The Challenges and Opportunities of Advancing Equity through Education Policy: A Research Overview

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Executive Summary

Shifting sociopolitical and policy dynamics have put a spotlight on systemic inequities and the need for school systems to implement policies that can make inroads into equity’s advancement.

With these changes underway, this research synthesis takes stock of education policy research over the last 15 years, elucidating how scholars have investigated reforms intended to redress inequity and what directions the field may undertake to inform equitable schooling and policymaking. Specifically, it answers: How have scholars examined the intersection of policy and equity in K-12 schooling?; and 2) How have scholars examined power and oppression in policy development and implementation?

This analysis revealed that researchers investigating policy and equity have primarily examined the impact and evolution of familiar (e.g., finance, accountability) and emerging policies (e.g., discipline reform) that seek to address inequities. In addition, scholars have shed light on the impact of universal and targeted policies on student subgroups and investigated policy processes to examine reform’s equitable and democratic character. While research has provided important insights, this review points to areas for further inquiry, including the evolution of prominent policies, intersectional analyses, greater attention to specific student subgroups (e.g., Indigenous students, undocumented youth), and attention to the sociopolitical dimensions of change circumscribing educational justice movements.

This synthesis also suggests bolder paths forward for the field. It elevates the need for scholarship that examines how multiple policies affect young people and their communities to consider how education can work within policy ecosystems to support healthy development and success. It also encourages scholars to pair important policy critique with discussions of evidence-based practices that may prevent or remedy inequities. Finally, the review concludes with a call for the adoption and consistent use of robust conceptualizations of equity in policy scholarship to support inquiry that illustrates how equity is or is not realized.

Keywords: equity, educational policy, educational reform, policy implementation, politics of education.
The Challenges and Opportunities of Advancing Equity through Education Policy: A Research Overview

With the long-standing and persistent inequities that U.S. schools have perpetuated and exacerbated since the nation’s inception, many rightfully invoke the concept of equity in the development and enactment of educational policy. Some appeal to equity as they advocate for policies that enhance individual freedoms, using traditional concepts of liberalism to ground arguments for achieving equity through the protection of individual choice and access. Others invoke a different vision of equity—one grounded in communitarian aims with the goal of mitigating the “education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that has resulted from centuries of systemic oppression and subjugation of marginalized groups. Despite the varying definitions and attention to equity in education policymaking, its advancement in the educational arena remains a persistent yet elusive goal for policymakers seeking to reduce the opportunity gaps that nondominant racial, economic, linguistic, and gender groups face in U.S. schools.

While the effort to advance opportunities for disenfranchised groups is a centuries-long project, equity has taken center stage in education policy since the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954. Policymakers have tried to fulfill Brown’s promise by alleviating gross inequities largely through a few policies: 1) desegregation; 2) school finance reform; 3) the marketization of schooling; and 4) accountability regimes (Superfine, 2013). Despite facing legislative, judicial, and/or community resistance in each instance, decision makers have nonetheless persisted, enacting policies that carry differing theories of action that suggest that a particular input, structure, or practice will provide much needed resources and opportunities for communities put at risk. Even as these policies hold the potential to be mutually reinforcing in their ability to alleviate educational inequities, more often they have operated as competing reforms (Bishop & Noguera, 2019), creating a fragmented policy agenda. Consequently, the pursuit of equity has become a “conservative force” (Mehta, 2019), resulting in policies and practices that have generated modest changes at best and exacerbated systemic oppression at worst.

Education policy scholars driven by equity questions have examined the development and implementation of these policy waves at various institutional levels (e.g., federal, state, local) and drawn attention to the shortcomings of decades of reform aiming to address inequities. While the ideas embedded in earlier reform waves continue to color the policy landscape, the U.S. educational system is in a unique political and policy moment that can affect the scope of education policy in the service of equity. First, U.S. schools have entered a post-No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era and have even witnessed the temporary and unprecedented suspension of accountability measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Practitioners and school systems leaders have increasingly grown suspicious and weary of high-stakes accountability policies and their inability to spur improvement and equity over the years, often pointing to the laws’ punitive orientations, laser-like foci on test
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scores as a sole metric for school quality, and the negative consequences they have had on teaching and learning (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). NCLB’s replacement, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), recently became federal law in 2015 and granted increased autonomy to states and emphasized the use of multiple measures to assess school quality (e.g., course access, college readiness, school climate). Many see the current era as an opportunity to advance whole child education, wherein schools and systems become more equitable by developing policies that attend to students’ academic, social, and emotional needs (Kostyo et al., 2018), and to reimagine accountability and assessment practices writ large. Yet, questions remain as to whether the behaviors and mindsets cultivated by NCLB will surface in a new wave of educational policies and their implementation.

Shifts in the broader political environment also beget questions as to the role of schools in advancing equity in the face of systems of oppression and injustice. Education scholars have long interrogated how schools function as sites of social reproduction that perpetuate inequities (Anyon, 1995; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Lareau, 2003; Leonardo, 2009; Oakes, 2005; Pascoe, 2007) while noting the emancipatory potential that schools hold in forging a new equitable future and vision (Anyon, 2014; Freire & Macedo, 2000). With the dissipating optimism following President Obama’s administration, ongoing displays of racial violence, and the public outrage around the discriminatory policies advanced by the Trump administration, individuals in the U.S. have a unique opportunity to assess persistent inequities in U.S. schools and to agitate for policies that transform unjust schooling systems. The emergence and prominence of equity-oriented social movements, including Black Lives Matter and those initiated by educators in red, blue, and purple states, further underscore this call to action by exposing systemic inequities along race, class, ethnicity/nationality, and gender lines.

Overall, U.S. schools are in the midst of policy shifts and political dynamics that elevate the importance of advancing equity and implementing policies that can finally make inroads into equity’s advancement. With these changes underway, it is critical to assess the state of the education policy research field to examine the topics and approaches that policy scholars employ as they investigate reforms, policymaking, and implementation processes that aim to redress inequity. This literature review engages in this undertaking and answers the following questions: 1) How have education policy scholars examined the intersection of policy and equity in K-12 schooling?; and 2) How have education policy scholars examined lines of power and oppression in the context of education policy development and implementation?

This systematic analysis of the scholarship investigating educational policy and equity suggests that the field has primarily attended to:

- The impact and evolution of familiar policies e.g., school finance, market-oriented reforms, accountability) and emerging reforms related to learning environments (e.g., school climate) that seek to redress persistent inequities
- The policy processes surrounding policy development and implementation and their equitable and democratic character.
- The effects of universal and targeted policies on student subgroups, including nondominant racial groups, English learners, students from rural communities, and those with special needs.

After describing the methods employed in this synthesis, I provide an overview of the research and argumentation in each of these areas. Following these assessments, I describe the state of the field and discuss possible directions for future scholarship that can support ongoing inquiry into education policy and equity advancement.
Reviewing the Research on Education Policy for Equity

To understand the knowledge base examining the intersection of education policy and equity, I engaged in a systematic analysis of the research to identify the primary topics and empirical approaches that comprised the field. Guided by the study’s research questions, I first searched for peer-reviewed research center-generated studies published between 2005 and 2019 that explicitly examined the intersection of education policy and equity. To engage in this broad, systematic scan, I used the databases Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Google Scholar to inductively identify topical trends in the field. I used the search terms education policy or its counterparts, educational policy and educational reform, in conjunction with the term equity in this initial search, which generated a list of over 3000 articles. I further bounded the search by excluding the terms higher education, early education, and international to limit the research sample to U.S. policies related to K-12 schooling. In analyzing this bounded scan, I identified 16 primary themes in the research. Themes included policies that were the primary foci of the literature, lines of inquiry that examined how policies served or underserved disenfranchised groups, and scholarship that examined policy processes. (Table 1 contains the list of themes that were inductively identified in this initial scan.) These emerging themes guided the second phase of review and analysis.

Topical Themes and Foci in the Research on Education Policy and Equity

Policies at the Center of Research

- School finance
- Accountability
- Market-based reform (e.g., choice, charters)
- Teaching and learning/instructional
- School climate
- Educators (e.g., unions, credentialing)
- School leader/administrator

Policy in the (Dis)Service of Disenfranchised Groups

- Nondominant racial groups
- English learners
- Students with special needs
- Students in rural communities

Processes Surrounding Policy Enactment

- Policy creation
- Implementation
- Actors and coalitions engaged in efforts
- Reform rhetoric
- Policy fidelity and adaptation

The second phase of analysis included targeted identification and in-depth review of research studies in each of the topical areas inductively identified in the initial scan. First, I conducted a targeted search of research studies using the newly generated themes as search terms in conjunction with the phrases education policy and equity. To illustrate, in exploring the research on school finance reform since 2005, I used the terms school finance, education policy, and equity while excluding higher education, early education, and international to identify relevant research. In another example, the terms education policy, equity, and English learners were utilized along with the excluded search terms to generate a list of studies that examined the equitable and inequitable policy impact and processes surrounding English learners. This process was repeated for each of themes identified in the initial scan. Once studies were identified, I reviewed studies to investigate the approaches and lines of argumentation that policy scholars have used to examine policies and their ability to advance equity. Overall, this multi-pronged literature review process resulted in an examination of 527 articles.

While this review process enabled a systematic assessment of the research base, this approach had limitations—one of which pertains to the identification of absences in the research on education policy and equity. The approach used in this synthesis allowed me to identify the topical and empirical themes that were present in the literature, shedding light on the prominent patterns in scholarship and providing some insight into what topics and lines of inquiry were under-explored. While this helped to delineate the state of published work in the field, future literature reviews should identify and interrogate the absences of policy topics or lines of inquiry in the literature to elevate its implications for the scholarly field.

Other limitations primarily stem from differences in how researchers define and operationalize policy and equity. With regard to policy, there undoubtedly are studies that examine equity-oriented reforms in education that may not explicitly ground their work in the education policy field and would thus not be captured in this review. For example, what constitutes education policy can be broadly conceptualized to include economic and social policies that affect communities and students (Anyon, 2005). Scholars that maintain this broader policy analysis in their investigations may or may not directly situate their work in the education policy field but rather in other disciplines and fields that examine public policy. Moreover, what constitutes policy can be broadly conceived. While some define policy as formal legislation to be adopted or developed by a governing body or institution, others emphasize the relevance and importance of unstated policy—the norms and uncodified rules that govern educational settings and/or those driven by community partners that affect the equitable character of how policy
is adopted and implemented (Ball, 1993; Dumas & Anderson, 2014). Those who investigate these implicit or unofficial instantiations of policy may not situate their work in the education policy field, but their scholarship nonetheless has implications for understanding if or how reforms meet their equity promise.

The definition and use of the term equity also complicates the scholarship identified in this systematic review. Equity has become a ubiquitous term that is espoused across the ideological and research spectrum, albeit with disparate undergirding conceptualizations. For example, some advance a vision of equity that is grounded in exercising individualism, wherein individuals have access to equal opportunity regardless of race, class, language, or creed. Others hold more communitarian aims and often seek the redistribution of resources to address societal and educational ills. While individuals advancing these contrasting visions of equity invoke the term, they nonetheless hold distinct aims and advance different means by which an equitable society and educational system can be nurtured and maintained. This review did not distinguish or account for the differing conceptualizations of equity that researchers advance through their work and argumentation, instead opting to cast a broad net to capture the current state of the scholarship that is intended to understand and interrogate policies seeking to advance equity. Despite these important limitations, the approach used in this research synthesis does advance key insights into the state of the research field by identifying scholarship that is explicitly situated in the policy field and explores policy development or implementation in the service of equity.

Policies for the Advancement of Educational Equity

With the changes of the past 15 years, education policy scholars have examined the evolution of prominent policy initiatives and other reforms to address persistent inequities that have captured the attention of key decision makers. Many of the policy topics scholars investigate are familiar features of education’s “policy primeval soup”—the ecology of ideas that emerge, compete, combine, and recirculate to inform policymakers and the mechanisms they identify to address policy and equity challenges (Kingdon, 2010). This section describes the ongoing research into these familiar policy topics at the center of inquiry and the emerging reforms that have garnered scholarly attention. These topics include investigations into resource and finance equity, the impact of market-oriented policies, and the nature and form of accountability policies. Researchers have also examined the effect of these prominent reform waves on policies related to teaching and learning and have shed light on the growing efforts to support the development of positive and inclusive school climates as a means to advance equity. An overview of the scholarship in each of these topical areas is discussed in turn.

Continued Focus on Resource and Finance Equity

The role of school resources in addressing entrenched opportunity gaps in U.S. schools comprises much of the research at the intersection of education policy and equity. While scholars have debated if money matters for schools for decades (Grubb, 2009), much of the scholarship over the past 15 years has demonstrated that it indeed does (Baker, 2017; Jackson, 2018). For example, using quasi-experimental methods, researchers have conducted multistate investigations to examine the impact of school finance reforms (SFRs), many of which were spurred by adequacy lawsuits over the last five decades, on spending and student achievement. Despite using different data sets and statistical techniques and examining different time periods, multiple studies have reached similar conclusions: SFRs have generated sustained increases in per pupil spending, closed spending gaps between high-income and low-income districts, and have been associated with improvements in student test scores and graduation rates (Baker & Weber, 2016; Biasi, 2015; Candelaria & Shores, 2019; Darling-Hammond, 2019; Hyman, 2017; Jackson, Johnson, & Persico, 2016; Lafortune, Rothstein, & Schanzenbach, 2016). Many single state studies of school finance, which typically examine the effects of particular types of spending (e.g., Title I, unrestricted, construction), also found positive effects of increased funding streams on student outcomes (Cascio et al., 2013; Conlin & Thompson, 2017; Holden, 2016; Hong & Zimmer, 2016; Roy, 2011). However, the presence of significant relationship between outcomes and these funding streams has varied across contexts and settings (Jackson, 2018).
In examining the relationship between school finance and student outcomes, researchers also illustrate how policymakers can increase investments in particular structures and resources to improve student learning (Baker & Weber, 2016; Jackson et al., 2016). For example, researchers have shown that investments in smaller class sizes for younger students and students from marginalized groups produce greater and sustained achievement and postsecondary outcomes (Bifulco & Reback, 2013), revealing the challenges these institutions pose to the sustainability of equitable and adequate funding streams. Others have more broadly interrogated the inadequacies of state finance laws to advance and secure resource equity between advantaged and disadvantaged groups (Rolle et al., 2008; Steinberg & Quinn, 2015; Sweetland, 2014; Verstegen, 2013), with many elevating how the 2008 recession exacerbated or generated new challenges to investing in public schools (Baker, 2014; Evans, Schwab, & Wagner, 2017; Knight, 2017; Strunk & Marianno, 2019).

Counterbalancing the research on obstacles to finance equity is the recent scholarship investigating innovative and equity-oriented school funding initiatives, such as weighted school funding (WSF), to assess their ability to redistribute public dollars to students and schools that have been historically disenfranchised. While WSF has generated increased funding equity between high-income and low-income districts in some instances (Chambers et al., 2010), including under California’s landmark Local Control Funding Formula (Furber et al., 2019; Koppick & Humphrey, 2018; Roza et al., 2017), other studies have shown that WSF’s impact is variable and has been undermined by technical, fiscal, and political factors that affect its impact, including local resistance to redistribution initiatives and the inadequacies of weighted formulas and overall funding levels to enable necessary changes and supports (Baker & Elmer, 2009; Halverson & Plecki, 2015; Ladd, 2008; Malen, Dayhoff, Egan, & Croninger, 2017).

Summary. Researchers investigating the intersection of school finance policy and equity have illustrated how increased financial investment in public schools can help mitigate entrenched opportunity gaps. Yet, despite this growing consensus in the research base, scholars suggest that in practice, there are critical and persistent challenges in identifying and implementing the policy mechanisms that can achieve and sustain finance equity. Thus, while a select few continue to interrogate the more fundamental question of if money matters for student learning (Hanushek, 2006), particularly in light of criticisms that the research base is too methodologically diverse and too inconsistent to generate reliable inferences and syntheses (Hedges et al., 2016), the question of how to overcome contextual, economic, and sociopolitical challenges to ensure that increased resources are allocated to students and schools that need them most remains pressing.

Ongoing Research on the (In)Ability of Market Reforms to Advance Equity

While the systematic marketization of the education field has been underway for several decades (Horsford et al., 2018), researchers have continued to investigate the ability or inability of market-based policies to spur educational equity for marginalized groups over the past 15 years. By definition, market-oriented policies aim to translate private sector structures and practices for use in school systems to improve school and student performance. In turn, researchers have empirically tested the assumptions in these theories of action (Bulkley & Burch, 2011; Scott & Holme, 2016) in the context of various reforms and have found mixed results as to their ability to improve student outcomes. For example, studies of the Portfolio Management Model (PMM)—a district reform strategy that aims to diversify school options to increase competition and stakeholder responsiveness (Bulkley et al., 2010)—have found variable effects of PMMs on student achievement and other non-test outcomes (Harris & Larsen, 2015; Kemple, 2011; Marsh et al., 2013; McEachin et al., 2016; Strunk et al., 2016). Scholars examining the impact of state and district vouchers programs have also drawn mixed conclusions (Boser, Benner, & Roth, 2018; Egalite, 2013; Sude, DeAngelis, & Wolf, 2018; Wolf, 2008), with some researchers arguing that limited participation in voucher programs and their race-neutral logics undermine their policy potential in advancing educational equity and opportunity (Gooden, Jabbar, & Torres, 2016).

Studies of charter schools predominate the research base on market-oriented policies given their proliferation and the support they have accumulated across partisan lines. Because advocacy for charter schools is often grounded in claims that charters spur school quality and equity, researchers have assessed if or how these schools have advanced opportunities and outcomes for nondominant groups. For example, many researchers have investigated the demographic composition of independent and network-
operated charter schools, noting the disproportionate presence of students of color and the disproportionate under-enrollment of students with special needs and English learners in many charters when compared to schools in their host districts (Carnoy et al., 2005; Furgeson et al., 2012; Miron, Urschel, & Saxton, 2011). The concentration and exclusion patterns of these student populations within their school walls have raised questions of how charters have served as a re-segregation mechanism in U.S. school systems (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Orfield et al., 2012) and spurred scholars to investigate the processes and practices that some charters use to disproportionately exclude students with challenging learning and behavioral needs (Epple, Romano, & Zimmer, 2016; Nichols-Barrer et al., 2016; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2011; Zimmer & Guarino, 2013).

In addition to surfacing the equity implications of who charters serve, scholars have generated evidence that casts doubt on charters’ claims of positive impact on student learning for marginalized groups. In many studies, researchers have found that students of color enrolled in charter schools perform on par with and sometimes lower than their counterparts in traditional public schools, as measured by traditional outcome measures such as standardized tests in English Language Arts and mathematics (Barr, Sadovnik, & Viscontì, 2006; Buddin & Zimmer, 2005; Carnoy et al., 2005; CREDO, 2013; Welner, 2013). Scholars have also investigated if the presence of charters spur improvements in overall district performance by virtue of introducing greater competition, as purported by their theory of action (Arsen & Ni, 2008; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker et al., 2008; Carr & Ritter, 2007; Imberman, 2008; Jabbar et al., 2019; Loeb, Valant, & Kasman, 2011). Here, too, studies point to mixed effects, suggesting that charters and their surrounding schools may not be fulfilling their theoretical and equity promises.

As quantitative studies provide inconclusive evidence of positive charter impact, qualitative studies complement and complicate many of these empirical trends by revealing how charter school practices may undermine equitable learning opportunities. For example, scholars have indicated that charter school and traditional public school leaders alter their practices in response to increased competition in local landscapes in ways that do not directly enhance school quality such as increased attention to recruitment and marketing (Jabbar, 2015; Loeb et al., 2011; Lubienski, 2005). Others, too, have generated questions on the robustness of charter school programming. While some research has suggested that charters can implement innovative and responsive pedagogical models (Gross & Pochop, 2008; Neumann, 2008; Smith et al., 2011), others have provided counterevidence that suggests that some charters reproduce traditional teaching and learning approaches and/or implement harsh discipline practices (e.g., pervasive adult monitoring of students, disciplinary action for behaviors unassociated with learning), which can contribute to teacher turnover (Torres, 2014) and quell student motivation and personal agency (Golann, 2015; Goodman, 2013; Sondel, 2015).

Summary. With the prevalence of market logics in the field of education, scholars seeking to understand policies that advance educational equity continue to keep an analytic eye on the implementation of market-oriented policies and their impact on vulnerable student groups. The research surrounding the range of market-oriented reforms remains inconclusive—some studies show positive effects and outcomes for students while the preponderance of evidence suggests that decision makers remain cautious in relying on market solutions to propel learning and change. This is particularly true in the case of charter schools, which remain the primary focus of this literature. While studies show that some charters propel learning among student subgroups under certain circumstances, others come to more inconclusive findings and even point to problematic practices that shed doubt on their ability to advance equity for the many marginalized groups that comprise their student populations.

Evidence of New Accountability Regimes?

Because of the codification of high-stakes accountability policies in various states and ultimately in federal law with NCLB, researchers have long investigated their development, enactment, and impact since their emergence in the 1990s. While these policies have fallen out of favor for many over the last 15 years, scholarship on equitable education policy has continued this line of inquiry, with more recent work interrogating the legacy of high-stakes accountability and considering its implications for the development of more holistic accountability regimes.

Because NCLB was recently replaced by ESSA in 2015, much of the research has continued to examine the felt impact of NCLB’s theory of action. For example, scholars considered the implications of the law’s unprecedented federal oversight of U.S. school systems on the development and implementation of equitable accountability systems (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; McDermott, 2007; McDonnell, 2005; Wong & Sunderman, 2007). Researchers have also investigated the intended and unintended consequences of the law’s laser-like focus on standardized tests as a primary measure of school and student progress, demonstrating how NCLB’s use of sanctions towards underperforming schools negatively affected teaching and learning conditions for students of color and students from low-income families (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Kim & Sunderman, 2005; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Sunderman, 2008). Others have examined how the federal law fueled anti-democratic practices through the growth of privatization in the education sector (Burch, 2006; Burch et al., 2007), how the law’s “test and punish philosophy” negatively affected teacher working conditions (Barrett, 2009; Finnigan & Gross, 2007; Lewis & Young, 2013; Murnane & Papay, 2010; Rubin, 2011; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Smith & Kovacs, 2011), and how NCLB furthered inequity under the guise of serving as a race-conscious policy (Au, 2016; Leonardo, 2007). While some scholars found evidence that suggests that the negative
consequences of NCLB were overstated (Dee & Jacob, 2011; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010), the body of research generally exposes the law’s flawed logic and detrimental impact on educational opportunities for nondominant groups.

While many continued to investigate the problematic impact of NCLB, others have turned to examine its legacy. For example, scholars have investigated the spawn of related reforms that perpetuate punitive logics in the pursuit of improving achievement and school quality that have proliferated in its wake. These include the impact and efficacy of state takeovers of local school districts (Arsen & Mason, 2013; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005; Morel, 2018) and school closures (Johnson, 2013; Kirshner, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni, 2010; Trujillo & Renée, 2015)—two policies that have been disproportionately implemented in low-income communities of color. Studies suggest that these efforts, which are often justified on the grounds of persistent underperformance or fiscal mismanagement, have failed to bring about improvements in schooling while facilitating the systemic disempowerment of disenfranchised communities and local democracy. Others point to how high-stakes accountability has impacted the public’s perception of what makes a quality school. For instance, Jacobsen et al. (2013) investigated how parents in New York City responded to public accountability data, noting that parent dissatisfaction rose as achievement scores dropped in the face of more rigorous examinations and standards. These findings suggest that the focus on test scores as the primary measure of school quality under NCLB and other high-stakes accountability policies may still color public opinion, which has implications for developing public support and political will for newer equity-oriented policies that have more holistic measures of school quality and progress.

With NCLB’s sunset and the growing questions around the efficacy of high-stakes accountability as a mechanism to mitigate educational inequities, many have turned their attention to examining the possibilities and potential pitfalls of ESSA, which became federal law in 2015. Because of the law’s recency, the research base has primarily raised important questions surrounding its implementation. For example, in light of the increased autonomy that ESSA offers states to refine their accountability systems, policy scholars have questioned if state education officials will be able to reinvent their systems in ways that help schools continuously improve along multiple outcome measures or if they will fall back on high-stakes accountability logics, systems, and singular measures (Egalite et al., 2017; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016; McGuinn, 2016). At the same time, there is optimism about the policy opportunities that ESSA affords. Researchers have suggested that ESSA’s mandate to incorporate multiple measures of school quality into accountability systems may elevate “whole child education” that advances equity by attending to students’ varied needs through policies such as investments in social-emotional learning (SEL) and community schools (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Kostyo et al., 2018; Maier et al., 2017; Melnick, Cook-Harvey, & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Penuel, Meyer, & Valladares, 2016). In addition, scholars have argued that ESSA provides a policy opportunity to enhance student learning by better supporting teachers and school leaders. These researchers point to the federal law’s emphasis on ensuring the equitable distribution of highly effective teachers, states’ ability to more broadly define teacher quality, and allocations for investments in leadership development as promising practices that can improve equity across the sector (Saultz et al., 2017; Young, Winn, & Reedy, 2017).

Summary. Over the past 15 years, policy scholars have continued to examine the impact of NCLB, typically exposing the many inequities perpetuated in its wake. With the sunset of NCLB and other high-stakes accountability policies, researchers have increasingly turned to investigating their legacy, noting if and how punitive logics are embedded in reform initiatives and understanding if or how the public understanding of school quality fostered under high-stakes accountability regimes remains. Scholars also maintain a healthy balance of skepticism and optimism as states refine their accountability systems under new federal mandates that in theory, seek to spur more equitable, holistic approaches to schooling and achievement. While the research base is still emerging, scholars should continue to investigate ESSA and broader accountability shifts to assess if or how new accountability regimes align to enhance equity for all students, particularly those from disenfranchised groups. This analytic attention is consequential for the enactment of equity-oriented reform that seek to address the many inequities that have been perpetuated or exacerbated under high-stakes accountability in the last two and half decades.
Creating Equitable Learning Environments Through Policy

Given the challenges that emerged around teaching and learning under high-stakes accountability, researchers have investigated policy efforts that seek to counteract these patterns through the advancement of quality instruction and the development of supportive school environments. Much of this scholarship has focused on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which were released in 2010 and aimed to create a set of national standards that more explicitly promoted higher-level thinking than the standards established by states under NCLB. The research has compared CCSS to its predecessors and considered its potential impact on student learning, particularly with relation to teachers and school leaders' willingness and ability to support CCSS-aligned instruction and materials (Cobb & Jackson, 2011; Gamson, Lu, & Eckert, 2013; Kober & Rentner, 2011; Mathis, 2010; Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011a, 2011b; Schmidt & Houang, 2012). With these key questions, researchers have typically used surveys or interview data to examine practitioner perspectives on the rigor and equity claims put forth by CCSS advocates (Ajayi, 2016; Burks et al., 2015; Matlock et al., 2016; Nadelson et al., 2014) and to interrogate the relationship between the implementation of CCSS and instructional change (Hodge, Salloum, & Benko, 2016; Opfer, Kaufman, & Thompson, 2016; Supovitz, Fink, & Newman, 2016). Given the complexity of assessing outcomes, few studies have examined if CCSS has improved student outcomes and in these few instances, have generated inconclusive results regarding its ability to mitigate achievement and opportunity gaps for marginalized groups (Loveless, 2016; Schmidt & Houang, 2012; Song et al., 2019; Xu & Cepa, 2015).

A smaller subset of studies examines the enactment of state and local curricular policies that seek to increase access to rigorous learning environments. For example, scholars have investigated policy efforts to expand access to Advanced Placement courses (Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Long et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2013) and course sequences aligned with university admission requirements (Alvarez & Mehan, 2006; Farmer-Hinton, 2011; Mazzeo et al., 2010), typically finding that these reforms have fallen short in expanding opportunities for historically underserved student groups because of technical, political, and normative reasons. Another line of scholarship examines the expansion and impact of deeper learning (e.g., linked learning, project-based learning, performance assessments), which advances an interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning coupled with opportunities for students to apply their learning to relevant situations and complex problems (Daniel, Quartz, & Oakes, 2019; Huberman et al., 2014; Mehta & Fine, 2015; Noguera, Darling-Hammond, & Friedlaender, 2015; Rodriguez, Bellanca, & Esparza, 2016). Studies have indicated that students who experience deeper learning, including those from historically marginalized groups, have higher test scores and postsecondary outcomes and demonstrate greater interpersonal and intrapersonal skills when compared to their peer counterparts (Rickles et al., 2016; Zeiser et al., 2014). At the same time, scholars have noted that systematic and sustained access to deeper learning has been stifled by the array of institutional obstacles that policymakers and practitioners face as they seek to change the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) that governs student learning and school organization (Cohen & Mehta, 2017; Hernández et al., 2019; Mehta & Fine, 2019).

Scholars also look outside of policies that target the technical core of teaching and learning to another critical element of school quality that shapes student learning: school climate (Cohen, 2010; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013). Scholarly attention to school climate, which is typically investigated through an examination of school discipline policies, is motivated by the extensive body of research elucidating the disproportionality in suspension and expulsion rates between privileged socioeconomic students and students from nondominant populations, including students of color, students from low-income families, and LGBTQ+ youth (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2016; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Losen, 2014; Ritter & Anderson, 2018; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014; Skiba, Rausch, & Rausch, 2013). These studies have included critical investigations of how discipline policies (e.g., zero-tolerance laws, willful defiance infractions) exacerbate existing inequities for nondominant student populations (Curran, 2019; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; Hoffman, 2014; Skiba et al., 2013) and elucidated how the discipline gap parallels and reinforces research-identified gaps in achievement (Anderson et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2010; Morris & Perry, 2016).

The identified discipline gap and its association with student achievement have prompted scholars to examine state and district policies such as the elimination of zero-tolerance policies and the implementation of nonpunitive behavioral programs (e.g., restorative justice, positive behavioral support systems) to assess their impact on student learning and school climate (Anderson, 2018, 2019; Flannery et al., 2014; Freeman et al., 2016; Hashim et al., 2018; Laceo & Steinberg, 2018; Losen, 2014; Ritter, 2018). Through this work, scholars elevate some promising effects of these reforms and programs (e.g., reductions in absenteeism and disciplinary incidents, increased student perception of school safety and inclusiveness) while elucidating evidence of on-the-ground resistance to these reforms that undermine their enactment.
While studies of school discipline reform are the most prevalent in the research on school climate and equity, researchers have investigated other policies that intend to systemically cultivate more inclusive school environments. For instance, with the evidence that demonstrates that having a teacher of color can generate academic, social, and emotional benefits for all students (Achinstein et al., 2010; Boser, 2011; Dee, 2004; Fox, 2016; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Villegas & Irvine, 2010), scholars have suggested that policies that support retention and recruitment among teachers of color, including easing access barriers to teacher preparation programs (e.g., loan forgiveness programs, teacher residencies), hold the potential to improve school climates and learning conditions for students (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Guha et al., 2017; Henry et al., 2012; Solomon, 2009). In other studies, researchers have considered the possibilities and impact of policies that would further social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed practice in schools (Dorado et al., 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015; Perry & Daniels, 2016; Rutledge et al., 2015), but inquiries remain limited as these policies are typically studied at the school level or are not widely adopted. In fewer instances, scholars have investigated the development or implementation of policies that seek to expand access to culturally relevant curriculum such as ethnic studies programs (Dee & Penner, 2017; Griner & Stewart, 2013; Moon, 2011; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015), which can increase investment in learning and nurture healthy identity development and inclusion for students from nondominant groups (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Hammond, 2014). Here, too, investigations and evidence remain limited in the policy research field due to the limited adoption and implementation of these curricular policy strategies.

Summary. Questions as to how education policy can advance educational equity have driven many scholars to investigate policies that seek to transform classrooms and schools into rich learning environments. Cumulatively, these studies have found inconclusive evidence for national, state, and local policy initiatives delivering on their promise of increasing access to rigorous instruction and curriculum or improving outcomes for students. Some of this inconclusiveness may be attributed to the relative newness of reform initiatives or the research barriers that inhibit their systematic analysis. At the same time, early evidence suggests that institutional and normative barriers may be a factor in preventing systemic and robust implementation of more promising reforms. In addition to instruction, scholars have increasingly grappled with policies related to discipline and school climate that aim to alleviate entrenched opportunity and discipline gaps. Studies of policies related to school climate remain ongoing, particularly in light of the public and policy attention given to whole child educational practices. This emerging research can continue to shed light on the breadth and depth of adoption and implementation of reforms seeking to create inclusive school environments as well as their ability to enrich student learning and advance educational equity for student groups who have been disproportionately harmed by more punitive practices and policies.

Policy Processes and their Equity Implications

As researchers examining the intersection of education policy and equity have investigated if prominent reforms are meeting their espoused equity promise, others have focused their examinations on their surrounding policy processes. Often falling within the politics of education or policy implementation fields, this body of research primarily focuses on the following dynamics and interrogates their equitable and democratic character: 1) how actors and coalitions engage in policy development and adoption; 2) how idea circulation undergirds policy processes; and 3) how actors support or undermine implementation of adopted reforms. While each of these areas is discussed in turn below, this literature collectively exposes how the use of knowledge, resources, power, and collective action affects the process of implementing reforms seeking to mitigate opportunity gaps among student groups. In turn, this scholarship raises important questions as to how equity is or is not advanced in policy processes and demonstrates how equity-oriented policies may fall short in fulfilling their espoused aims by furthering normative, socioeconomic, and educational interests of dominant groups.

Actors and Idea Circulation in Policy Development and Enactment

Coalitions Advancing and Resisting Policy. In investigating the equitable character of policy processes, many scholars trace the actors and interest groups that have agitated for and influenced the adoption of prominent education initiatives. For example, policy researchers have identified the factions supporting and resisting the adoption and implementation of Common Core, a reform that aimed to increase the rigor and quality of teaching and learning. While noting that Common Core enjoyed broad coalition support at the onset, scholars have demonstrated how the coalition fractured and in turn, undermined the depth or breadth of CCSS implementation across the country (Jochim & Lavery, 2015; Polikoff et al., 2016; Supovitz & Spillane, 2015; Supovitz, Daly, & Del Fresno, 2018). Others have considered the politics and actors surrounding additional policies related to teaching and learning. These include studies of the advocacy efforts and often waning levels of influence of teachers unions in securing labor rights in the face of lawsuits within a broader political climate that has systematically minimized and/or dismantled the power of collective bargaining (Marianno, 2015; Moe, 2011; Strunk & Grissom, 2010; Superfine & Thompson, 2016; Young, 2011). In fewer instances, researchers have examined the groups mobilizing for school discipline reform, noting how coalition dynamics determined policy agendas that often minimized more radical, transformative practices to improve school climate (Koon, 2019).
Another body of research shines the analytic spotlight on the growing influence of market reformers, commonly referred to as “edu-preneurs,” and describes their research, policy, and advocacy efforts to proliferate market-oriented education policies, such as charter schools, alternative teacher certification (e.g., TFA), and portfolio management models (Bulky & Henig, 2015; DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Kirst, 2007; Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014; Scott, 2009; Vergari, 2007). Through this research, scholars have elucidated the array of actors who comprise edu-preneur reform coalitions (e.g., foundations, think tanks, advocacy groups, business sector, entrepreneurial educators and leaders) and demonstrated how they have mobilized their networks and resources to influence the adoption of market-oriented reforms that align with their ideological and economic interests, even in the face of community resistance (Baker & Miron, 2015; Bulky & Henig, 2015; Buras, 2011; Ferrare & Setari, 2018; Scott et al., 2016; Scott, 2009, 2011). This subfield of research underscores the importance of investigating the equitable and democratic character of policy processes, as it uncovers how these dynamics can further sociopolitical or economic interests for dominant groups and undermine community voice and empowerment.

While much of the research draws critical attention to the powerful actors and forces that influence education without democratic input or accountability; some scholars shed light on the active role of local actors and communities in affecting policy. For instance, researchers have drawn attention to how communities of color and grassroots organizations agitate for equitable reform and more democratic processes in the face of market-oriented reforms, which have been proposed and adopted with minimal community input and leadership (Buras, 2014; Horsford et al., 2018; Lipman, 2011b; Scott & Fruchter, 2009). Others, too, reveal how local actors, particular Black youth and other youth of color, have played significant roles in policymaking campaigns (Holquist, 2019) and have been key actors in resisting pathologizing narratives and the onset of paternalistic reforms that aim to “fix” communities of color rather than build upon their assets and desire for self-determination (Balridge, 2014). Finally, others have demonstrated how practitioners navigate policy demands and partner with communities to ensure that educational policies and reforms are more community responsive (Ishimaru, 2013; Jenkins, 2018). Overall, this scholarship demonstrates how local actors can serve as key mediators that help enhance the equitable character of a given reform. Yet, it is important to note that some recent studies advance a more cautionary lesson as they reveal how local efforts can be undermined by gentrification and other local dynamics that enable the influx and mobilization of privileged and predominantly white families who assert their own interests in neighborhood advocacy (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Posey-Maddox, 2014).

The power of communities and locally developed efforts is also apparent in the body of research investigating the emerging social movements in education, many of which are agitating for democratic and multifaceted reforms that can counteract the inequities perpetuated on marginalized communities vis-a-vis ineffective and narrow education policies (Anyon, 2014). For instance, studies have examined how grassroots organizations joined forces to build political support for the enactment of California’s landmark Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)—a multipronged reform that sought to redistribute state funds to districts with concentrations of students with intensive learning needs while empowering local communities to invest these funds in ways that align with locally and collectively established goals (Furger et al., 2019). In addition, a growing number of scholarly inquiries have focused on the #RedforEd movement, with researchers seeking to trace the policies and tactics of educators and activists who have engaged in this movement in blue, red, and purple states and to consider the equity implications of their demands (Blanc, 2019; Shelton, 2017; Slocum et al., 2018). Additionally, scholars have investigated the role and presence of grassroots organizations, including parent advocacy organizations, in spurring equity-oriented educational policy at the state and local levels. While some studies demonstrate how community-based organizations (CBO) enable grassroots movements that strive for policies that empower local communities and equity causes (Fennimore, 2017; Ferman, 2017; Oakes et al., 2008; Renée et al., 2010; Warren, 2005), others point to the growing influence of market-oriented groups in grassroots organizations and the ways they may be undermining community empowerment and self-determination by influencing CBO policy agendas (Barkan, 2013; Chong, 2018; Scott, 2013; Smith & Rowland, 2014).

Idea Circulation in Policy Processes. In addition to describing the coalitions agitating for policies, scholars interrogate the ways these actors have circulated ideas to build support for and foundational knowledge of their reforms. For instance, some scholars have elevated the strategic and selective use of research in growing support for or resistance to policy ideas, showing how coalitions advance reforms (e.g., charter schools, Common Core) by disseminating research that selectively elevates or obscures evidence to support their positions (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2012; Scott et al., 2016). Others, too, have demonstrated how market-oriented reformers often engage in a form of “idea orchestration” (Lubienski, Brewer, & La Londe, 2016), wherein foundations or other wealthy donors provide resources to produce and disseminate think tank-generated research in order to advance policy processes and political support (Lubienski et al., 2016; Scott & Jabbar, 2014). While this research suggests skepticism around research use and circulation in educational policy processes, there is some evidence of effectual information use in the sector. In particular, some studies demonstrate that key decision makers use an array of data sources (e.g., administrative data, expert testimony, parent and community input) to inform policy decisions, minimizing the effects of selectively
mined or politically motivated research that can undermine the equity impact of reforms (Asen et al., 2011; Honig & Coburn, 2008). Scholars have also found that research-practice partnerships, which facilitate cross-sector learning through sustained structures that allow for the productive examination and application of research to policy and practice, have also been promising forums for the exchange and use of evidence-based ideas that attend to community and student needs (Bryk et al., 2015; Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Farrell, Coburn, & Chong, 2019; Penuel et al., 2011; Tseng & Coburn, 2019).

In addition to research use and circulation, some studies have delineated how policy advocates circulate narratives that include problematic or hegemonic subtexts to generate support from policymakers, communities, and the broader public (Dumas, 2016; Gottlieb, Hutt, & Superfine, 2018; Hernández, 2016). For example, scholars have examined marketing practices in U.S. schools that have increased with the growing competitive pressures of privatization (DiMartino & Jessen, 2014; Jennings, 2010). In this work, researchers have revealed how leaders in both traditional public and charter school sectors employ deficit-laden, racialized representations to attract public support in their outreach, which has had the added effect of reifying racial and economic hierarchies that maintain systems of oppression built on negative social understandings of marginalized groups (Hernández, 2017; Lipman, 2011; Lubienski, 2007; McWilliams, 2017; Turner, 2017).

**Summary.** Scholars have investigated the actors that have supported the adoption and implementation of prominent education policies and the ideational and discursive practices they have deployed to build sociopolitical support. In doing so, researchers elevate important insights into how power, influence, and equity can be inhibited or propelled in policy processes. In particular, they reveal how inequities can be perpetuated through and by policy processes when powerful actors disproportionately influence reform efforts and propagate the circulation of ideas that impede the implementation of research-based and assets-driven policies that can enrich opportunity. At the same time, scholars have illustrated the power of community efforts and grassroots movements that seek to advance community empowerment and equity-oriented reforms that address systemic inequities. In doing so, scholars push the field to consider the possibilities that community-based counter-movements hold and the potential challenges they may face as they agitate for equitable change and justice.

**The Challenges and Opportunities of Policy Implementation**

As scholars investigate education policy processes and their equitable character, they have also paid analytic attention to how actors implement adopted reforms and how their behaviors support or undermine equity-oriented policies. Much of this research investigates policy implementation by tracing if policies evolve as they are enacted and suggests that political and normative dynamics at the local level are consequential in this process (Honig, 2006; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2016). For instance, researchers have demonstrated how local histories, particularly surrounding education reform and race relations, have often created a climate of mistrust that influences the degree to which community members support the implementation of district or citywide policies that claim to advance equity for nondominant groups (Buras, 2011; Dumas, 2011; Lipman, 2011; Trujillo et al., 2014). Studies of instructional and disciplinary reforms at the school level also reveal the challenging micro-politics of advancing equity-oriented policies. Specifically, this research has elucidated how some practitioners and communities resist equity-oriented reforms (e.g., de-tracking, discipline reform) or implement them in watered down ways, often justifying their hesitations with arguments that reveal deficit-laden understandings of students from disenfranchised populations or the desire to protect opportunities for privileged groups (DeMatthews et al., 2017; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Holme, Diem, & Welton, 2014; Payne & Smith, 2018; Trujillo, 2012; Turner & Spain, 2016). Because policy developers of equity-oriented reforms often fail to anticipate and attend to the technical, political, and normative dimensions of change (Oakes, 1992), some scholars have demonstrated how school leaders, who work as unofficial policy analysts on a daily basis (Malen, 2005), play a critically important in mediating and translating policy so that it is justly implemented and promotes the learning of students from marginalized racial, linguistic, and economic groups (Mavrogordato & White, 2019).

Researchers also trace the implementation of reforms that intend to generate more inclusive decision-making and stakeholder responsiveness. In seeking to understand how traditionally underrepresented groups are engaged or neglected in district- and site-level governance, scholars have attended to promising policies that mandate parental and community participation in educational decision making, including school-based budgeting and the development of local accountability plans. These studies have revealed how insufficient district and school capacity hampers outreach to and consistent inclusion of families from marginalized groups, allowing for privileged groups to continue to exercise greater influence in these arenas and undermining the democratic and equity aims of these policies (Marsh & Hall, 2018; Marsh et al., 2015; Sinclair & Malen, 2019). Researchers have also examined the issue of inclusive governance and involvement in the charter sector—schools that were theorized as more responsive spaces to students, families, and communities (Budde,
While some scholars found evidence that families were more deeply engaged in charter settings (Smith & Wohltestetter, 2009; Smith et al., 2011; Wilson, 2016), others have provided counterevidence, which shows that some charters operate with limited transparency and create obstacles that inhibit them from being democratically accountable to local communities (Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015; Hamlin, 2017; Koyama & Kania, 2016; Lay & Bauman, 2017; Scott, 2011).

While many bring scholarly attention to how inequities are maintained or exacerbated through the implementation of equity-oriented policies, others highlight how schools and districts can create conditions that enable policy implementation in ways that fulfill, not abandon, promises of equity. For instance, many scholars have demonstrated how instructional reforms are better implemented when there is ongoing and targeted capacity building that support educator sense-making. Specifically, professional development has been shown to be most impactful when it builds practitioners’ foundational understanding of a respective policy, fosters an appropriate mindset to mitigate bias, and develops the technical pedagogical expertise needed to enact pedagogical improvements (Cobb & Jackson, 2012; Coburn, 2005, 2006; Mayer, Woulfin, & Warhol, 2015; Penuel et al., 2009; Spillane, 2009). In this work, scholars have also illustrated the influential role of organizational routines in policy implementation (Peurach, 2016; Spillane et al., 2011), suggesting routines require change and differentiation by grade and subject level to progress beyond the logics of previous reforms to embrace new approaches (Coburn, 2016; Hopkins, Lowenhaupt, & Sweet, 2015; Hopkins et al., 2013; Penuel, 2019; Spillane & Hopkins, 2013).

Summary. Despite the espoused equity aims of many education policies, researchers have empirically demonstrated how implementation of these very same reforms at the district and school level can undermine the advancement of opportunity for students and families. Whether through normative and political resistance to equity-oriented policies or the infrastructural issues that inhibit local institutions from creating more inclusive spaces and practices, research indicates that individuals from marginalized communities continue to face micro- and institutional-level barriers that prevent the advancement of educational equity. While these studies underscore the need for equity-oriented policies to anticipate and address the technical, normative, and political dimensions of change (Oakes, 1992), some scholars have identified concrete structures and practices (e.g., ongoing capacity building, organizational routines, investments in principal development) that policymakers and practitioners can use to overcome implementation obstacles.

Targeted Policies to Support Opportunities for Nondominant Groups

As scholars trace the equitable impact and implementation of education policies, many researchers engage in analyses that specify how prominent reforms uniquely affect the learning and well-being of students in specific subgroups. Over the last 15 years, this work has most frequently focused on how policies are felt and experienced along racial lines. For example, scholars have demonstrated the effects of prominent reforms (e.g., NCLB, zero-tolerance discipline, choice) on Black and Brown communities, often drawing attention to the need to adopt new or more robust policies that further opportunities for these nondominant racial groups (Carter & Welner, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Gregory et al., 2010; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). Studies investigating how racist ideologies are perpetuated in policy development and implementation also bring critical attention to the racism that undergirds policy processes and the need to more comprehensively anticipate and address normative dimensions of change (Au, 2016; Dumas, 2016; Flores, 2016; Kohli et al., 2017; Wells, 2014).

While racial analyses compose much of the scholarship examining education policy for equity and its impact on subgroups, scholars also consider the effects and implementation of policies intended to support the needs and persistent inequities faced by other vulnerable student populations. Specifically, scholarly attention to the effectiveness and inadequacies of universal and targeted reforms aimed to support English learners, students from rural communities, and students with special needs are prevalent in the research base. An overview of these research subfields is described below and is followed by a brief discussion of the other subgroups—indigenous communities and LGBTQ+ youth—that are less represented in the field.

Policies to Increase Opportunities for Marginalized Student Subgroups

English learners. The teaching and learning experiences of English learners (ELs) have often been the focus of research on equity-oriented education policy. Much of the scholarship in this area interrogates the continued inequities perpetuated by EL policies related to reclassification (Mahoney & MacSwan, 2005; Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013) and standardized, monolingual accountability measures (DelliCarpini, Ortiz-Marrero, & Sumaryono, 2010; Li et al., 2018; Menken, 2008; Shohamy & Menken, 2015), demonstrating how these policies restrict access and inclusion of ELs in rich learning environments and promote practices that undermine effective language development (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Gándara & Rumberger, 2009; Johnson, 2019). Other studies have investigated the effectiveness of locally-adopted or state-sanctioned instructional programs for ELs, including statistical
evaluations that denote the negative effects of English-only programs and the positive effects of those that support bilingual language development (MacSwan & Pray, 2005; Marian, Shook, & Schroeder, 2013; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005; Slavin & Cheung, 2005; Steele et al., 2017; Tong et al., 2008; Valentino & Reardon, 2015).

As the research base converges to demonstrate how decades of “subtractive schooling” policies and practices (Valenzuela, 1999) have not advanced opportunities for ELs, scholars are assessing the possibilities and potential obstacles to systematically supporting ELs under federal and state policies, including ESSA and LCFF (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016; Hopkins et al., 2013; Olsen, Armas, & Lavadenz, 2016; Robinson-Cimpian, Thompson, & Umansky, 2016; Vasquez Heilig, Romero, & Hopkins, 2017). These studies suggest that prioritizing investments in capacity building that foster effective instructional practices and necessary mindset shifts among educators and leaders would allow states and districts to best leverage the opportunities and resources available under these new policy frameworks.

**Students in Rural Communities.** A growing body of research attends to the unique needs of students in rural communities—a student population that researchers argue has been underexamined and overlooked in policy efforts and research. Policy scholars seeking to elevate the inequities in rural communities have engaged in defining the extent of the “rural problem” or the educational and socioeconomic challenges faced by stakeholders in these regions (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Schafft, 2016). Researchers have described the severity of socioeconomic challenges experienced by youth in rural areas, often noting how job scarcity, low income levels, and racial discrimination shape rural living and intergenerational disadvantage (Duncan & Blackwell, 2015; Edin & Shaefer, 2016; Thiede, Lichter, & Slack, 2018; Thiede, Kim, & Valasis, 2018; Tickamyer, Sherman, & Warlick, 2017). Building on the research that explores the contextual factors that can affect student learning and well-being, other researchers specifically investigate the learning outcomes of students in these regions and the factors that affect academic success. Their work has revealed the varying levels of student achievement among students in rural schools when compared to their urban peers (DePaoli, Balfanz, & Bridgeland, 2016; Economic Research Service, 2017; Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014; Witherspoon & Ennett, 2011) and the circumstances precipitating or mitigating early school exit and academic challenges (Dupéré et al., 2019; Irvin et al., 2011).

Scholars also interrogate the failure of educational policies to anticipate obstacles and needs in rural regions given that the much of the research uplifts the complexity and interconnectedness of challenges for youth in rural communities. For instance, some studies examined how rural districts were administratively disadvantaged in implementing the mandates outlined in federal laws, including NCLB and its reauthorization, which aimed to close disparities in academic outcomes between marginalized groups and their more advantaged peers (Brenner, 2016; Hodge & Krumm, 2009; Johnson & Howley, 2015; Yettick et al., 2014). The lack of responsiveness in federal and state policy to support rural schools has also been well-documented in regional efforts to address one prevalent issue facing rural schools: the recruitment and retention of well-prepared educators and school leaders that can nurture rich learning environments for rural learners (Brownell, Bishop, & Sindelar, 2005; Duncan & Stock, 2010; Eppley, 2009; Malloy & Allen, 2007; Monk, 2007; VanTuyle & Reeves, 2014; Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013). A small number of researchers have considered how market-oriented policies, including the growth of virtual charter schools, have affected rural communities (Cervone, 2018; Mann et al., 2016; Stuit & Doan, 2012). In this subset of research, scholars have demonstrated the increased likelihood of students living in rural areas to attend virtual charter schools, which have been shown to have questionable effects on student learning (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Miron & Gulosino, 2016; Waters et al., 2014). Taken collectively, this research examining the intersection of education policy, equity, and rural schools has generated important questions about the ability and inability of prominent education reforms to foster rich learning environments in rural communities.

**Students with Special Needs.** Researchers examining equity and education policy also frequently assess the impact of reforms on students with special needs, considering if and how reforms have inhibited or advanced equity by increasing opportunities and outcomes for youth receiving special education services. Like those investigating English learners and other subgroups, scholars have interrogated how prominent reform waves acknowledge and address the academic and social-emotional needs of students receiving special education services (Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012; Ferri & Ashby, 2017; McLaughlin & Rhim, 2007; Stern et al., 2015). For example, researchers have found that students with special needs are often underrepresented in charter schools and face impediments to service provision in these settings, suggesting that these institutions, which claim to advance equity for all learners, have struggled to include this student population (Drame, 2011; Estes, 2009; Furgeson et al., 2012; Winters, 2015; Wolf, 2011).

Scholars have also pointed to the potential pitfalls and unintended consequences of federal accountability policies (i.e., NCLB) on students with special needs (Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Katsiyannis et al., 2007; McLaughlin et al., 2005). Here, studies have not only highlighted the inconclusive impact of high-stakes accountability on the academic progress of students with special needs (Thurlow et al., 2008; Wei, 2012), but also demonstrated how the attention to test scores often translated into inequitable learning opportunities for this subgroup, including selective attention to “bubble students,” limited curricula, and insufficient accommodations on standardized tests (Bowen & Rude, 2006; Cole, 2006; Katsiyannis et al., 2007; Smith, 2007). Finally, many of the studies investigating
the potential and felt impact of federal and state accountability policies on students with special needs often interrogate the alignment or misalignment of said policies with the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), signed into law in 2004. Scholars investigating the intersection of accountability policies and IDEA often highlight the underlying tension between the standardization and uniform progress levels mandated under high-stakes accountability and the individualization that lies at the heart of special education (Cole, 2006; Hope, 2009; Karger, 2005; McLaughlin, 2010; Moores, 2011)

While scholars investigate if and how policies address the learning needs of special needs students, others continue to delineate a well-documented inequity in the realm of special education: the disproportionate identification of students from nondominant groups. Studies have demonstrated that students of color, English learners, and LGBTQ+++ youth are among the student populations that are over-identified for special education services (De Valenzuela et al., 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Skiba et al., 2008; Sullivan, 2011), and have, at times, used intersectional analyses to demonstrate how the identity markers of race, culture, and language coalesce as compounding factors in special education identification (Artiles, 2019; Blanchett et al., 2009; Liasidou, 2013; Shifer et al., 2011). With these over-identification patterns, many scholars have empirically investigated how this overrepresentation occurs, and found that biases embedded in the technical and interpersonal processes around identification and service provision can lead to prolonged classification and inequitable learning opportunities (Ahram et al., 2011; Artiles, 2011; Blanchett, 2006; Cavendish et al., 2015; Kramarczuk Vougarides et al., 2017; Macswan & Rolstad, 2006; Skiba et al., 2008). Overall, the body of research focused on education policy and students with special needs underscores the shortcomings of prominent reforms to address entrenched inequities in special education and further elevates the need for policies and policy research to elucidate how special education and its surrounding processes can be implemented in culturally responsive and just ways.

Lesser-Examined Subgroups in the Research Base

While there is a strong research base on the impact of policies for English learners, special needs students, and youth living in rural communities, the effects of policies on other vulnerable populations who face acute disadvantages and discrimination have been comparatively underexplored in the scholarship on policy and educational equity. These populations notably include indigenous students and LGBTQ+ youth, though some scholars have undertaken investigations of the ways education policy uniquely affects these communities. Through these research subfields, researchers expose ongoing inequities and underscore the imperative of increased scholarly and policy attention to these disenfranchised communities.

Youth in Indigenous Communities. While much of the research on indigenous education policy over the past 15 years considers its development in international settings (e.g., Burke & Milewski, 2011; Cottrell, 2010; Ellinghaus, 2006; Gray & Beresford, 2008; Schwab, 2018), some scholars elucidate the ways that targeted and universal reforms have shaped learning experiences for indigenous youth and communities in the U.S. Most of the scholarship in this subfield has investigated community-driven movements that advance policies that emphasize culturally sustaining pedagogy and indigenous language development as a means of creating more equitable and responsive learning opportunities in Native American communities (Beaulieu, 2008; McCarty, 2013; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Warhol, 2010, 2012; Yazzie-Mintz, 2011). Yet, as some examine the possibilities and challenges surrounding these community-rooted policies, others interrogate how prominent reform waves have intersected with these localized efforts. For example, scholars have employed interpretative analyses of No Child Left Behind and other standardization initiatives to consider its impact on Native groups, often noting how these federal laws further limit tribal sovereignty and the development of linguistically and culturally responsive schools (Brayboy et al., 2015; Cohen & Allen, 2013; Mackey, 2017; Winstead et al., 2008). In fewer instances, researchers have considered if school choice and charter school policy have supported the learning needs and rights of indigenous youth. While some studies have demonstrated how charter autonomies can be leveraged to create schools that are more responsive to indigenous communities (Fenimore-Smith, 2009; Fox & Buchanan, 2014; Goodyear-Ka’opua, 2013), others have demonstrated how equitable practices can be limited in local education marketplaces or curtailed by high-stakes accountability (Anthony-Stevens, 2017a, 2017b; Castagno et al., 2016; Combs & Nicholas, 2012). Overall, scholars examining indigenous education reform and its equity implications elevate important tensions in U.S educational policymaking—the challenge of enacting universal policies that can advance outcomes and opportunities for all students while recognizing and adhering to Native peoples’ right to self-determination and well-being.

LGBTQ+ Youth. Studies of education policy and its impact on LGBTQ+ youth also constitute an important research subfield, which calls attention to the inequities faced by queer and gender-nonconforming students and the emerging, systemic efforts to ameliorate their learning challenges. To date, much of this research has centered on the need to create or better implement policies related to school climate (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; McGuire et al., 2010; Russell & McGuire, 2008; Sears, 2005; Wright & Smith, 2013)—a strategy to address the high levels of harassment and disproportionate discipline LGBTQ+ face which negatively affects their well-being and progress (Mitchum & Moodle-Mills, 2014; Mueller et al., 2015; Snapp & Russell, 2016). Many of these studies have examined district or school-based policies and supports (i.e., gay-straight alliance clubs, anti-bullying laws, mental/social services, professional development, LGBTQ+ curriculum)
to consider if the presence of these programs advances student outcomes, identity development, and well-being (Gower et al., 2018; Heck et al., 2014; Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013; Kull et al., 2016; Smith, 2014). Other studies of LGBTQ+ related supports and their implementation have also suggested how these programs might be improved so that they are more identity-affirming and counteract discriminatory forces that inhibit their implementation (Formby, 2015; Kolbert et al., 2015; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). In fewer instances, scholars have considered how states have instituted policies that allow for the growth of LGBTQ-inclusive policies at the district and school levels, often finding that most states fall short in providing civil protections (Russo, 2006). With the current political climate and the growing attacks on the civil liberties of LGBTQ+ communities, future research should continue to assess the presence and impact of education policies serving queer and gender-nonconforming youth so that reforms can support healthy identity development and academic success among LGBTQ+ youth (Russell & Horn, 2017).

Summary. Despite varying levels of scholarly attention, researchers have investigated how prominent reforms uniquely affect vulnerable student groups, and in doing so, elucidate how policies like school choice and accountability have yet to consistently increase learning outcomes and opportunities for students with unique academic, social, and emotional needs. Similarly, researchers examining the effects of targeted policies that affect teaching and learning conditions for specific student populations (i.e., IDEA, EL reclassification, LGBTQ+ supports) have also suggested how these policies fall short in their implementation despite their intended aims. Overall, this body of research has generated critical findings that expose how inequities persist for specific student populations and in turn, elevates the importance of ongoing scholarly inquiry related to the potential and felt effects of policies on student groups who experience discrimination and disadvantages in distinct ways. At the same time, the scholarships suggests that researchers should consider using intersectional frameworks more frequently to understand if and how policies uniquely impact individuals with multiple identity markers and to support the development of reforms that attend to students’ academic needs and whole selves.

Investigating the Intersection of Education Policy and Equity: Future Directions

With the political shifts and growing calls for justice in U.S. schools and beyond over the last 15 years, this research synthesis sought to understand how scholars have engaged in analyses of education policy and equity amid the changing sociopolitical and policy context. To this end, this examination aimed to uncover how policy scholars have sought to understand if or how reforms have enabled the advancement of educational equity for disenfranchised groups and how they have investigated lines of power and oppression within and surrounding policy processes. This analysis revealed that researchers have primarily examined prominent policy waves and/or those intended to support specific student subgroups to consider if or how they have generated improved outcomes and schooling experiences. Furthermore, studies have often surfaced the technical challenges, politics, and norms that have circumscribed reform processes in ways that undermine policy and equity aims, and in fewer occasions, elevated how systems and practices can support deep and powerful implementation. While providing comprehensive and diverse assessments of education policies and their equity potential, this review points to important areas that warrant further inquiry. Some of these are topical, wherein scholars should remain vigilant of ongoing policy developments and their impact. Other suggestions point to newer and bolder research directions for the policy field that can enable robust and multifaceted investigations as to how policy can support the transformation and sustainability of equitable schooling systems.

Lines of Inquiry to Pursue

This research synthesizes suggests that there are topical areas that scholars should attend to in their investigations of education policy and its equitable potential and impact. A key area for continued investigation pertains to the U.S. accountability context and its ongoing evolution. On one level, researchers should continue to understand the implementation and impact of ESSA and seek to can assess if increased state autonomy and the law’s emphasis on multiple measures of success translates to improved outcomes and the development of more whole child centered learning environments. This could be pursued quantitatively as scholars seek to detect changes in traditional outcome measures and discipline rates to a shed light on ESSA’s impact, and/or engage in studies that more systematically include climate survey data, which can yield important insights on equity and inclusion in schools while elevating the perspectives of students, teachers, and families who are immersed in these settings. Mixed methods and qualitative studies that investigate if and how states and districts implement policies that improve rigor and instruction, support inclusive school climates and culturally responsive programming, and accelerate college and career readiness would also be of critical importance.

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to the ESSA-related future research base. At the same time, lines of inquiry into the evolution of accountability structures beyond ESSA are also necessary for the field. With COVID-19 spurring the temporary suspension of many accountability structures and laying bare the need for schooling systems grounded in relationships and whole child practices, it is imperative that scholars pursue investigations that capture if or how emerging accountability structures support approaches that spur learning and well-being for disenfranchised youth.

In addition to accountability, scholars should remain vigilant of continued attempts to further marketize in the education sector. Education policy scholars have comprehensively delineated the translation of market systems and logic into U.S. schools, suggesting that market policies have become characteristic features of school systems despite the inconclusive evidence of their impact and the research that reveals how these reforms can perpetuate discriminatory and undemocratic practices and ideologies. The entrenchment and proliferation of market-oriented reforms has even further potential to accelerate with the Trump administration’s preferences for choice and privatization and in the face of potential “disaster capitalists” (Klein, 2008) who may seek new or expanded markets and influence in the education sector in the wake of COVID-19. While the potential for increased marketization remains, there is evidence of growing resistance to market-oriented reforms at the state and local levels. For instance, market advocates, particularly those who support the growth of charter schools, have increasingly come under fire by teachers unions, civil rights organizations, and equity activists, suggesting that the broad coalitional support they once maintained is now waning in the face of critical challenges that competitive and constrained schooling environments have fostered. Given these tensions in the landscape, scholarly attention should continue to be paid to the political tactics that reformers use as they seek to maintain favorable policy contexts and/or create new avenues to expand their influence—efforts that the capitalistic logic underpinning their theories of action would suggest they would do.

The growth of grassroots educational movements, which often espouse resistance to privatization and advance multifaceted reform platforms, is also an important area of inquiry for scholars investigating the intersection of equity, policy, and community empowerment. While exemplified by the Black Lives Matter and #RedforEd movement, numerous movements across the country are emerging as counterforces to entrenched coalitions that have perpetuated the onset of policies that have had questionable and often inequitable effects. These movements often ground their efforts in justice-oriented critiques and elevate anti-racist and community responsive reforms as potential remedies for systemic inequities. Researchers should further examine the emergence and growth of these movements, the political tactics and agendas they employ to move the public and decision making bodies to action, and the ultimate success of their efforts to enact and implement equity-oriented policy. Given the research that demonstrates how more radical educational transformations can be distilled through implementation processes or appropriation by reformist groups, scholars should consider designing studies that can conceptually and methodologically trace the normative and political dimensions of change in their investigations.

As researchers investigate policies and the movements that undergird them, studies should continue to include targeted and intersectional analyses that surface the ways that student subgroups are uniquely affected by broader state and federal policies as well as initiatives generated for their communities. This is particularly true for student groups that are less examined in the research base including LGBTQ+ youth and students from indigenous communities, who have acute social, emotional, and academic needs and have tended to be over-looked in the development and implementation of prominent reform waves. In addition, while a substantial number of research studies has investigated how English learners are affected by policy, future research should consider how equity and learning is promoted for undocumented students, whose learning experiences have primarily been investigated in the realm of higher education. (See Rodriguez & Monreal [2017].)

In surfacing how students experience education policy in unique or compounding ways based on their identity markers, scholars can provide research and guidance to decision makers to better understand the complexity and depth of the challenges that need to be acknowledged and addressed in policy development and implementation.

A final topical area for increased scholarship pertains to school leaders and the policies that support their development, placement, and retention. Much of the research on education policy and equity points to the importance of growing and sustaining culturally responsive, equity-oriented leaders, who are critically situated in school systems to serve as policy mediators and to support the conditions that would support its equitable implementation. While there is a robust body of literature on leadership preparation and effective school administration, there is a dearth of studies on administrator-focused policy and how it can systematically support equity-oriented reform implementation. Some exceptions include studies that examine if and how policy changes related to administration accreditation (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015) and preparation program curricula (Brown, 2004; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Roach et al., 2011) have spurred tangible and systemic changes in leadership practice. Despite these contributions, the field remains nascent, thus suggesting that more explicit scholarly attention to policy supporting effective and responsive school leadership is needed.
Bolder Frontiers for the Research Field

While the aforementioned topics and lines of inquiry will support ongoing investigations into education policy and its ability to further equity, this synthesis also suggests additional and bolder paths forward that can propel the field. Taken collectively, the body of research on education policy for equity exposes the depth of challenge decision makers and practitioners face in advancing equitable and transformative change for nondominant groups in U.S. schools. While these challenges are related to many education policy processes, they also stem from a fundamental fact: education policy is fundamentally limited in addressing and remedying inequities due to the powerful and compounding systems of power and oppression that permeate all aspects of daily life. This reality should not discourage scholars from advancing queries into the effectiveness and equitable character of education policy, but rather compel the field in different directions to consider how reforms can actually spur and sustain equitable change. For instance, researchers can formulate investigations that more deliberately consider their interplay of education policy with other economic and social policies that necessarily affect young peoples’ opportunities to learn and develop. Attending to the multiple and compounding policies that affect young people and their communities can advance a whole child research agenda for the field—one that builds upon the growing scholarship on the development of holistic and inclusive schooling environments to acknowledge how broader systems and policies can support healthy development, well-being, and success. Awareness of the interconnectedness of policy systems and structures has been amplified by the coronavirus pandemic and the ongoing displays of racial violence; scholars investigating education policy and equity advancement should seize this opportunity to propel the field in ways that more thoroughly investigate and attend to this reality.

The field would also benefit from further scholarship into another factor limiting the equitable impact of education policy: the fractured nature of U.S. schooling systems that has led to challenges in addressing inequity. The loosely coupled structure of U.S. schools, wherein federal, state, and local institutions hold varying influence in policy making, has not only led to significant differences in how equity-oriented policies are implemented, but also to a fragmented policy agenda that suggests reforms related to areas like funding, accountability, and educator capacity building are competing rather than reinforcing policies (Bishop & Noguera, 2019). While it remains imperative to interrogate the equitable character of individual policies at differing institutional levels, policy scholars should consider engaging in investigations of systems-building, wherein they push against the tendency of viewing policies as piece-meal and provide windows into how schooling systems can effectively and creatively braid varying policy streams to build equitable and community responsive schools and systems.

In addition to these critical areas for research, policy scholars should consider how they engage policy critiques as well as policy solutions. In the face of the documented, multidimensional challenges that impede transformational and equitable change in schools, scholars in the education policy field have tended to maintain healthy skepticism around the ability of more recent initiatives to fulfill their equity promises to all students, noting the potential pitfalls and flawed logics embedded in policy trends and efforts. While some have demonstrated how particular structures and practices can facilitate greater progress, the field is more definitive in delineating the severity and complexity of the obstacles that lay ahead rather than identifying the policy and research-based solutions that can better support decision makers in making equitable transformation and improvement. Looking ahead, policy scholars should consider how they might better complement the rich and important policy critiques they present with discussions of concrete and evidence-based systems and practices that might serve as remedies that mitigate anticipated and emerging inequities.

Education policy scholars investigating equity advancement will also have to continue grappling with a fundamental question: what is equity and how can it be realized? Equity has become a ubiquitous and often appropriated term that can translate to anything from securing individual freedoms for all to the redistribution of opportunities to remedy centuries-long systems of oppression. With the diversity of perspectives and approaches in the education policy field, these differing conceptualizations—as well as abstract definitions of equity—are undoubtedly reflected in the literature base and hold methodological and conceptual implications. While this diversity of thought is a staple of empirical inquiry and scholarship, the current moment compels policy scholars seeking to investigate the equitable impact and potential of reforms to incorporate robust equity definitions into their research—particularly those that articulate how equity-oriented policies can address and ameliorate systemic racism and other oppressive structures. Many researchers, particularly many Black scholars and other scholars of color, have long set an example of how to engage in rigorous inquiry while employing equity-explicit and socially conscious frameworks. A scholarly field dedicated to understanding the intersection of equity and policy should consistently follow suit to enable analyses that advance compelling, nuanced, and impactful scholarship for the research and policy fields.


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Polikoff, M. S. (2017). Is Common Core “Working”? And Where Does Common Core Research Go From Here? AERA Open, 3(1), 2332732215623553


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