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How Classroom Economic Disadvantage and Social Class Attitudes Shape Parents' Educational Preferences

Shelley M. Kimelberg, Shira Gabriel, and Michael J. Poulin

University at Buffalo

ABSTRACT

Research indicates that income segregation is a significant problem in U.S. schools. Here, we investigate the role that parent preferences play in this phenomenon. We analyze experimental data from a sample of parents of young children to examine how the proportion of low-income students in a hypothetical classroom and parents' social class attitudes influence preferences. We find that classroom economic composition affects parents' preferences but only at high levels of disadvantage. The desire to avoid classrooms with a substantial share of low-income students persists even in high-performing, majority-White classrooms. Furthermore, both implicit and explicit measures of classism influence classroom desirability, suggesting that parents' preferences reflect, in part, individual biases and not solely concerns about material resources in low-income schools. Finally, the effect of classroom disadvantage on preferences is stronger for high-SES than low-SES parents. We discuss the implications of these findings for addressing income segregation in the context of school choice.

KEYWORDS

Income segregation; parent preferences; school choice; social class attitudes

Segregation is a persistent feature of K-12 schools in the United States (Bischoff and Owens 2019; U.S. GAO 2022). Whereas racial segregation has been a primary focus of education scholars and policymakers for decades, income segregation has received comparatively less attention (Dalane and Marcotte 2022; Owens 2015). Yet studies reveal that rates of income segregation are on the rise, not only between school districts but also between schools within individual districts (Owens, Reardon, and Jencks 2016). This has prompted concerns about equitable access to educational resources as well as the reproduction of socioeconomic disparities in schooling outcomes (Duncan and Murnane 2011; Michelsmore and Rich 2023; Owens 2018; Owens and Candipan 2019). Income segregation may also exacerbate other disparities; racial achievement gaps, for example, are larger in places where income segregation between districts is higher (Owens 2018; Owens et al. 2016).

Given that school assignment is often determined by a family's home address, economically segregated schools are, to a significant degree, a reflection of economically segregated communities (Lareau and Goyette 2014). However, as the school choice movement increasingly disrupts the linkage between residence and school assignment (Bischoff and Tach 2020), there is a pressing need to better understand how parents' decision-making may shape the demographic composition of schools. A growing body of research documents the extent to which a school's racial profile affects the likelihood that parents would consider enrolling their child there (Billingham and Hunt 2016; Brinkman et al. 2023; Evans 2024; Hailey 2022; Saporito and Lareau 1999). However, fewer studies assess the influence that the socioeconomic composition of the student body has on parents' educational decisions (see Finger and Houston 2023; Saporito 2003 for exceptions). Furthermore,

CONTACT Shelley M. Kimelberg  shelleyk@buffalo.edu  Department of Sociology and Criminology, University at Buffalo, 443 Park Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260-4140

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the research that does exist offers limited insight into the potential factors motivating parents' socioeconomic preferences.

In the current paper, we address this gap in the literature by exploring several questions. First, we investigate the degree to which the proportion of low-income students in a hypothetical classroom influences the likelihood that a parent would choose that environment for their child, independent of the effects of the racial composition and average academic performance of students in the classroom. This allows us to determine whether economic disadvantage, per se, is meaningful to parents when evaluating educational options, or whether economic disadvantage merely serves as a proxy for other schooling characteristics commonly associated with poverty in U.S. schools, such as race or academic quality.

Second, we examine the influence of individual attitudes—both implicit and explicit—regarding social class and poverty on parents' preferences for classrooms with varying levels of economic disadvantage. This focus on psychological indicators allows us to explore the extent to which classism or anti-poor biases may contribute to parents' educational decision-making. If anti-poor bias leads some parents to avoid schools with higher proportions of low-income students, policy efforts focused primarily on reducing material differences in learning environments by equalizing funding and resources (Chingos and Blagg 2017) may have limited impact on parents' willingness to consider those schools; other approaches may also be necessary.

Finally, we test the extent to which classroom preferences differ based on parent characteristics—namely, socioeconomic status and race. For example, if a preference exists for classrooms with fewer low-income students, is that preference limited primarily to higher-income parents (or to White parents), or do parents from across the income (or racial) spectrum seek to avoid classrooms with high levels of economic disadvantage? Previous findings provide evidence of outgroup avoidance among parents who were asked to evaluate classrooms or schools with varying racial compositions (Billingham and Hunt 2016; Brinkman et al. 2023; Hailey 2022). Here, we investigate whether a similar tendency exists for social class—such that high-SES parents may be more likely than low-SES parents to avoid classrooms with many low-income students—or whether classroom preferences do not vary by parent economic background. Likewise, we examine whether White and Black parents differ in their assessments of the desirability of classrooms that feature varying levels of student poverty.

A clearer understanding of the educational preferences of parents is especially important in light of the current push in states across the U.S. to dramatically expand school choice. In theory, increasing access to a range of public and private school options would allow all parents to select the environment that best satisfies the needs of their individual children and families. While the present study is only designed to examine parents' preferences concerning one factor—the income profile of a classroom—it contributes to broader debates about the likely consequences of school choice for inequality. Indeed, studies indicate that parents' ability to act upon their preferences is itself highly stratified: Low-income parents, for example, tend to have fewer viable options available to them and are more likely to have to engage in “preference compromise” (Saatcioglu and Snethen 2023) than higher-income parents. Less advantaged families often must prioritize basic needs (e.g., access to adequate, safe housing) over schooling considerations or must contend with practical constraints (e.g., limited transportation to schools outside of one's neighborhood) that severely restrict school choice (Rhodes and DeLuca 2014; Saatcioglu and Snethen 2023). To the extent that parents possess preferences for educational environments with fewer low-income students, the greater ability for advantaged families to avoid such spaces has the potential to further marginalize those left behind.

BACKGROUND

Income Segregation in U.S. Schools

Racially and socioeconomically integrated schools have been linked to a variety of positive outcomes, including improved academic achievement, higher college matriculation rates, enhanced creativity, critical

thinking, and socioemotional learning, and better adult economic and health outcomes (Kahlenberg, Potter, and Quick 2019). Yet decades after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Coleman Report (1966) and despite countless policy initiatives and academic studies, K-12 students in the United States still attend institutions that are largely separated based on race and income (Owens et al. 2022).

Accounts of recent trends in racial segregation are mixed (often due to a reliance on different measures of segregation), with some studies suggesting school segregation by race and ethnicity has stabilized or decreased in many U.S. metropolitan areas, whereas others point to evidence of resegregation in some schools and districts that had previously made integration gains (Logan, Oakley, and Stowell 2008; McGrew 2019; Reardon and Owens 2014; Stroub and Richards 2013). Trends in socioeconomic segregation—frequently operationalized as income segregation—by contrast, are clearer: Separation between low-income students and their advantaged peers has intensified since 1990 (Owens et al. 2016; Reardon 2011). Rates of income segregation have increased not only between districts (i.e., across communities within a metropolitan area or region) and within districts (i.e., across schools in a single district) (Owens et al. 2016), but also within individual schools, as evidenced by the unequal sorting of higher- and lower-income students into distinct educational tracks (Dalane and Marcotte 2022).

As children's learning environments become more segregated by income, achievement gaps worsen. As Owens (2018) demonstrates, the gap in achievement between high- and low-income students is most pronounced in highly segregated metropolitan areas. Moreover, Reardon et al.'s (2022) analysis of a decade's worth of data from all U.S. school districts indicates that it is racial economic segregation (i.e., the disproportionate concentration of Black and Hispanic students in high-poverty schools) that accounts for widening test score gaps between Black and Hispanic students and their White peers.

A meta-analysis of the effects of school SES (i.e., the mean level of student socioeconomic status in a school) on student outcomes finds that school SES is associated with student learning and achievement across a variety of subjects, and that school SES is a better predictor of outcomes than individual student SES (Tan et al. 2023). The reasons why income segregation may produce unequal outcomes are varied and complex. Reliance on local property tax revenues to fund education contributes to stark inequities in the resources that flow to schools in higher- and lower-income communities (Baker and Corcoran 2012; Owens et al. 2016). Thus, court decisions in the 1970s and 1980s prompted many states to modify funding models in an effort to minimize such resource disparities, primarily by directing additional state dollars to lower-income communities to supplement local financing (Jackson, Kirabo, and Persico 2016). Evidence suggests that these efforts helped to ameliorate some of the effects of income segregation on student achievement and attainment (Bischoff and Owens 2019; Jackson et al. 2016).

At the same time, socioeconomically segregated districts and schools differ substantially in other ways, including the quality, experience, and qualifications of administrators and teachers as well as the personal resources that high- and low-SES parents can bring to schools (Bischoff and Owens 2019; Tan et al. 2023). For example, research suggests that high-SES parents not only deliver substantial amounts of private funding to schools (often via contributions to parent-teacher associations) but also wield their human, social, and cultural capital to provide instrumental benefits to schools and students (e.g., by deploying specialized skills such as grant-writing expertise, volunteering in the classroom, or leveraging connections to local leaders to influence policy or resource decisions [Billingham and Kimelberg 2013; Bischoff and Owens 2019; Nelson and Gazley 2014; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara 2014]). Ultimately, schools often reflect or exacerbate the inequities that are present in children's residential contexts, rather than reducing them (Rich and Owens 2023).

The Role of School Choice in School Segregation

Though most children in the U.S. still attend a school assigned to them based on their residential address, close to one-third of students are enrolled in "schools of choice" (Lareau and Goyette 2014;

Wang, Rathbun, and Musu 2019). This figure has increased in recent decades, driven largely by the proliferation of charter schools and other forms of public-school choice (Wang et al. 2019). The push to further expand both the range of educational options available to families as well as the number of families eligible for choice programs has only intensified as the narrative of parental rights has animated local and national debates concerning COVID-related policies and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (Metz and Hollingsworth 2023).¹

Given the increasing prevalence of school choice, scholars have devoted considerable attention to the question of how parents make schooling decisions for their children (Jabbar and Lenhoff 2019; Kimelberg 2014a; Kimelberg and Billingham 2013; Lareau and Goyette 2014; Saatcioglu and Snethen 2023). In addition to factors such as a school's academic quality and reputation (Denice and Gross 2016; Holme 2002; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000; Valant and Newark 2020), the role that school demographics play in shaping parents' preferences and choice behavior has been a key focus of this work. Much of this research examines the extent to which the racial composition of a given school affects the likelihood that parents would consider enrolling their child in that institution (Saporito and Lareau 1999). For example, qualitative studies reveal that White parents, in particular, rely on racialized stereotypes to justify avoidance of majority Black schools (Evans 2024; Goyette, Farrie, and Freely 2012). Experimental evidence likewise indicates that as the proportion of Black students in a school rises, White parents' willingness to enroll their child decreases (Billingham and Hunt 2016; Brinkman et al. 2023; Hailey 2022).

In contrast, we know less about how the socioeconomic composition of the student body influences parents' educational preferences and choices. While a few studies include school poverty rates or similar measures of socioeconomic status (SES) in models of parents' decision making (e.g., Burdick-Will et al. 2020; Finger and Houston 2023), most do not measure how this information works in combination with other school characteristics (e.g., racial composition, academic performance) to affect parents' preferences.

While often framed as a personal decision with individual consequences, parents' schooling choices can shape broader demographic patterns in schools and school districts (Kimelberg and Billingham 2013). As Owens (2016:551) notes, "schools tend to be more segregated by race and poverty than are neighborhoods," highlighting the potential role that the educational decisions of parents (e.g., to select institutions other than their local public school) may play. Indeed, districts that allow for school choice are often more segregated than they would be if all children attended their neighborhood school (Saporito 2003; Whitehurst 2017). For example, the degree of charter school penetration in large school districts—one measure of how much choice is available to families—has been shown to contribute to the growth of within-district income segregation (Marcotte and Dalane 2019). Therefore, as the movement toward widespread choice empowers more families to opt out of their assigned public schools, parents' desire to avoid schools with certain student characteristics may exacerbate segregation.

Greater attention to how parents view economic diversity, in particular, is especially important as school districts increasingly look to socioeconomic status-based student assignment (SBSA) plans to achieve integration goals in the wake of court decisions—notably, the 2007 Supreme

¹Demographic patterns in the use of choice schools underscore the inherent complexity in the current educational landscape. Whereas Black and Hispanic students are overrepresented in public charter schools relative to their share of the student population, they are underrepresented in nonpublic (i.e., private) schools. Likewise, a larger proportion of students enrolled in public charter schools than in traditional public schools are in schools deemed "high poverty" (based on the percentage of the student body qualifying for a free or reduced-price lunch), while private schools disproportionately educate students from non-poor families (Wang et al. 2019). This is, at least in part, an artifact of the geography of schools of choice: Charter schools, in particular, have historically been concentrated in urban districts that serve more students of color and low-income students. As states increasingly allow more families to use public funds to attend nonpublic (i.e., private and religious) schools, this raises the question of how patterns of choice may change. Initial evidence from Arizona, which provides vouchers to all families regardless of financial need or location, provides a hint. Analysis reveals that low-income families, despite an interest in choosing a private school, are *less likely* than more advantaged families to actually use the vouchers, often citing barriers that prevent them from doing so (Hager and Waldron 2024).

Court case *Parents Involved*—that restricted the explicit use of race in school assignment (Reardon and Rhodes 2011; Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg 2011). SBSA plans refer to a range of methods that incorporate various measures of family or neighborhood income or SES (e.g., eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, receipt of public housing assistance) into school assignment policies. In addition to ensuring some degree of socioeconomic mix across a district's schools, SBSA plans may also contribute to racial desegregation, given the substantial correlation between race and class in U.S. communities. SBSA plans are thus sometimes viewed as “race-neutral” means of achieving both income and racial diversity that are less subject to legal challenge (Reardon, Yun, and Kurlaender 2006). While only two U.S. school districts pursued integration via a “conscious plan using socioeconomic factors” in 1996, that figure jumped to 40 districts by 2007, then more than doubled to 91 by 2016 (Potter, Quick, and Davies 2016:1). Reflecting the tendency for economic integration plans to be adopted by large, urban school districts, the number of students attending districts (or charter schools) with such plans in place exceeded 4 million (or 8 percent of the public-school population) in 2016 and has increased further since (Potter and Burris 2020; Potter et al. 2016).

The effectiveness of economic integration plans, however, will necessarily depend in part on parents' willingness to consider schools with a mix of lower- and higher-income students. Poll data suggest that most Americans acknowledge that school segregation is an important issue and “agree that more should be done to integrate low- and high-poverty schools” (Boser and Baffour 2017:4). At the same time, findings indicate that respondents are resistant to policies that will restrict their school choices and are fearful that the pursuit of integration will come at the expense of school quality (Boser and Baffour 2017:22). Furthermore, while the vast majority of Americans agree that economically integrated schools deliver substantial benefits to low-income students, far fewer believe that benefits accrue to higher-income students (Boser and Baffour 2017:24), raising questions about the degree to which more affluent parents, in particular, will respond positively to targeted efforts to integrate schools or opt for schools that have a greater proportion of lower-income students.

Recent experimental evidence likewise highlights the challenges of marshaling support for economic integration. Using a nationally representative sample, Thompson and Trejo (2024:99) demonstrate that parents both “systematically underestimate the degree to which economic school segregation exists in their local school districts” and also remain largely unmoved in their support for policies that would reduce segregation, even when presented with data about actual levels of local segregation and information delineating the adverse effects of school segregation. Coupled with analyses of administrative data that reveal the tendency of families to avoid schools with more low-income students (Burdick-Will et al. 2020), these findings underscore the role that parental preferences concerning socioeconomic status may play in educational decisions. Moreover, as Thompson and Trejo (2024:114) conclude, greater attention to the source of parental preferences concerning economic integration is clearly warranted.

One possible explanation is that parents make decisions based, in part, on their previous exposure to—or personal experience in—segregated schools. As Sikkink and Emerson (2008:286) note in their seminal study of the impact of school racial composition on parents' school choices, in the United States, “segregation breeds segregation.” The reasons for this are varied and complex, but related work by Krysan and Crowder (2017) on residential segregation emphasizes the need to attend to the way that people's lived experiences and embeddedness in homogenous neighborhoods and social networks create a self-perpetuating cycle of segregation, by shaping the information and perceptions that people rely on to make decisions. In the context of school choice, Rhodes, Szabo, and Warkentien (2023) illustrate how parents draw on their personal educational experiences to justify their attempts to either replicate their own positive schooling experiences for their children or to avoid schools that they fear will subject their children to the negative environments that they once experienced. Given the history of racial and class inequities in many U.S. schools, this reliance on personal experience may contribute to the perpetuation of segregated educational environments.

Such work underscores the importance of understanding the attitudes and beliefs that parents bring into the school choice process. For the purposes of the present study, previous research on attitudes toward social class and poverty is especially instructive.

Attitudes Toward Social Class and Poverty

A substantial literature documents attitudes toward social class, poverty, and the poor, as well as attributions for poverty (Hunt and Bullock 2016). Research suggests that classism (i.e., negative attitudes toward lower classes) can be found in a wide variety of settings including medical, mental health, and educational (Bullock, Lott, and Wyche 2010; Lott 2010; Lott and Bullock 2007; Smith 2010). Survey data reveal that respondents evaluate poor people as unattractive, overweight, lazy, stupid, and unhygienic (Jones 2007; Moss 2003). Poor people are frequently dehumanized and compared to vermin or other pests (Loughnan et al. 2014). In a study of attitudes toward 17 different groups commonly stereotyped in the United States, only welfare recipients were seen as lacking in both warmth and competence and as being both disliked and disrespected (Fiske et al. 1999).

One explanation for such negative stereotypes is that they can be utilized to justify persistent class stratification and rationalize the social and economic hardships experienced by poor individuals and groups (Ashmore and McConahay 1975; Hoyt et al. 2021). In contrast to race or gender, which are largely considered ascribed traits, social class tends to be understood as a status that is achieved, and one for which the individual therefore bears responsibility (Bullock 2008). The prevalence of classism can lead low-income people to internalize these negative attitudes and in turn apply them to other members of their social class and even to themselves (Jost and Banaji 1994). For example, people from working-class backgrounds describe experiencing shame and anxiety when their clothing or food choices communicate their class status to others (Nenga 2003).

As with any form of prejudice, classism is a complex concept that can be operationalized in several ways, including attitudes, beliefs, and degree of internalization. First, classism can be reflected in the attitudes people hold toward poor individuals or groups. In other words, people may have positive or negative evaluative reactions (i.e., feelings) toward poor people that can occur either implicitly or explicitly and affect preferences, behaviors, and choices (John-Henderson et al. 2013). Second, people may hold negative beliefs about poor people that attribute undesirable characteristics (e.g., laziness, lack of intelligence) to the poor or assume that poor people are at fault for and therefore deserving of their lot in society (e.g., Fiske et al. 1999). Finally, internalized classism captures the degree to which people internalize a society's class structure or hierarchy. This internalization can affect self-concepts, self-esteem, and decision-making (Russell 1996). In the current research, we assessed each of these measures of classism to explore potential factors motivating parents' preferences for classrooms with varying degrees of economic disadvantage.²

DATA AND METHODS

In 2018, the research team recruited parents of young children—people who would soon face the prospect of selecting a school—to participate in a two-part study designed to determine how parents evaluate hypothetical classrooms with varying poverty rates. Participants were recruited from the city of Buffalo, New York, and its surrounding communities. Buffalo is a mid-sized city with poverty and

²Whereas there is substantial work exploring anti-poor biases, there is less research on “upward classism,” or prejudice directed at higher-income individuals (Zitellmann 2020). Some studies reveal that while rich people tend to be perceived as competent, they are often seen as less caring, lacking in warmth, or selfish (Durante and Fiske 2017; Durante, Tablante, and Fiske 2017; Fiske et al. 2002; Gorman 2000). Other research indicates that the rich are seen as undeserving of their wealth or success, less self-reliant, or morally questionable (Black and Davidai 2020; Schnurr 2022; Zitellmann 2020). Therefore, stereotypes about affluent individuals may likewise affect how parents think about the schooling context that they desire for their children. For example, studies suggest that low-SES individuals are less trusting of high-SES individuals and may be less disposed to cross-class contact (Gilbert 2000; Navarro-Carrillo, Valor-Segura, and Moya 2018; Wu et al. 2025). In general, mistrust between social class groups (Fiske et al. 2012) may shape the willingness of parents from across the income spectrum to choose economically diverse educational settings.

child poverty rates (27.6 percent and 41.8 percent, respectively, in 2021; U.S. Census Bureau 2021b) that consistently rank among the highest in the United States. The city is racially and ethnically diverse: 49 percent of residents identify as White, 33 percent as Black, 12 percent as Hispanic, and 7 percent as Asian (U.S. Census Bureau 2021a). More than three-quarters (78 percent) of students in the Buffalo Public School (BPS) district are considered economically disadvantaged based on their family's participation in designated economic assistance programs (e.g., free or reduced-price lunch, SSI, EITC) (NYSED 2022). Notably, rates of poverty and food stamp (SNAP) receipt, as well as the proportion of students of color, are all higher in the district than in the city as a whole (NCES 2021), suggesting that some families actively choose other educational options in the area, including private, charter, or parochial schools.

The setting for this study had two main benefits. First, BPS, like many of its urban counterparts in the United States, was a “district of choice” that allows parents to select from among many schools, affording ecological validity. Second, despite the district's overall high level of economic disadvantage, it contained several schools for which the rate of student economic disadvantage was markedly lower, permitting a plausible manipulation of classroom poverty rates. Diversity across district schools in terms of racial and ethnic composition as well as academic quality likewise allowed for credible manipulation of these variables.

Sample

Participants were required to be parents of at least one child under the age of six who had not yet entered elementary school. Potential participants were recruited primarily through local organizations that serve families of young children (e.g., preschools, libraries).³ Additional participants were recruited using snowball sampling and via community listservs. Only one parent per family was eligible to participate. A sample of 255 parents was initially recruited to participate in the study, which was composed of two sessions; 201 participants completed all measures in both sessions.

The sample was predominantly female (86.1 percent) and White (76.1 percent), with smaller proportions identifying as Black (18.9 percent) or other race (5 percent); 4.8 percent of respondents identified as Hispanic/Latino. Participants' mean age was 35.46 (SD = 6.06). The mean age of their preschool-aged child was 3.41 (SD = 1.61). Participants reported a median annual household income of \$80,000–99,999. Notably, more than one-fifth of participants reported incomes below \$40,000, slightly less than the city's median household income at the time of study. (10.5 percent had incomes between \$20,000–\$40,000 while 10.9 percent had a household income less than \$20,000.) The majority of respondents reported at least some college education.

METHODS

Participation involved two separate online sessions, completed at least one week apart at a location of the participant's choice. Participants received \$10 after completing session one of the study and \$30 after completing session two. For parents who lacked access to a computer, a member of the research team brought a laptop to their home. In session one, participants reported demographic information (e.g., age, gender, family composition, race, ethnicity, education, income) and completed several measures of explicit and implicit class attitudes. During session one, we also measured explicit attitudes toward other non-pertinent groups (e.g., age, gender) to obfuscate our primary research interests. In session two, participants viewed a series of slides representing hypothetical classrooms

³In an effort to enroll participants from a range of income and racial backgrounds, we reached out to organizations from a variety of neighborhoods and communities across the city. The use of snowball sampling (especially with low-income participants) and the offer to have a research assistant bring a laptop to the homes of those who did not have access to a computer were other ways, through both recruitment and methodology, that we sought to increase the diversity of our sample. While our final sample was not representative of the city population as a whole, either in terms of household income or race/ethnicity, we did recruit a sufficient number of both lower-income parents and parents of color to allow for analyses to address our third research question.

with varying student profiles and indicated their preference for each. By breaking the attitude measures and classroom evaluations into two different sessions (separated by a minimum of one week) and including several attitude measures not related to income or class, we sought to camouflage the true purpose of the study and to minimize potential ordering effects and social desirability bias.

Measures

Implicit social class attitudes. We assessed implicit attitudes using a social class implicit association test (IAT; Greenwald, McGee, and Schwartz 1998; Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji 2003). Employing a modified version of the approach described in John-Henderson et al. (2013), we measured the relative strength of participants' automatic evaluative associations with the concepts "upper class" and "lower class." The stimulus items for "upper class" included "rich," "wealthy," "affluent," and "fortune." For "lower class," the stimulus items included "poor," "poverty," "broke," and "bankrupt." The "good" evaluative terms included "beautiful," "joyful," "glorious," and "wonderful." The "bad" evaluative terms were "tragic," "horrible," "terrible," and "nasty." Respondents categorized the target concept with evaluative terms as quickly as possible via keystroke. Faster response times for certain pairs of stimuli (e.g., lower class and bad words vs. upper class and good words) indicate more negative class attitudes toward lower-class people relative to upper-class people.⁴

Explicit social class attitudes. We used a "feeling thermometer" to assess respondents' explicit attitudes toward members of different social classes. The feeling thermometer is a simple measure—commonly used in research focused on both explicit and implicit prejudice—that captures feelings toward other groups without the use of incendiary statements that participants may want to avoid stating (e.g., Payne et al. 2005; Williamson, Bishop, and Ralph 2014). Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale ranging from 0 degrees (as cold and negative as possible) to 100 degrees (as warm and positive as possible) how they felt about "lower-class people," "middle-class people," and "upper-class people," with 50 degrees representing neutral feelings toward the group in question.

Beliefs about poverty. To assess beliefs about low-income people, we deployed the short-form version of the attitudes toward poverty (ATP) scale (Atherton et al. 1993), which measures explicit agreement with negative characterizations of poor people. Participants responded to 21 items using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) (Yun and Weaver 2010). The ATP scale includes statements such as, "Poor people are dishonest"; "Children raised on welfare will never amount to anything"; and "Poor people generally have lower intelligence than non-poor people." This scale had excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$). See [Appendix A](#) for the full list of items.

Internalized classism. Finally, we used the internalized classism scale (Liu and Hernandez 2007) to assess the internalization of social class discrimination, as evidenced by the degree to which social class influences individuals' sense of self-worth and self-esteem, as well as the degree to which classist beliefs are internally accepted and justified (Russell 1996). High scores suggest desire to fit in with members of their social class and to maintain or advance class standing. Participants responded to 30 items using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The internalized classism scale includes statements such as, "My peer group shapes the way I spend and value my money"; "I make an effort to know the right people to reinforce my social status"; and "I need

⁴The IAT is a very common measure of implicit bias. The test measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., Black people, poor people) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad). The main idea is that making a response is easier when closely related items share the same response key (Greenwald, McGee, and Schwartz 1998). If a person responds more quickly when "poor" and "bad" both use the same key on the keyboard (as compared to when "good" and "poor" both use the same key), that suggests that the former are more tightly linked in the person's mind than the latter. In other words, it is the relative strength of the association between the two target words that renders a quicker response.

to have similar experiences to those in my social class group.” This scale exhibited excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$). See [Appendix B](#) for the full list of items.

Socioeconomic status (SES). We constructed a composite measure of each participant’s socioeconomic status based on their (a) highest level of education attained and (b) household income, as well as their (c) scores on the MacArthur scale of subjective social status (Adler et al. 2000), used to measure participants’ subjective sense of their individual socioeconomic status relative to others in society and in their local community.⁵ This composite measure demonstrated adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .75$).

Classroom preferences. Participants were asked to consider the decision to select an elementary school for their preschool-aged child(ren). To do so, they were shown a series of cards presenting information about hypothetical classrooms⁶ and provided the following prompt: “Imagine your child in a classroom with the following characteristic (s). If you had the opportunity to choose your child’s kindergarten classroom, how likely would you be to choose a classroom with the characteristics listed here?” Participants indicated their preferences using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not likely at all, 7 = very likely; see [Figure 1](#) for an example).

We varied the degree of poverty depicted in the hypothetical classroom across three levels: low, medium, and high. As shown in [Table 1](#), we operationalized each of the three levels using a measure of economic disadvantage commonly found in educational research and data: the proportion of students who qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) (Greenberg, Blagg, and Rainer 2019). A “low poverty” classroom was defined as one in which 15 percent of students qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch, while the “medium poverty” and “high poverty” levels were described as classrooms in which 45 percent and 75 percent of students, respectively, qualify for a FRPL.

Imagine your child in a classroom with the following characteristic(s). If you had the opportunity to choose your child’s kindergarten classroom, how likely would you be to choose a classroom with the characteristics listed here?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not likely at all Neutral Very likely

**POVERTY LEVEL
IN THIS
CLASSROOM:**

HIGH

(75% of students qualify for a free- or
reduced-price lunch)

Figure 1. Hypothetical Classroom with Income Characteristics.

⁵For the MacArthur scale, participants indicated where they see themselves on a 10-rung ladder (1 = least off; 10 = best off) representing people’s status with respect to money, education, and jobs.

⁶Although parents are typically not able to choose their child’s specific classroom, we sought to provide participants with a hypothetical situation that would most closely approximate the educational setting where their child would spend most of their time. Given that all respondents had a child who was approaching kindergarten age, the individual classroom would be the primary learning environment for their young child (rather than the entire school, as is more common for older students), and thus very salient in the minds of parents. Some studies indicate that parents think about kindergarten in different terms than they do older grades (Kimelberg 2014a, 2014b). As it is often the first step in the school process, the selection of a kindergarten is thus a sociologically meaningful event.

Table 1. Classroom Information Provided to Participants

Economic disadvantage	Racial composition	Academic performance
1. Low poverty (15% qualify for FRPL)	1. 0% Black/80% White	1. Low (students typically score in the bottom third of the school district)
2. Medium poverty (45% qualify for FRPL)	2. 20% Black/60% White	2. Medium (students typically score in the middle third of the school district)
3. High poverty (75% qualify for FRPL)	3. 40% Black/40% White	3. High (students typically score in the top third of the school district)
	4. 60% Black/20% White	
	5. 80% Black/0 percent White	

First, participants were shown the three slides displaying classrooms of varying income levels, along with eight additional slides depicting classrooms for which other, non-income, information (e.g., the racial composition of the classroom, the test score performance in the classroom) was shown in isolation. These slides were used to familiarize participants with the kinds of information that would be presented on the slides of interest. By providing different information on each of these initial slides, we sought to obfuscate the primary focus of the research.⁷ Next, the slides of interest were presented. Specifically, each participant was presented with a series of classrooms that contained information about the income level of the classroom as well as (a) the racial composition of the classroom and (b) the average academic performance in the classroom. (See [Figure 2](#) for an example.) There were five levels of racial composition⁸ and three levels of academic performance. (See [Table 1](#) for information on each level.) Each participant rated *every* possible combination of classroom characteristics. We used a computer program (Qualtrics) to ensure that classrooms were presented to participants in a random order.

FINDINGS

Descriptive data and correlations for key predictors are presented in [Tables 2 and 3](#). Implicit class attitudes consist of an IAT D score, for which values above 0.65 are typically considered “strong” implicit bias (in this case, against poverty; Haider et al. 2011). For the feelings thermometers, values ranged from 0 degrees (as cold and negative as possible) to 100 degrees (as warm and positive as possible), with 50 degrees representing neutral feelings toward the group in question. The attitudes toward poverty and internalized classism variables represented composite scales ranging from 1 to 5 and 1 to 7, respectively. Subjective social status variables represented a person’s position on a status “ladder” from 1 to 10. Income and education rankings consisted of ordinal rankings of categorical levels. For income (range 1–11), the median (5) represented an income range of \$80,000 to \$99,999. For educational attainment (range 1–6), the median (5) represented a bachelor’s degree. The SES composite was a standardized variable combining different facets of SES, with 0 in principle representing the sample mean.

Q1: Does Classroom Poverty Predict Parents’ Preferences?

To address question one, we analyzed the ratings that parents provided for the 45 possible classroom conditions (3 levels of poverty × 5 levels of racial composition × 3 levels of academic performance).

⁷Although we cannot entirely rule out the possibility of social desirability bias, presenting an equal number of slides with different information highlighted on them makes it unlikely that participants could know for sure what the experiment was designed to study. Furthermore, while we cannot determine whether or to what extent participants felt motivated to minimize or hide any biases they may feel toward individuals of different social classes, our study is designed to measure the extent to which people make choices that reflect such biases (whether they are aware of them or not).

⁸To minimize the number of trials and simplify analyses, we only varied the proportion of White and Black students; the percentage of Asian and Hispanic students were fixed at levels that approximated the racial composition of the city.

Imagine your child in a classroom with the following characteristic(s). If you had the opportunity to choose your child's kindergarten classroom, how likely would you be to choose a classroom with the characteristics listed here?

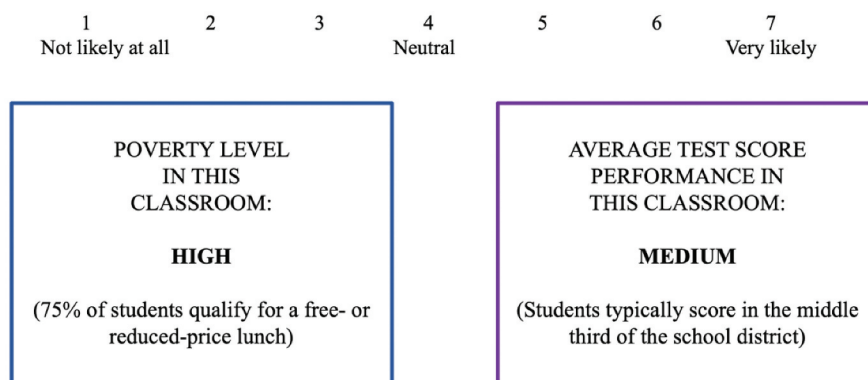


Figure 2. Hypothetical Classroom with Income Characteristics and Other Information.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 201)

Variable	Range	M	SD
1. Implicit class attitudes	−0.98–1.57	0.87	0.41
2. Feelings thermometer: low class	0–100	74.42	21.50
3. Feelings thermometer: middle class	0–100	78.97	19.25
4. Feelings thermometer: upper class	0–100	62.72	24.83
5. Attitudes toward poverty	1–5	2.68	0.95
6. Internalized classism	1–7	3.17	1.03
7. Subjective social status: community	1–10	6.68	1.62
8. Subjective social status: society	1–10	6.22	1.43
9. Income ranking	1–11	5.00	2.81
10. Education ranking	1–6	4.91	1.34
11. SES composite (standardized)	−2.27–1.59	0.01	0.76
12. Race (Black = 1, White = 0)	0–1	0.20	0.40
13. Gender (male = 1, female = 0)	0–1	0.14	0.34

Each participant rated all 45 classrooms.⁹ For this reason, it was important to test our predictions in a way that accounted for the fact that the data consisted of two levels: within-subjects differences in classroom ratings and between-subjects differences in these ratings among individual parents. To address this, we used random effects regressions (using Stata's *xtreg* module) that consisted of matrix weighted averages of fixed-effects (within-subjects) and between-subjects effects.¹⁰ This allowed us to examine all ratings while taking into account their non-independence within individuals, thus keeping our effective N at 201. Because much of the variability in our analyses came from within-subjects comparisons, our analyses achieved much greater power than would have been possible with all between-subjects comparisons given this N. All analyses included parent demographics (race, gender, income, education, and subjective social status) as control variables.

Classroom economic poverty was manipulated at three levels (low, medium, and high poverty). We conducted an exploratory analysis to determine whether it would be best to treat the variable as a continuous predictor or a dichotomous predictor (i.e., whether the primary effects on parents' preferences were driven by the difference between high-poverty classrooms and the two other conditions [low- and medium-poverty classrooms]). To do so,

⁹As noted above, the larger study also included slides for which parents were provided with only partial information about the classroom (e.g., only racial information or only test score information). For the purposes of this investigation, we focused only on the conditions that contained full information about the classroom on all three variables (income, race, and test scores).

¹⁰Detailed information about these random effects models is available at <https://www.stata.com/manuals13/xtxtreg.pdf>.

**Table 3.** Weighted Correlations Among Study Variables ($N = 201$)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Implicit class attitudes												
2. Feelings thermometer: low class	.06											
3. Feelings thermometer: middle class	.10	.74***										
4. Feelings thermometer: upper class	.16*	.46***	.58***									
5. Attitudes toward poverty	-.04	-.33***	-.07	.04								
6. Internalized classism	-.06	-.28***	-.16*	-.08	.19**							
7. Subjective social status: community	.03	-.10	.01	.04	-.07	.05						
8. Subjective social status: society	.12	-.02	.02	.14*	-.07	.05	.63***					
9. Income ranking	.13	-.16*	-.01	.04	-.15*	.09	.40***	.36***				
10. Education ranking	.02	-.08	.08	-.03	-.21**	.001	.24***	.23***	.55***			
11. SES Composite (standardized)	.11	-.13*	.01	.08	-.19**	.06	.76***	.76***	.77***	.70***		
12. Race (Black = 1, White = 0)	-.06	.18**	.02	.12	.05	.01	-.22**	-.10	-.55***	-.45***	-.45***	
13. Gender (male = 1, female = 0)	-.01	.11	.12	.02	.02	.02	-.02	.08	-.06	-.10	-.06	.13*

Note. Correlations computed with sample weighted to approximate actual distributions of race and income levels in Buffalo, NY, USA.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

we first conducted random effects regressions examining the effects of dummy-coded classroom poverty variables on parents' ratings of those classrooms. In these analyses, each b coefficient reflected the amount of predicted change in a participant's classroom rating (1–7) given a one-unit increase in the predictor variable. These analyses indicated that, compared to high-poverty classrooms, parents strongly preferred both medium-poverty classrooms ($b = 0.32, p < .001$, 95 percent CI [0.25, 0.37]) and low-poverty classrooms ($b = 0.40, p < .001$, 95 percent CI [0.33, 0.48]). By contrast, parents had little preference between the medium- and low-poverty classrooms ($b = 0.08, p = .04$, 95 percent CI [0.01, 0.16]). For this reason, and to simplify interpretation of our findings, in subsequent analyses we proceeded to treat classroom poverty as a dichotomous variable (high poverty (poor) = 1, low/medium poverty (non-poor) = 0), but all results were substantively the same when treating classroom poverty as a continuous variable.

As a stringent test of the role of classroom poverty as a predictor of classroom preferences, we first conducted a random effects regression examining (dichotomous) classroom poverty as a predictor of parent preferences alongside both classroom racial composition and classroom test scores. (For full information on this model, see Supplemental Table S1.) Results from this analysis indicated that parents rated poor classrooms lower than non-poor classrooms ($b = -0.36, p < .001$, 95 percent CI [-0.43, -0.30]), even adjusting for the effects of classroom racial composition ($b = -0.01, p < .001$, 95 percent CI [-0.02, -0.01]), and test scores ($b = 1.69, p < .001$, 95 percent CI [1.65, 1.73]). This effect is illustrated in [Figure 3](#). Notably, these more negative ratings of poor classrooms persisted even when classrooms were depicted as entirely White ($b = -0.33, p < .001$, 95 percent CI [-0.45, -0.21]), as having high test scores ($b = -0.40, p < .001$, 95 percent CI [-0.51, -0.29]), or both ($b = -0.32, p < .001$, 95 percent CI [-0.47, -0.17]).

Q2: How Do Individual Class Attitudes Influence the Relationship Between Classroom Poverty Levels and Parents' Preferences?

To test the role of individual class attitudes and beliefs in moderating the effects of classroom poverty, we computed interaction terms between each attitude variable and the (dichotomous)

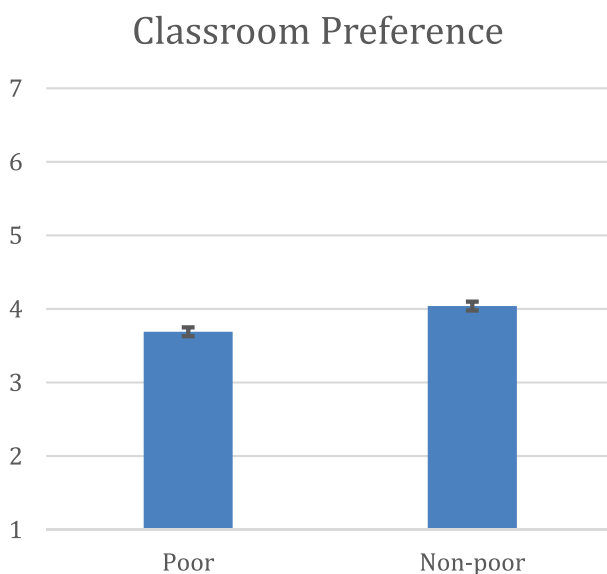


Figure 3. Estimated Classroom Preferences in Poor Versus Non-Poor Classrooms, Adjusting for Classroom Race and Test Score Information. Note. Both classroom race and test score variables were held constant at their midpoint to yield these estimates.

classroom poverty variable. Each attitude variable was examined as a moderator in a separate random effects regression along with classroom poverty and the respective interaction term. It is important to note that we did not create distinct “groups” of individuals who were high versus low on these moderating variables, but rather we allowed them to be continuous and examined their moderating role by examining simple slopes at statistically relevant high and low values. Specifically, to interpret significant interactions, significant moderators were recentered at “low” ($M - 1\text{ SD}$) and “high” ($M + 1\text{ SD}$) values of the continuous attitude variables to make it possible to examine simple effects of classroom poverty at low and high values of the moderators. All analyses continued to adjust for classroom race and test scores along with demographics. (For full information on these models, see Supplemental Tables S2 and S3.)

First, we examined the potential moderating role of implicit classism (i.e., the class IAT). Results indicated that the effect of classroom poverty on parent preference was significantly moderated by implicit classism ($b = -0.08$, $p < .05$, 95 percent CI $[-0.14, -0.01]$) such that classroom poverty mattered much more for those who scored high on class IAT ($b = -0.44$, $p < .001$, 95 percent CI $[-0.53, -0.34]$) than for those who scored low on class IAT ($b = -0.28$, $p < .001$, 95 percent CI $[-0.38, -0.19]$), though the negative effect of classroom poverty was significant at both levels of implicit classism (see Figure 4). In other words, people high in implicit classism expressed more aversion to poor classrooms than those low in implicit classism, but this was an effect more of degree than kind, given that even those low in implicit classism cared about economic disadvantage in the classroom setting.

Next, we examined internalized classism (a more explicit measure of classism) as a possible moderator, and found that it also moderated the effect of classroom poverty ($b = -0.13$, $p < .01$, 95 percent CI $[-0.20, -0.05]$) such that classroom poverty mattered much more for those high in classism ($b = -0.48$, $p < .001$, 95 percent CI $[-0.58, -0.38]$) than for those low in classism ($b = -0.23$, $p < .001$, 95 percent CI $[-0.33, -0.12]$), as shown in Figure 5. As with implicit classism, this effect was relatively subtle in that even those low on internalized classism preferred classrooms with few economically disadvantaged students.

In addition, we tested the moderating role of the feelings thermometer toward lower-class people and found that it also significantly moderated the effect of classroom poverty ($b = 0.11$, $p < .01$, 95 percent CI $[0.04, 0.19]$). Specifically, classroom poverty mattered much more for those with “colder” feelings toward the lower class ($b = -0.47$, $p < .001$, 95 percent CI $[-0.57, -0.37]$) than for those with

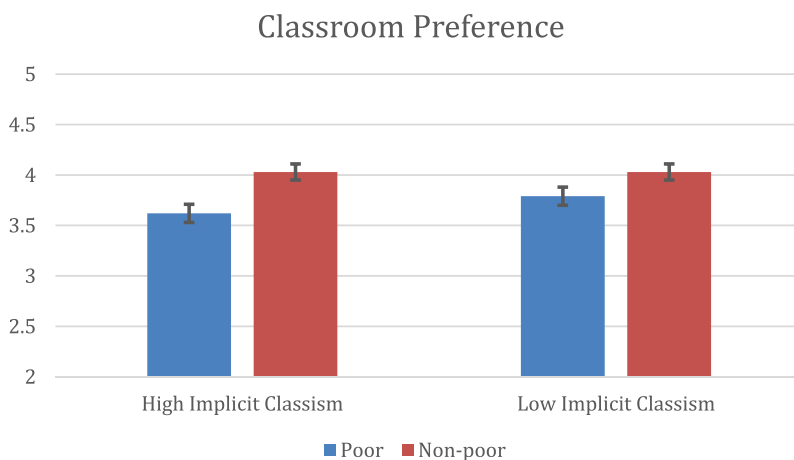


Figure 4. Estimated Classroom Preferences in Poor Versus Non-Poor Classrooms by Implicit Classism, Adjusting for Classroom Race and Test Score Information. Note. Both classroom race and test score variables were held constant at their midpoint to yield these estimates.

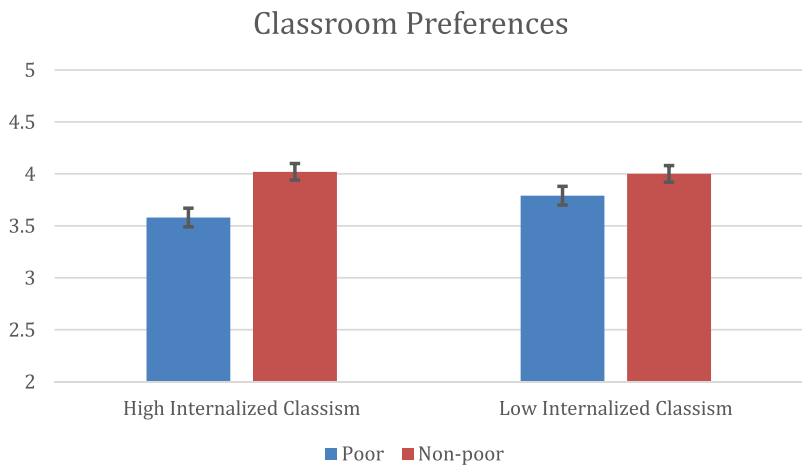


Figure 5. Estimated Classroom Preferences in Poor Versus Non-Poor Classrooms by Internalized Classism, Adjusting for Classroom Race and Test Score Information. Note. Both classroom race and test score variables were held constant at their midpoint to yield these estimates.

“warmer” feelings ($b = -0.24, p < .001$, 95 percent CI $[-0.34, -0.14]$), as shown in [Figure 6](#). Once again, this moderation effect was somewhat subtle in that even those with relatively warmer feelings toward the lower class showed the bias.

Moreover, these moderators appeared to differentially predict parent preferences: When all three moderators were entered into a single model, the interaction terms of both implicit classism ($p < .05$) and internalized classism ($p < .01$) remained significant, while the interaction term for the feelings thermometer was reduced to just shy of significance ($p = .10$). By contrast, there was no significant moderation by ATP or feelings thermometers toward the middle or upper class (all $ps > .05$). The lack of a significant effect for feelings toward the middle- and upper-classes suggests that participants’ classroom preferences were motivated more by the negative stigma attached to poverty and the poor than they were by an affinity for wealth or wealthier people specifically.

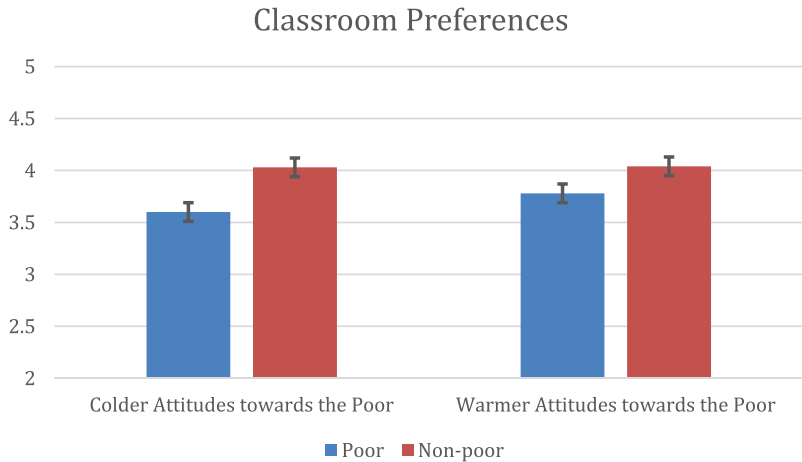


Figure 6. Estimated Classroom Preferences in Poor Versus Non-Poor Classrooms by Feelings Thermometer Towards the Poor, Adjusting for Classroom Race and Test Score Information. Note. Both classroom race and test score variables were held constant at their midpoint to yield these estimates.

Q3: To What Extent Do Parents' Classroom Preferences Differ Based on Their Own Socioeconomic Status and Race?

Although the above analyses adjusted for parent demographics, it is important to consider whether relevant parent variables themselves *shape* classroom preferences. In addition to moderation by parent attitudes, we also examined whether the effects of classroom poverty differed by actual parent SES. SES was examined both as a composite variable as well as in the form of the individual components (i.e., participant education, household income, and subjective social status with respect to the community and to society), with each moderator tested in its own random effects regression along with classroom poverty and the respective interaction term. As above, significant moderation effects were followed by analysis of the simple effects of classroom poverty at “low” ($M - 1\text{SD}$) and “high” ($M + 1\text{SD}$) values of each SES variable. All analyses continued to adjust for classroom race and test scores, as well as other demographics as controls. (For full information on these models, see Supplemental Table S4.)

We found that the association between classroom poverty and parent preference was not significantly moderated by composite SES ($p > .05$). When examining the individual components of the SES composite, we did find that the effect of classroom poverty was moderated by household income alone ($b = -0.07$, $p < .05$, 95 percent CI $[-0.14, -0.01]$) such that classroom poverty mattered more for high-income parents ($b = -0.43$, $p < .001$, 95 percent CI $[-0.52, -0.34]$) than for low-income parents ($b = -0.28$, $p < .001$, 95 percent CI $[-0.38, -0.19]$), though the nature of this effect was such that even low-income parents showed significant bias toward classrooms with less economic disadvantage. Neither education nor either measure of subjective social status moderated the effect of classroom poverty ($ps > .05$).

We also examined whether respondent race influenced classroom preferences. The association between the level of classroom economic disadvantage and parents' rating of the desirability of that classroom differed significantly based on the race of the parent ($b = -0.17$, $p < .05$, 95 percent CI $[-0.34, -0.01]$). Specifically, White parents expressed a stronger preference for classrooms with fewer low-income students ($b = -0.40$, $p < .001$, 95 percent CI $[-0.47, -0.32]$) compared to Black parents ($b = -0.22$, $p < .01$, 95 percent CI $[-0.37, -0.07]$), independent of the racial composition or academic quality of the classroom. Again, however, parents of *both* races were significantly biased against poorer classrooms.

DISCUSSION

The expansion of school choice in the U.S. necessitates a better understanding of the factors contributing to parents' educational decisions. In this paper, we examined how classroom poverty, attitudes toward social class, and respondent income and race influenced parents' classroom preferences. First, we found that classroom economic composition affects parents' preferences, but only at high levels of economic disadvantage. Parents were significantly less likely to choose classrooms where a majority of children (defined here as three-quarters of the classroom) qualified for a free or reduced-price lunch. In contrast, parents' preferences for classrooms with moderate or low levels of economic disadvantage did not differ. This suggests that parents may be willing to tolerate some degree of economic diversity in educational contexts but are likely to avoid schools or classrooms where most students come from lower-income households.

Notably, parents' preferences for low- or moderate-poverty classrooms were independent of the racial composition or academic quality level of the classroom. Parents were less likely to prefer classrooms where low-income students were the majority, regardless of whether the student body was predominantly White or predominantly Black, and/or whether the students in that classroom tended to score high or low on standardized tests. In other words, student economic disadvantage is a deterrent for parents, even in high-performing, majority White classrooms. This is important as it indicates that classroom disadvantage is not merely a proxy for racial diversity or low academic quality, two factors commonly associated with high poverty schools. Rather, this finding highlights the

pervasive nature of classism—parents cared about SES even when it did not signal race or poor performance.

Second, this research demonstrates that social class attitudes shape parents' classroom preferences; both implicit and explicit measures of classism independently predicted the likelihood that parents would choose a given classroom for their children. Parents who scored high on implicit and explicit measures of classism, as well as internalized classism, were more likely than those who scored low on these measures to say that the poverty level in the classroom affected the desirability of the classroom for their children. This highlights the role of individual attitudes in the school choice process, suggesting that a decreased preference for classrooms with higher levels of economic disadvantage is not solely a reflection of concerns about the material characteristics associated with high-poverty schools (e.g., a lack of resources) but rather at least partially about individual biases against poverty or poor people. At the same time, it also illustrates the ubiquity of class bias: Even those low in implicit classism preferred classrooms without many poor students.

Finally, the influence of classroom economic disadvantage on parents' preferences was stronger for high-income parents than for low-income parents. High-income parents were especially likely to avoid educational settings in which low-income students were the majority, regardless of the racial composition or academic quality of those classrooms. This suggests that attempts to promote economic integration may face resistance in communities with extreme levels of income inequality—for example, gentrifying neighborhoods—if doing so would require affluent parents to send their children to schools populated predominantly by students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. At the same time, even low-income parents still exhibited a bias against poor classrooms; having a low income attenuated, but did not eliminate, respondents' preference for classrooms with fewer low-income students. Furthermore, White parents expressed a stronger preference for classrooms with fewer low-income students than did Black parents, though parents of *both* races exhibited a bias against classrooms with large proportions of students from lower-income families. These findings underscore the pervasiveness and strength of stigmas against poverty and poor people.

Situating our findings in the related literature concerning racialized schooling preferences, we note that the relative preferences for lower-poverty classrooms we report here (ranging from 0.21 to 0.44 on a 7-point scale where 1 represents *not likely at all* to choose this classroom and 7 indicates *very likely* to do so) are consistent with those reported elsewhere. For example, Hailey (2022:120) interpreted as substantively meaningful racialized school preferences that fell above 0.20 on a similar 7-point Likert scale of school desirability. Likewise, as Hailey (2022) observed, Krysan et al.'s (2009) seminal work on racialized neighborhood preferences “found that on a 7-point scale, white adults rated racially mixed and black neighborhoods 0.16 and 0.40 points less desirable than white neighborhoods” (Hailey 2022:120). Given that our participants' ratings fall toward the higher end of this range, it is reasonable to conclude that the effects we reveal here represent a meaningful difference in parents' preferences for classrooms based on the economic profile of the student body. Another way to think about these findings is to consider the directional shifts in parents' ratings. In almost all cases, classrooms portrayed as low income shifted parents' preferences from around the scale midpoint (i.e., a “neutral” rating) to a rating below neutral, which suggests at least some opposition to such classrooms. In light of the “bad is stronger than good” principle outlined in Baumeister et al. (2001), even small shifts to negativity might be expected to exert notable effects on parents' actual schooling decisions.

Overall, this research speaks to the challenge of creating more economically integrated schools. To date, income segregation across school districts and schools has primarily been a function of residential segregation, as families with children tend to cluster in different neighborhoods and communities based on their economic resources (Owens 2016). While some school choice advocates have suggested that allowing parents to choose from among many school options will weaken the tight connection between residential segregation and school segregation, these findings raise serious questions about choice as a remedy for segregation, particularly in highly unequal communities. Individual biases against poverty and poor people are likely to drive some parents—especially more advantaged parents—away from schools with higher concentrations of economic disadvantage, potentially maintaining

income segregation even in a landscape of considerable choice. As previous research suggests, even parents who embrace liberal or progressive attitudes toward class diversity and income integration may ultimately act in ways that reproduce, rather than reduce, inequality (Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, and Guskin 1996; Roda and Sattin-Bajaj 2024).

These findings remind us that, to the extent that parents' aversion to high-poverty classrooms is at least partially a function of implicit biases, addressing this issue will not be easy. For example, individual-level interventions (e.g., altering explicit attitudes by providing information about the benefits of socioeconomically diverse classrooms) may address the impact of explicit attitudes but are unlikely to affect implicit attitudes. While implicit class prejudice is a relatively understudied area in sociology and social psychology, studies of efforts to reduce other implicit biases (mostly concerning race) have suggested that the effectiveness of such interventions is limited at best. As Fitzgerald et al. (2019:10) conclude from their systematic review, "many interventions have no effect, or may even increase implicit biases." Furthermore, among the extant studies there are comparatively few that evaluate the effectiveness of bias-reducing interventions in situ, as opposed to in a laboratory setting (Bursell 2024). While we are not aware of specific interventions that have proven effective in reducing the impact of implicit biases in parents' actual schooling decisions, Greenwald et al. (2022) propose that tackling the general problem of implicit bias and its discriminatory consequences may benefit from strategies deployed in public health and related disciplines.

Finally, this research may have implications for policies designed to expand affordable housing in middle- and upper-class communities, as classist attitudes may fuel the type of NIMBY-ism ("Not In My Backyard") that often thwarts such proposals. The phrase "housing policy is school policy" (Rusk 2002; Schwartz 2010) suggests that the use of inclusionary zoning policies or voucher programs that allow low-income families to move to communities with higher quality schools can be an effective way to improve educational outcomes (DeLuca, Rhodes, and Garboden 2016). While studies have borne out the promise of such initiatives for educational gains among low-income children (DeLuca et al. 2016; Schwartz 2010), the viability of this strategy is predicated, in part, on more advantaged families' willingness to support income integration in their neighborhoods and schools. As Kahlenberg (2023) notes, however, fears about the impact that affordable housing could have on the capacity or quality of high-performing local schools are often at the center of opposition efforts.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the present study warrant consideration. While we asked parents to evaluate the desirability of classrooms, in practice parents typically choose among individual schools, not classrooms. Though classrooms are the primary educational setting for students in the elementary grades—the parents in this study all had children who were approaching kindergarten age—it is possible that when presented with data about *school* income levels, the type of socioeconomic information to which parents would be most likely to have access when making actual schooling decisions, they might not evaluate this information in quite the same way. In other words, while our findings revealed parents' perceptions of the socioeconomic composition of classrooms, they may not be a good indicator of how parents would perceive schools' socioeconomic mix. Future studies should aim to examine the influence of social class attitudes and school-level income data—both independently and in combination with race and academic data—on parents' educational preferences.

Likewise, it may be that other characteristics associated with schools (e.g., the neighborhood in which it is located, its physical campus and facilities) interact with parents' perceptions of social class to influence their educational preferences in ways that our study could not capture. Given that school-based income inequality is not merely a reflection of the financial status of the student body but also structural and systemic disparities in the material resources and conditions associated with low- and high-income schools, it is possible that parents may reasonably assume that schools populated primarily by low-income students are of inferior quality or otherwise undesirable (e.g., unsafe). For example, in their study of parent preferences for hypothetical schools with differing racial

compositions, Billingham and Hunt (2016) found that nonracial school characteristics, such as the number of years since the school's facilities had last been renovated, also affect the likelihood that a parent would enroll their child in the school. Other studies have shown that as the racial composition of a school changes, parents perceive the school to be not only of lower quality but also less safe, even if actual safety records do not bear this out (Goyette et al. 2012). It is certainly possible that as the poverty level of a school or classroom increases, parents may make similar assumptions about the safety of the learning environment, attributing behavioral issues or disorder to low-income populations.

Relatedly, study participants' previous experiences with school selection could have influenced their thinking. For example, a parent who has searched for and enrolled their child in a formal preschool (whether private or publicly funded) may think differently about what kind of a kindergarten environment they want for their child than a parent who has not gone through the process of selecting a preschool. Similarly, parents who have older children (in addition to their preschool-aged child) may rely on the information gleaned from those children's experiences in school when evaluating different classroom conditions. Although our data did not allow us to examine this issue, future research should consider the role that prior engagement with educational settings or differential embeddedness within parent networks where information about schools circulates (Bader, Lareau, and Evans 2019) may play in parents' preferences for classrooms with different socioeconomic demographics.

The experimental design of our study allowed us to vary several key classroom characteristics in order to examine the extent to which parents' preferences are influenced by specific combinations of student poverty levels, race, and academic performance. However, it is important to recognize that stated preferences (i.e., those claimed on a survey or captured in a controlled experiment) may diverge from respondents' revealed preferences (i.e., their actual behaviors under real-world conditions), raising questions about external validity. Therefore, we took several steps in an effort to increase external validity. First, we ensured that our study participants were all parents of young children who were soon to engage in the process of choosing a school (as opposed to non-parents) to ensure that the task was meaningful and salient to them. Second, we drew our sample from a city (Buffalo) in which parental choice is a core part of the process by which students are matched with schools; thus, the activity we asked participants to complete (i.e., evaluating different educational settings) was relevant to their situation. Finally, the demographic profiles that we presented to participants mirrored those that they might reasonably find in the Buffalo public school system, enhancing the credibility of the exercise. Nevertheless, there are a number of reasons why parents' actual behaviors may not reflect their stated preferences, including logistical or family constraints that may require parents to make trade-offs when evaluating schools or that otherwise limit their ability to actualize their stated preferences (Agarwal and Somaini 2020; Hastings, Van Weelden, and Weinstein 2007). While it is true that our findings are consistent with studies that rely on application or enrollment data to demonstrate parents' reluctance to enroll in schools with higher proportions of poor students (Saporito 2003), supplemental studies that examine parents' actual school choices in the Buffalo context would further strengthen the practical implications of this research.

Finally, several aspects of the research sample should be kept in mind when evaluating the generalizability of these findings. Our study drew respondents largely from Buffalo, New York, a city with a high level of economic disadvantage as well as intra-district school choice. While this enhanced ecological validity, it limits what we can say about how parents might view classroom economic diversity in communities or school districts that are more advantaged, where the consequences of economic inequity are less stark or where public school choice is not an option. Likewise, because most of our respondents had at least some college education and were disproportionately White and higher income, future studies should aim to replicate these analyses with parents from a broader range of backgrounds. Finally, while we chose to sample parents of young children who were approaching school age to maximize the salience of the research activity, this restricts what we can conclude about parents' class preferences at different stages of the educational process. For example, other studies indicate that parents grow more risk-averse in their schooling decisions as children enter

middle school and high school (Kimelberg 2014b), suggesting that parents may exhibit even stronger preferences for schools with fewer low-income students as their children age.

In an educational marketplace that increasingly affords parents some degree of choice, greater attention to how parents evaluate student demographics when making schooling decisions is critical. Our research highlights the key role that the economic profile of the student body may play in parents' assessments of a school's desirability. Against the backdrop of growing levels of income inequality in both U.S. communities and schools, these findings suggest that absent policy interventions, expanded school choice may ultimately reproduce or exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, income segregation in schools.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Shelley M. Kimelberg is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at the University at Buffalo. She is an urban sociologist whose research focuses primarily on education, social inequality, and neighborhood change. Her work has been published in *Sociological Forum*, *Sociological Perspectives*, *City & Community*, *Urban Education*, *AERA Open*, and *The Sociological Quarterly*, among others. Dr. Kimelberg received her PhD in Sociology from Harvard University in 2007.

Shira Gabriel is a professor of social psychology at SUNY, University at Buffalo. She is an expert on the human need for social connections. She studies non-traditional ways to feel connected to others, school choice, social comparisons, spirituality, and well-being. Her work has been funded by the Templeton Foundation, Templeton World Charities, The Russell Sage Foundation, and the National Science Foundation. She is the past-president of the Society for Experimental Social Psychology and the president of the International Society for Self and Identity and the Midwestern Psychological Association. She received her PhD in Social Psychology from Northwestern University in 2000.

Michael J. Poulin is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at the University at Buffalo. He is a social psychologist whose research focuses on understanding the resources that people use to adjust to adversity, as well as what motivates people to respond to the adversity of others. His research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, and his work has been published in *JAMA*, *Psychological Science*, *American Journal of Public Health*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, and *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, among others. He received his PhD from the University of California, Irvine, in 2006.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

SHORT-FORM VERSION OF THE ATTITUDES TOWARD POVERTY (ATP) SCALE

- (1) Poor people are different from the rest of society.
- (2) Poor people are dishonest.
- (3) Most poor people are dirty.
- (4) Poor people act differently.
- (5) Children raised on welfare will never amount to anything.
- (6) I believe poor people have a different set of values than do other people.
- (7) Poor people generally have lower intelligence than non-poor people.
- (8) There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients.
- (9) Some “poor” people live better than I do, considering all their benefits.
- (10) Poor people think they deserve to be supported.
- (11) Welfare mothers have babies to get more money.
- (12) An able-bodied person collecting welfare is ripping off the system.
- (13) Unemployed poor people could find jobs if they tried harder.
- (14) Welfare makes people lazy.
- (15) Benefits for poor people consume a major part of the federal budget.
- (16) People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control.
- (17) I would support a program that resulted in higher taxes to support social programs for poor people.
- (18) If I were poor, I would accept welfare benefits.
- (19) People who are poor should not be blamed for their misfortune.
- (20) Society has the responsibility to help poor people.
- (21) Poor people are discriminated against.

APPENDIX B

INTERNALIZED CLASSISM SCALE

- (1) I buy the right things to fit in with my social class group.
- (2) I need to be involved in activities similar to others in my social class group.
- (3) The way I spend my money is influenced by a social class group I want to be a part of in the future.
- (4) I sometimes become frustrated when I am not able to get something that is important for me to maintain my social class standing.
- (5) Physical attractiveness is valued in my social class group.
- (6) Possessions are necessary to reinforce my standing in my social class.
- (7) I need to know how to dress to fit into my social class group.
- (8) The social class group I would like to be a part of has shaped the way I see social class issues.
- (9) Sometimes I feel distressed when I can't get my social class needs met.
- (10) I make an effort to know the right people to reinforce my social status.
- (11) The group I aspire to be like is an important source of social class messages.
- (12) When I can't get something I need to be like others in my social class group I sometimes feel anxious.
- (13) Sometimes I have feelings of failure when I can't maintain my social class standing.
- (14) I tend to listen to the group I want to be a part of when it comes to how to behave in a particular social class group.
- (15) I feel pressure to keep up with others in my social class group.
- (16) The group I aspire to be like influences how I think about social class issues.
- (17) My peer group shapes the way I spend and value my money.
- (18) When I continually fail to meet the expectations of my social class group, I feel sad.
- (19) I need to have similar experiences to those in my social class group.
- (20) I am concerned when others do not conform to my group standards.
- (21) I am conscious of how I behave around others because it reflects my social class.
- (22) My peers influence how I act in my social class group.
- (23) When I don't meet the expectations of my social class group I feel sad.
- (24) I believe that social class is an important issue in my life.
- (25) My peer group has shaped the way I see social class issues around me.

- (26) I need to have the same skills and abilities as others in my social class group.
- (27) I do whatever it takes to meet the “right” people.
- (28) I consider it important to make connections in the right social class groups.
- (29) I am expected to know the right kinds of food, clothing, and music to maintain my social class standing.
- (30) When my friends do not act like others in my social class group, I feel uncomfortable.