adult* coaches/leaders as well as student leaders within activities to deliver specific messages to students are avenues for changing the *social capital* that is being traded within *peer networks*, the peer crowd structure, and the interplay of the interpersonal and *academic climates* (Mahoney et al. 2005; Moody 2001). Along those same lines, identifying structural and compositional factors of schools with functional social contexts is important. After all, *policy interventions* aiming to change school structure and composition are widely seen as appropriate and doable. If we know what those factors are and can change or implement them in a school, then we may indirectly alter the social context of that school over time.

Lessons for more direct *interventions* into the social contexts of schools can be derived from recent efforts to create and refine programs to increase tolerance among diverse groups of students and to develop *multicultural curricula*. For example, *Gay–Straight Alliances*—which have the goal of fostering greater acceptance of *LGBT* youth in schools through social activities, awareness campaigns, and peer advocacy—have become more common in U.S. high schools in recent years. As another example, ethnic studies programs and associated culturally aware pedagogical practices have received increased attention, both as a way of broadening the academic scope of what students are taught but also as a means of easing social divisions among students and in society at large. In both cases, schools have rejected the *policy dilemma* and instead actively tried to improve their social contexts for students (Tintiangco-Cubales et al. 2014; Poteat et al. 2013). Whether the observed benefits of such programs are causal, generalize across contexts, and endure remains unclear, as does the degree to which such programs can be implemented outside the realm of social justice issues to improve basic academic norms and attitudes.

Other examples of efforts to directly change school peer cultures include positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) and social and emotional learning (or SEL) efforts. The former is a school-wide approach to reduce the need for disciplinary actions in schools by developing positive social skills among students (Bradshaw et al. 2008). The latter involves incorporating socioemotional skill-building exercises into school curricula and activities as a means of achieving a healthy and supportive school environment for students (Durlak et al. 2001). Both programs are exemplars for altering the peer cultures of schools in positive ways.

14.3.1.1 Other Avenues of Action

Another way to address the *policy dilemma* related to the social contexts of schools is to move beyond attempts to change *informal processes* and instead concentrate on breaking the link between *informal* and *formal processes*. In other words, schools with negative social contexts might not be able to improve those contexts but could develop strategies to protect students from being hurt by them. Consider the ample research by sociologists of education on Catholic schools. Efforts to explain why student performance was much better and socioeconomic disparities in performance much weaker in such schools relative to public schools and other kinds of private schools eventually centered on the benefits of a constrained academic curriculum. Because all students took the same classes and enrolled in the same programs, they had no opportunity to make academic choices that could

be undermined by social influences. All students also experienced much greater similarity in the academic norms and expectations to which they were exposed (Hallinan and Kubitschek 2012; Coleman et al. 1982). This constrained curriculum idea has been utilized more recently in *policy* efforts to equalize the math course-taking of public school students in California and other states. Although the academic benefits of this translation of *policy* from the private to the public realm have been disappointing (see Penner et al. 2015; Attewell and Domina 2008), evaluations have not looked at other unintended consequences, such as whether the academic progress or general behavior of students in the most negative school social contexts are protected from further harm.

Finally, understanding the social contexts of schools may help to support the effectiveness of *interventions* in changing students' non-academic behaviors. Because they provide one-stop access to large numbers of adolescents, high schools have long been popular sites for behavioral *interventions*, even those that seem unrelated to academic performance. Examples include efforts to curb *drinking*, improve *sexual* health, and decrease *obesity*. These programs are often doomed to failure when they are implemented with inadequate attention to the specific school contexts in which they are situated. Messages about anti-social behavior could fall flat if they contradict what is valued among peers in a school, programs that group together many students at the same time might double as social activities with diluted impact, and the efficacy of increasingly popular peer educator and peer mentoring techniques in programmatic *interventions* depends on picking the right peers to lead (Crosnoe and McNeely 2008; Bearman and Brückner 2001; Dishion et al. 2001). Indeed, research on the social contexts of schools points to the value of enlisting high-status or well-connected students as agents of norm change for interventions to combat key social problems of childhood and adolescence (e.g., bullying, substance use) in schools (Osgood et al. 2013; Paluck and Shepherd 2012).

The difficulty of dealing with peer influences and the potential value of incorporating them are exacerbated by the strong emphasis on fidelity in *intervention* and prevention (i.e., ensuring that programs are implemented in exactly the same way across different sites), since a "one size fits all" mentality is incompatible with the basic themes of research on the social contexts of schools (Steiker 2008). The point is that the translation of social context research into *policy* action is not just about what can be done about the social contexts of schools. The knowledge derived from this research can improve *policy* and *intervention* far more broadly.

14.4 Conclusion

When magazines and think tanks put out lists of "good" schools and "bad" schools, they are focusing almost solely on the *formal processes* of education. A school is considered "good" if it consistently meets certain academic benchmarks (e.g., high test scores) or consistently produces academically successful students (e.g., National Merit Scholars, enrollees at prestigious *colleges*). These discussions rarely touch on what going to such "good" schools is like. Schools that work well as educational institutions often have positive and healthy social contexts, but this "all good things go together" pattern is not absolute. Some academically successful schools might have toxic social contexts, some academically struggling schools might help students feel safe and develop in healthy ways, and some schools could be doing better or worse academically if not for the attitudes, norms, and behaviors prevalent in their social contexts.

With a significant assist from scholars in other fields and disciplines, sociologists of education have done a great deal to shed light on what a "good" school is and, perhaps more importantly, what a "bad" school is. That research has involved inquiry into the social contexts of schools on their own as well as how the social contexts of schools work at cross-purposes with or in support of the educational mission of schools. Without the insights of this literature, our understanding of schools would be incomplete and our policies to reform schools would be misguided.

By emphasizing the social contexts of schools, therefore, all of those seemingly shallow movies, shows, and books were focusing attention where it was needed.

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