A Call for the Conceptual Integration of Opportunity Structures Within School Safety Research

Ron Avi Astor, Pedro Noguera, Edward Fergus, Vivian Gadsden & Rami Benbenishty

To cite this article: Ron Avi Astor, Pedro Noguera, Edward Fergus, Vivian Gadsden & Rami Benbenishty (2021): A Call for the Conceptual Integration of Opportunity Structures Within School Safety Research, School Psychology Review

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1854621

Published online: 21 Jan 2021.
A Call for the Conceptual Integration of Opportunity Structures Within School Safety Research

Ron Avi Astor, Pedro Noguera, Edward Fergus, Vivian Gadsden, and Rami Benbenishty

UCLA; USC; Temple University; University of Pennsylvania; Hebrew University of Jerusalem

ABSTRACT
Few studies explicitly examine how opportunity structures impact school safety, school climate, or bullying. This article applies school-centered ecological theory as a heuristic conceptual framework that links opportunity structures and school safety. Historically, opportunity structures identified how institutional characteristics such as labor conditions, combined with factors such as geographic location, gender, race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and family background, influence the opportunities open to individuals and shape patterns of entering the labor market. In education, the concept has been used when describing systemic racism in educational inequality. Examples are drawn from several bodies of research that have strong implications for future study of these issues. These areas include research on communities and families, creating positive school cultures and climates, and different types of educator bias that restrict opportunities and result in less safe environments. The authors suggest new research that combines school safety, opportunity, and social justice-oriented school reform.

IMPACT STATEMENT
Opportunity gaps based on social injustice often overlap with school safety concerns. Yet most school safety studies and interventions focus on individuals or interpersonal relationships and not on structurally changing opportunity or safety gaps. This article calls for new research, intervention, and policy approaches that jointly address opportunity and school safety gaps. Examples include research on (a) school-community opportunity and safety gaps, (b) low resourced schools’ opportunity and safety gaps, and (c) racially biased classroom interactions that decrease opportunity and increase safety gaps.

A CALL FOR THE CONCEPTUAL INTEGRATION OF OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES IN SCHOOL SAFETY RESEARCH

Background: Opportunity Structures and School Safety

Opportunity Structures
In 1968, British sociologist Ken Roberts proposed opportunity structure theory to help explain successes and failures in the transition from school to work in the post-World War II British economy (Roberts, 1968). This theory identified how institutional structures, such as labor conditions, combined with factors such as geographic location, gender, race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and family background to influence the opportunities open to individuals and shape patterns of entering the labor market. Job opportunities were open for some groups and severely restricted for others. The theory has been expanded to many divergent areas beyond employment, such as legal opportunity structures for LGBT individuals in Costa Rica and Colombia, the social mobility of women in Central Asia, and political opportunities of migrants in Portugal (i.e., Oliveira & Carvalhais, 2017; Urbaeva, 2019; Wilson & Gianella-Malca, 2019).

In education, the concept of opportunity structures includes patterns, options, supports, and access to resources that shape the opportunities of K-12 and college students to achieve good outcomes (Weis et al., 2015). The robust literature on opportunity structures has also documented the vast inequities in opportunity for traditionally oppressed groups across academic areas (Thompson, 2017). Restricted educational opportunity structures are often linked to structural racism, sexism, global migration and xenophobia, and other forms of societal discrimination. Indeed, research indicates that family, community, and regional educational opportunity experiences can
constrain or expand pathways to higher education and vocational options after high school (e.g., Gray et al., 2018; Lynch et al., 2018). To date, discussions of opportunity structures in education focused mainly on academics. Issues of school safety have not been directly included in opportunity structure conversations. In this paper, we make the case for explicitly combining opportunity structures and school safety in theory and studies.

School Safety, Bullying, and Violence
Definitions of school safety, bullying, and school violence have varied over the years. In this article, our definition reflects a consensus among researchers that school safety includes intentional protection from intentional behaviors that aim to harm others on or around school grounds (Astor et al., 2009; Pitner et al., 2015). Caring, supportive, and welcoming environments that are promotional are the ideal safe school environments (Astor & Benbenishty, 2018). We are also guided by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) position that bullying is “part of the larger phenomenon of violence in schools” (AERA, 2013). Although bullying and other forms of school violence are generally the result of individual behaviors, the effects of violence reach outward into schools and surrounding communities (Berkowitz, Iachini, et al., 2017).

Interest in the effects of opportunity structures on academic achievement (and consequently, social mobility) has overlooked the conceptual and practical impact of school safety as a mediator between opportunity structures and educational outcomes. This is unfortunate, because in recent years, the influence of neighborhood social and economic conditions on school safety has moved to the center of discussions about achievement (Gadsden & Dixon-Roman, 2017). The combination of major achievement gaps and school safety concerns has compounded the difficulties youth experience in accessing future opportunity structures, such as higher education (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019). Recently, the joint impact of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted the lack of opportunities due to structural racism and the resulting underresourcing of communities and schools (M. S. Kelly et al., 2020a, 2020b). Unfortunately, few studies explicitly examine how opportunity structures and weaknesses or gaps in those structures relate to school safety, school climate, or bullying.

What Do We Mean by Safety, Opportunity Structures, and Gaps?
Schools play a vital role in creating both opportunity and safety structures, because they are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring learning opportunities, quality teaching, fair treatment, and care of students, including the provision of safe and intellectually stimulating environments. Families, communities, and neighborhoods have a reciprocal relationship with schools to serve as protective factors for students. Educational and social systems could bolster this protective capacity at each systemic level (Noguera, 2003).

Opportunity and safety structures include at least two critical dimensions. The first dimension pertains to a complex nested assortment of variables in each ecological layer that can interact to create a tapestry of opportunities and safety for those living in a given ecological context. The second dimension of opportunity and safety structures is shaped by the systemic patterns of expectations, rules, and guidelines in society or a geographical region that dictate the paths to safety, achievement, and well-being.

The first dimension represents the convergence of nested ecological factors—e.g., family backgrounds, sociopolitical histories, schooling, labor market economies, tax structures, and macro policy surrounding communities and schools. These factors represent societal structures that interact with the social determinants of safety, achievement, and well-being, such as poverty, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, national origin, and place (i.e., neighborhood or community). These macro societal structures leverage the availability of opportunities and safety as determined by the surrounding ecological contexts, creating defined pathways that can be accessed by a limited few.

In the United States and other countries, institutional racism—such as unequal school funding driven mainly by local taxes—solidifies structural inequalities that have been a core source of weak opportunity structures. Weak opportunity or safety structures can lead to major opportunity and safety gaps for students in high-poverty communities and schools, as compared with students in highly resourced communities and schools (Kozol, 2005, 2012). In settings with weak opportunity and safety structures, services, and supports, policymakers have commonly turned to law enforcement measures as a major societal school safety solution (American Psychological Association, 2008). Many communities have few or weak resources, services, normative developmental opportunities, or positive social contexts that facilitate opportunities for students and their families. Low-resourced communities tend to have an abundance of school police, law enforcement, electronic security, and other punitive measures—further limiting opportunity and safety. Like the achievement gap, opportunity and safety gaps between wealthy and low-income regions are large (Berkowitz, Moore, et al., 2017). In the United States, housing and school patterns are highly connected with discrimination, race, ethnicity, and poverty—factors that limit opportunity and contribute to the
The second critical dimension surrounding opportunity and safety structures is that they are shaped by intentional expectations, rules, and guidelines that dictate the path to achievement and well-being. In the United States, these types of rules and expectations surrounding educational and school safety opportunity structures have been shaped by intentional structural racism, a tax system that ensures an unequal distribution of resources, and intentional restrictions to community or regional resources, including access to top-performing schools and school districts. Macro-level policy often reflects systemic racism because these rules and policies also affect housing patterns, the number of nongovernmental organizations aimed at positive youth development, and the existence of parks, recreation, hospitals, supermarkets, sports, and mental health care in neighborhoods, communities, and schools (Miller & Garran, 2017). Low-resourced schools and communities did not become low resourced with few opportunities and low safety by chance. Many of these patterns are purposeful, with policymakers knowing that resources, safety, and opportunities are systemically stacked against students in low-income areas. These societal patterns and pathways ensure that some groups of students and schools receive an abundance of resources and a sense of safety whereas others do not. These policy choices, expectations, and ongoing funding patterns dictate expanded or narrowed opportunities for students in high- or low-resourced school settings. These systemic regional opportunity and safety gaps in communities of color in the United States are well documented in urban planning and public health research (Egan et al., 2008; Jacobs et al., 2009).

Hence, a very comprehensive ecological model of opportunity and safety structures is explored in this paper. Indeed, opportunity structures and systems are nested in each societal ecological layer, meaning that there are many examples and types of opportunity and safety structures that will still need to be described or explicated by researchers and theoreticians. Similarly, these structures encompass many social systems and are present in most aspects of the social ecology.

### Conceptual and Research Nexus of Opportunity and Safety

In this article, we focus on safety and opportunity structures as central dimensions of schooling. Both theoretically and empirically, the school safety and opportunity structure literatures have not been integrated explicitly. They are currently siloed and fragmented literatures that rarely cite each other, rarely overtly making the connection between opportunity structures and safety. This article integrates an ecological school safety conceptual framework with concepts of opportunity structures in each nested ecological environment (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019; R. Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). Multiple social ecological frameworks have been used to examine and explain differential levels of student achievement and the experiences of students in schools (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The current heuristic model differs slightly from other ecologically oriented approaches that place the individual student in the center (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Espelage & Swearer, 2004). The conceptualization presented in this article places the school setting in the center of the heuristic model. Although this may seem like a small conceptual shift, we believe it changes the focus of discussion and research toward more systemic and ecologically oriented patterns affecting safety and opportunity in communities and schools.

We suggest specific directions for future school safety research that also account for and include opportunity structures. First, we present a detailed conceptual framework. Then, we present examples from existing bodies of research that have strong implications for future research on opportunity structures and school safety, including literature on (a) schools, communities, and families that influence schools; (b) positive school cultures and climates in the school organization; and (c) different types of educator bias that likely restrict both safety and opportunities in the school. Many more developed areas of research could be included if space allowed. We chose these three examples because of the obvious potential linkages between safety and opportunity implicit in each research topic. Finally, we suggest future research that would more explicitly link, both empirically and conceptually, school safety, opportunity structures, and social justice-oriented school reform approaches.

### Heuristic Conceptual Model: Ecological Nested Layers of Opportunities and Safety

#### School in the Center of the Ecological Model

Figure 1 presents a heuristic model. The integrative conceptual model positions the school in the center of the social ecological environment and not the individual student (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019). The school is nested in ecological contexts. In this integrated opportunity and safety model, some external influences on the school result from the strength of the safety and opportunity structures ecologically and regionally surrounding the school. Figure 1 has nested circles of the ecology—each social
ecological layer with its own safety and opportunity structures that affect all ecological layers nested in each layer. In Figure 1, they are depicted as overlapping circles surrounding the school. Further, Figure 1 suggests that the school’s internal ecology itself could create opportunity and safety structures, in reaction to or independent of the external ecology, that could be harnessed to improve school safety and student outcomes.

**Opportunity and Safety Structures Exist in Each Nested Ecological Layer**

Societal opportunity and safety structures directly related to systemic racism, discrimination, and insufficient community resources create highly deficient and unequal local opportunity and safety structures that have a strong direct impact on communities that experience poverty and weak social organizational supports (Miller & Garran, 2017). These inequities (i.e., multiple layered opportunity and safety gaps) can be reflected in community violence and high crime (Patton et al., 2012). Weak community safety and opportunity structures on a regional or local level could affect school safety. Some students may arrive to school traumatized by crime and violence in their family or community (Kohli & Lee, 2019; Patton et al., 2012). In some schools, students may face dangerous gang activity on their route between home and school (Kohli & Lee, 2019).

To a certain extent, the trauma-informed schools, wrap-around school services, and community–school mental health movements and literatures attempt to address these systemic community and family issues by advocating for school settings that can help schools deal with or compensate for the high exposure to trauma incurred outside the school (Adelman, 1996; Furman & Jackson, 2002; Maynard et al., 2019). Even so, due to systemic inequities, many low-resource and high-crime neighborhoods may not have organizational, fiscal, or human capacity to provide sustained comprehensive safe environments for normative afterschool activities (such as libraries and parks) or safe routes to and from school, exacerbating students’ feelings of fear and lack of safety (Miller & Garran, 2017; Patton et al., 2012).

Due to U.S. tax structures that are the basis for local funding of education, schools in high-poverty neighborhoods also tend to be part of low-resourced districts and counties that have limited capacity to address opportunity and school safety in depth. It is well documented that high-poverty and high-crime communities also tend to have higher teacher and principal turnover (Simon & Johnson, 2015) and lack funding for sustainable...
implementation of prevention programs (Forman et al., 2009). The inability to provide safe community and school environments, due to restricted capacity and resources, limits social opportunities for students in those schools and communities (Miller & Garran, 2017).

The impact of deficient external opportunity and safety structures on students’ sense of safety and belonging can also be more subtle on school grounds, because educators may not see how students experience larger macro policies that limit their perceptions of opportunities in the community and school. For instance, children of undocumented parents may worry that federal and local governmental systems are collaborating to find and deport them, which can increase students’ anxiety about school and reduce their sense of belonging in school. Anxiety and fear may be seen on school grounds, yet educators may not be fully aware how macro policies affect students unless they ask why students or parents feel unsafe or that they don’t belong at school. According to Ham and Yang (2020), a study of 25 countries found disparities in belonging between nationals and immigrants, but the disparities were smaller in countries with public antidiscrimination campaigns and policies.

The school-centric perspective depicted in Figure 1 promotes an empirical understanding of how systemic organizational and societal forces can shape the school’s opportunity structures and overall safety. Hence, the school organization and resources are also opportunity structures for the students. The school’s internal opportunity and safety structures may be a reflection and extension of the impact of outside opportunity structures.

By contrast, clinical and practice literature on turn-around schools and on effective trauma-informed schools provides examples of how internal resources and positive climate can provide opportunities when external ecological opportunity structures are weak (Adelman, 1996; Astor et al., 2009; Furman & Jackson, 2002; Murphy, 2009; Walkley & Cox, 2013). Other school internal contexts, however, may exacerbate the negative influences of deficient opportunity structures—for instance, by employing harsh punitive disciplinary practices or through educator behaviors that reflect inherent biases toward some groups of students. Hence, how the school itself responds to external opportunity structures becomes a central focus because the school responses could either increase safety or further restrict opportunities for its students.

**Internal School Contexts That Can Mediate or Moderate Outside Influences**

In the model (see Figure 1), all outside ecological contexts and opportunity and safety structures in each ecological layer overflow into the school and influence internal school violence and bullying (arrow a), which in turn, affect social and behavioral outcomes (arrow f) such as academic functioning (e.g., attendance and achievement), emotional well-being (e.g., depression, suicide ideation), risk behaviors (e.g., substance use, risky social behaviors), and prosocial behaviors (e.g., volunteers, responsible bystanders). Outside contexts, however, do not predetermine what happens in school. The school’s internal context helps shape the students’ experiences, perceptions, emotions, and behaviors, both directly and by moderating outside influences.

Two main components of internal contexts that can serve as positive (or negative) internal opportunity structures are school organization and school social climate; both are influenced, at least to some extent, by the external contexts (arrows b1 and b2). For instance, a lack of outside resources may lead to teacher turnover and difficulties in attracting and maintaining experienced leadership. School climate and school organization influence each other (arrow c). Positive school climate with a balance among rules, discipline, and strong emotional support from staff and peers (Gregory, Cornell, et al., 2010) can help buffer external negative influences (arrow d1). Similarly, school organization can create opportunities through school mission, appropriate resources, and effective leadership; this can moderate the negative outside influences resulting from deficient opportunity structures (arrow d2). These internal components can also have a direct impact on school safety (arrows e1 and e2) and other school outcomes. It is important to note that school organization and climate may have yet another way of providing students with positive opportunities—effective school organization and school climate can moderate the effect of school violence on other school outcomes. So, whereas in some schools, students perpetrating violence and bullying are expelled or suspended and therefore, experience negative outcomes, other schools use social justice-oriented disciplinary measures for perpetrators, reducing the impact of violence involvement on outcomes. Similarly, whereas some schools tend to focus on perpetrators only and do not address the needs of victims, other schools support victims and provide them with resources that create opportunities for better outcomes. For instance, schools can create a climate in which LBGTQ students who were bullied by their peers receive consultation. Peer and teacher support can reduce the risk of negative outcomes, such as depression and suicide ideation (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019).

**School Can Affect Outside Ecological Structures**

In this model, although schools are influenced by outside opportunity structures, they can serve as positive opportunity and safety structures not only for their students, but also for their families and the community. The two arching arrows on the right of the model going from the school to
the outside ecological layers show the potential impact of the school on the community, families, and society. Family and community interactions with the school, on school grounds or associated with a common mission for the student, are paramount in shaping a school’s climate and students’ experiences (Berkowitz, Moore, et al., 2017; Siegel et al., 2019). Family and community opportunities that promote healthy development and school success exist outside and inside the school. Some schools are active in linking students and families to enriching and safe activities that strengthen both the school and community. Some schools provide opportunities and safe spaces that provide high-quality and access to community sports programs, music programs, preschool, child care, after-school enrichment programs, technology training, vocational education, special education supports, mental health services, libraries, safe parks, and other cultural programs. These supports on school grounds or linked with the community and family (going in both directions) have a major impact on students’ experiences, well-being, and future (Meyer & Astor, 2002). The availability of many of these resources can affect levels of engagement, investment, and connectedness in the school and radiate out toward the community. Thus, a culturally sensitive school supporting a strong sense of identity among new immigrants can help the students’ families and community feel proud of their identity and heritage (A. Benbenishty & Benbenishty, 2007, 2015).

Outside Organizational Hierarchy Influences
The model positions the school along an organizational hierarchy influenced by district, county, state, and federal levels (on the right side of Figure 1). School positionality in an organizational hierarchy is often neglected by school safety research that focuses mostly on the school and the programs it implements. This is unfortunate because the higher levels in the hierarchy (e.g., school board or school district) can create positive opportunities and support safety in schools, but they can also generate inequities and inadequacies. For instance, if implementation of violence prevention or social and emotional learning programs is dependent on local funding, opportunities for better safety or socioemotional learning may be open for some schools and not for others. Safety research should examine how these organizational hierarchies influence opportunities to enhance school safety.

Importance of Historical Contexts and Time Anchors
Figure 1 also includes the dimension of history and time as a separate context (arrow across the top of the model). Time and history matter. Schools across the globe are currently affected by COVID-19, a pandemic that potentially affects the health and safety of students, teachers, and their families (J. L. Lee et al., 2020; Nierenberg & Pasick, 2020). This clearly influences safety and opportunity in all internal contexts of schools worldwide. Our model indicates that to understand school safety and efforts to prevent bullying and enhance safety, it is essential to examine the historical context and how it affects schools. To illustrate, consider the issue of gender-related violence and related prevention policies. During the past few decades, public responses to gender-based victimization, sexual harassment, and discrimination based on gender identity have changed dramatically (Frye et al., 2019). Society is giving greater attention to the issue of gender discrimination and has become more adamant about responding to gender-based violence.

Clearly, these gender discrimination behaviors have been present in the past, perhaps in even greater magnitude. The change in attention and priorities can only be understood by considering historical shifts in gender roles and definitions. Furthermore, programs and policies that may have been effective in the past need to be revisited and redesigned because they may no longer be acceptable. Another major example of shifting norms concerns calls to defund school police associated with the recent Black Lives Matter (2020) social movement and documented concerns about the role of school police in the school-to-prison pipeline (Mallett, 2015). Social movements have direct effects on safety-related policies such as zero tolerance, school closures in poor neighborhoods, and funding equity patterns (Kupchik & Farina, 2016).

There are many layers of research possible based on Figure 1. We focus on existing bodies of research that could explicitly link opportunity structures with school safety and alter the way school safety is researched in the future. The first example of relevant research examines how two ecological contexts outside the school—the neighborhood and family—influence the opportunity and safety in the school.

EXEMPLAR 1: NEIGHBORHOOD-FAMILY OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL SAFETY

Connections Among the School, Family, and Neighborhood
The opportunity structures created by the intersection of the community–neighborhood and family ecological layers have a strong influence on the functioning and purpose of schools in each location (see Figure 1 for a visual depiction of how the school is influenced by outside ecological layers—the outside circles influence the school organization, climate, and levels of opportunity and safety). In our model,
schools are embedded in multiple contexts, including neighborhoods and communities. The neighborhoods and families in which children and adolescents grow and develop play very influential roles in young people's relationships with violence, access to youth development opportunities, and school engagement. Community poverty, crime, discrimination, and lack of opportunities for education and employment have all been identified as important family and community risk factors for interpersonal violence (Chen & Astor, 2012; Rivara & Le Menestrel, 2016).

Low levels of neighborhood support, resources, and social organization are strongly associated with negative outcomes, including children's opportunities for developmentally appropriate growth activities and involvement in violence and crime (Laub & Lauritsen, 1998). Foster and Brooks-Gunn (2013) studied the combination of several neighborhood characteristics that may influence children's school victimization: residential instability, concentrated disadvantage, and immigrant concentration. They found that neighborhood residential instability (mainly due to low employment opportunity and housing costs) was associated with school victimization, after controlling for family and student characteristics. In addition, the influence of residential family mobility is weaker in places with a higher concentration of immigrants. It is important to note that whereas in the past, neighborhood schools catered to the student population in their immediate surroundings, with the immediate impact on the community and families in those communities, today there are many more charter and magnet schools whose students come from relatively distant communities with vastly disparate opportunity structures and safety contexts. There is a clear need for more studies investigating the independent effects of the school's physical location and the students' home neighborhoods regarding both opportunity and safety.

These opportunity structures external to the school influence children's in-school classroom experiences, engagement in learning, persistence to achieve, and resilience. These type of family factors directly and indirectly affect students' opportunities in schooling and safety. Family engagement influences outcomes via at least three (causal) paths: increased parent and family participation in school and classroom activities, increased parent and family knowledge of the transitions between home and school, and families' impact on children's academic learning, socioemotional development, and health (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019; Gadsden, 2014).

Moreover, research in this area represents the human, social, and cultural capital that parents and families have access to and ways they navigate and negotiate weak opportunity and safety systems. Children's growth and development—and by extension, their achievement—can be viewed as part of an interrelated net of circumstances that includes family composition, levels of education, and membership in historically disenfranchised groups (see Huston & Bentley, 2010).

Available community resources can serve as protective or undermining factors. Neighborhoods may be conceptualized as: (a) sites with specific sociodemographic factors (e.g., racial mix and poverty levels) and physical quality (e.g., housing availability and housing density); (b) perceptions (i.e., individuals' assessments of the quality of a defined space, often differing along gender and racial lines and between parent and child; see Burton & Price-Spratlen, 1999; B. A. Lee & Campbell, 1997); (c) social networks and interpersonal relationships (Wood et al., 1993); and (d) culture, embracing the symbolic meanings and rituals of daily life (see Anderson, 1990; M. P. F. Kelly, 1994).

Family capacity and social capital affect family connectedness with local schools. School leaders' and teachers' perceptions of families and supports offered to families in the community also affect family and school connectedness. Some schools may choose to be an integral part of a neighborhood and see the community as a source of support containing valuable resources, whereas other schools may intentionally extricate themselves from the community to shield the school from influences that threaten safety and undermine opportunity. More research and empirical case examples are needed to examine these issues (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019). School and family-community connections could be critical in both creating and limiting opportunities and overall safety in schools.

Families Efforts to Find Safe and Protective Settings

Protecting and securing children's safety are concerns across settings, socioeconomic classes, and ethnic groups. Parents and families with fiscal capacity often aim to secure the achievement and safety of their children by choosing schools they perceive as being good or safe, often leading to considerable residential and school mobility (Astor et al., 2018; Sharkey, 2013; Sharkey & Sampson, 2010). Some families travel great distances to secure better schools for their children. Families with the least resources often reside in neighborhoods with poor services and low-functioning schools. Low-income families are the most significantly affected, with housing problems ranging from inadequate or crowded housing to housing that costs more than 30% of household income (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2009).

Drawing on data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten, Burkam et al. (2009) found that Black and Latinx children experience the greatest number of moves through third grade. Continuous mobility affects school performance, peer relationships, bullying victimization, and social interactions. Student transience, including the growing
problem of homelessness, contributes to parent and family stress and poses risks to student engagement and learning (see Labella et al., 2016).

In large and smaller low-income metropolitan areas, children and their families are more often faced with the threat of crime, some of which is extremely violent (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019). Recent school closings in urban settings, which often require children to enter neighborhoods considered unsafe, have added to parents’ anxiety in this regard (Gadsden & Dixon-Roman, 2017). Permanent school closures and city, neighborhood, or county fiscal deficits create even larger safety and opportunity gaps (defined as the difference between opportunity and safety for fiscally secure families versus those in poverty) for families. Neighborhood and school safety are also influenced by the frequency and nature of crimes, how crime alters the culture of the neighborhood and schools, the degree to which the school represents a microcosm of neighborhood vulnerability, and parents’ perceptions of the neighborhood (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019). When parents in high-poverty neighborhoods also perceive schools as a threat to their children's achievement, health, and well-being, vital school district and neighborhood resources that are sometimes overburdened or scarce can become inaccessible—creating larger opportunity gaps and more unsafe environments (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019).

**Bridging Family and School Obstacles to Harness the Potential for Change**

Schools could serve not only as safe contexts but also as places where children are inspired to learn. What we know about families, communities, neighborhoods, opportunity structures, and the conditions that promote safety and well-being clearly points to the need for public policies that link families, communities, and students to the pursuit of safety, achievement, and well-being. Although the need for such a connection may seem obvious, most education policies are not focused on this integration. Instead, they are focused on the family, the school, or the community separately (Astor et al., 1999; Berkowitz, Moore, et al., 2017; Siegel et al., 2019).

It is highly likely that problems experienced by the most disadvantaged families also serve as significant barriers to building effective partnerships with schools (Weis et al., 2015). For example, health influenced by safety-related environmental conditions (e.g., lead in water, asbestos in buildings, toxins on or around playgrounds, lack of heat or cooling systems in classrooms) and the presence of neighborhood parks and recreation centers are particularly relevant to students’ safety and opportunities to learn (AERA, 2013). Research has shown that these and other environmental conditions in schools have a direct effect on students’ emotions, behaviors, and academic performance (Kozol, 2005, 2012). Similarly, perceptions of neighborhood safety have a bearing on whether families take advantage of extensions to learning in out-of-school programs and experiences (Astor et al., 1999; Gadsden, 2014; Meyer & Astor, 2002). Fear of crime or a sense of danger can affect enrichment opportunities, friendship groups, and exposure to supports that may provide safety and opportunity during childhood development, such as sports clubs, arts programs, tutoring, and ongoing frequent interactions with local relatives or supports. Community-based opportunity structures have the potential to enhance societal contexts and make it possible for institutions to create access and support for families to be the arbiters of change and facilitators of opportunity. These same ecological opportunity structures that affect the family and schools could also potentially affect school safety. More research is needed to explore these conceptual and theoretical connections among family, community, and school safety and opportunity structures.

It is important to note that research exploring theoretically atypical schools—schools that effectively mediate outside influences and create opportunities—also has the potential to inform the neighborhood, community, and families. A simple example would be real estate values. Safe and enriching schools raise the value of homes and rent in the surrounding neighborhoods and worldwide, are part of real estate agents’ strategies in selling homes (Vivas, 2016). Exceptional schools in low-opportunity ecological contexts can truly change the outside ecological layers and potentially the family as well (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019; A. Benbenishty & Benbenishty, 2007, 2015). In Figure 1, this influence is depicted by the arrows going from the school into the outside ecological layers.

The first example focused on the impact of two outside contexts on school safety and opportunity. The second example focuses on how the school itself can create internal contexts that are effective opportunity structures promoting school safety. Note that in our model, the school both receives influences from outside ecological systems and reacts to those influences. The school can create its own opportunities and safety structures. Exemplar 2 highlights this possibility.

**EXEMPLAR 2: CREATING A SCHOOL CULTURE OF SAFETY AS AN OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE: INTERNAL CONTEXTS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE AND ORGANIZATION**

In the previous sections, we discussed how families embedded in neighborhoods with limited opportunity structures can influence school safety. Our model suggests that the school is not a passive recipient of such outside influences.
As depicted in Figure 1, the internal context of the school, including its culture, climate, organization, and available resources, can serve as both opportunity and safety structures that can help overcome the impact of difficult outside ecological forces and enhance positive ones.

**School Social Climate**

A large body of research indicates that positive school climate is an internal school context that has a major influence on students’ engagement in school, connectedness, and extracurricular opportunities, and also on bullying, violence, safety, and multiple other student- and staff-related outcomes (for an extensive review, see Berkowitz, Moore, et al., 2017).

School climate is a broad, multifaceted concept that involves numerous aspects of the internal contextual and structural elements of a school. The definition of school climate has evolved considerably in the past several decades, and there is still a wide variety of definitions and conceptualizations of climate. Many of these definitions focus on the combination of positive social relations (between the staff and students and among students) in the presence of fair and consistent disciplines and rules. Regardless of the specific definition, ample evidence suggests its positive influences on students’ abilities to connect to opportunities in the school and their experiences of safety (Wang & Degol, 2016).

Positive school climate is associated with higher academic achievement (especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and among marginalized populations), with positive emotional, mental health, physical health, and behavioral outcomes and fewer psychiatric problems for students. School climate also is associated with student engagement in more positive behaviors, such as cooperative learning and respect. Furthermore, positive school climate is associated with greater job satisfaction for teachers, increased work productivity and efficacy, increased staff retention, and decreased reports of burnout. Finally, school climate is associated with fewer discipline referrals and school suspensions and less bullying and other aggressive and violent behaviors in school (Gregory et al., 2011).

Replicated findings regarding associations between climate and student outcomes are often interpreted as indicating that positive school climate causes positive outcomes. A recent study (R. Benbenishty et al., 2016), however, provided evidence that the causal link may be in the reverse order. This school-level cross-lagged analysis of a very large sample of students and schools in California showed that although improvement in school academic performance at one point predicted climate at a later point, climate improvements were not followed by academic improvement. This study needs to be replicated in additional contexts utilizing mixed-method designs to help understand this unexpected set of findings.

Student engagement and belongingness are often considered part of school climate. In our model, we present them as outcomes of other components of climate—social support, fair rules and discipline, and programs and policies intended to improve school climate. This separation provides clues as to how schools may try to enhance students’ engagement and feeling of belongingness to the school by enhancing support and fairness. Further, in our model, we present the two forms of student perceptions of safety—their own safety and how safe the school is—as emanating from the school climate and in interaction with bullying and violence in school (both personal victimization and perpetration and observing peer violence and risk behaviors).

**School Organizational Climate**

Although there is wide consensus that programs and policies are needed to enhance school climate and improve student outcomes, there is also a growing awareness that schools differ significantly in the ways such policies are implemented and the degree to which they prevent violence, enhance safety, and lead to better student outcomes (Wang & Degol, 2016). Policies do not necessarily translate into educators’ practices. Mediating school organizational processes, such as sense making and interpretation of outside policies, influence the ways such policies are translated into school-level polices (Diamond, 2012).

Surprisingly, in our search for empirical studies, we found relatively little on how a school’s organizational characteristics, such as principal leadership, collaboration among school staff members, and a sense of affiliation with the school, play a role in school violence, bullying, and safety (for a similar observation, see Ertesvåg & Roland, 2015).

**School Ideology, Mission, and Purpose**

Policymakers, educators, and parents may differ about the purposes of a safe education and the resulting opportunities a strong and secure education can provide (growth, employment, higher education, skills, etc.; Astor et al., 2016). These differences likely translate into the attention they give to issues related to school violence and safety. Some schools may have a major, if not sole, focus on academic achievement. In such schools, the emphasis may be on creating environments that promote learning and academic achievement. In other schools, the educational mission encompasses and emphasizes other aspects, such as character building,
socioemotional development, and student well-being. Studies and theoretical models rarely include variables or measures that address both opportunity and safety.

**Effect of Security Measures on Safety, Opportunity, and School Culture**

Educators and researchers have expressed concern that the use of metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and armed security guards, in the pursuit of safety, overlooks the need to develop positive relationships between students and the staff. These law enforcement measures could restrict opportunity structures that could support learning and address the social and emotional needs of students (Gregory, Skiba, et al., 2010; Noguera, 1995). Although security measures may be needed in some schools, there is also a need to be aware of how these measures may affect school culture. One of the most common concerns raised by educators in urban schools regards the difficulty they experience maintaining orderly classrooms and safe schools (Gregory, Skiba, et al., 2010). The school’s ability to address these issues could influence both academic opportunities and the safety of teachers and students.

Lack of awareness about the relationship between school culture and security and academic opportunity seems common in many school districts. At several schools in New York and Philadelphia, metal detectors are ubiquitous, and students can be seen lining up for several minutes (sometimes up to an hour) at the start of the school day, waiting to be screened before entering the school (Garver & Noguera, 2015). This is particularly a problem when it is cold or raining. Following interracial violence at South Philadelphia High School, students were required to wait in lines so long that many missed their first class (Garver & Noguera, 2015). Security measures should be handled thoughtfully and with an awareness of how they may affect safety, belonging, and the learning environment.

When armed security guards or police officers are deployed at schools, the likelihood that students will be arrested for offenses previously treated as noncriminal (e.g., fighting, loitering) increases substantially. In her book *Police in the Hallways*, Knowlan (2011) cites examples of students receiving citations from police officers for minor offenses such as roaming the halls or riding a bicycle or skateboard on the sidewalk. Knowlan’s findings are mirrored in empirical research showing increased criminalization of some student behaviors that were traditionally handled through school disciplinary processes (Devlin & Gottfredson, 2018). Such practices can lead to more time out of school, requirements to appear in court, and future ensnarement with the criminal justice system.

Research on school reform has shown that without a concerted effort to transform the culture of schools, other changes (e.g., new curricula, leadership changes, professional development) are generally ineffective in creating lasting change (Bryk et al., 2010; Osher et al., 2010; Sarason, 1996). When students feel a strong sense of school belonging and have access to counselors and teachers who check in with them regularly about their academic and socioemotional needs, they are more likely to engage academically and share with adult educators safety concerns about peers (Berkowitz, Moore, et al., 2017; Bryk & Schneider, 2003). For instance, with trust in place, “snitching” can be reframed from an act of betrayal to one of concern for a classmate at risk. Scholars suggest that this issue of peer trust with adults could be helpful in preventing mass shootings, because often the peer group knows and hears of potential danger before the adults (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019).

Urban school districts are increasingly under pressure to reduce suspensions. When students are not in school, they cannot take advantage of opportunities available in the school to learn and thrive. Awareness of the harmful effects of punitive discipline has increased, particularly since the release of a report by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014) showing that 1 in 4 Black male preschoolers had been suspended. Many schools have struggled in their search for alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline. The use of restorative justice, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and multitiered systems of support has increased in recent years as an alternative to traditional school discipline approaches. When implemented well, such practices can be effective (Losen & Gillespie, 2012), yet many districts do not realize that to implement such policies and practices effectively, changing school culture is essential. To implement restorative approaches well, schools must transform relationships between students and teachers (Fronius et al., 2016). When trust and an investment in student-centered learning are at the core of restorative practices, they are more likely to lead to a safe, orderly, and supportive learning environment (Fronius et al., 2016).

Trust and student-centered learning practices were implemented at Social Justice Humanitas High School (SJHHS), a small pilot school in Los Angeles. Located in a poor community where several gangs operate, the school has not had a fight in more than 7 years. Former principal Jose Navarro explained the school’s approach to safety, describing how the staff has worked to create a culture where students are known and feel supported. All entering ninth-grade students are required to attend orientation 3 days prior to the official start of the school year; 10th through 12 graders report 1 day early. At the orientation, students and the staff participate in activities designed to
get students to share meaningful information about themselves and become familiar with one another. SJHHS students also evaluate their teachers to provide feedback on how to improve teaching and the quality of their relationships with students. Safety at SJHHS is, therefore, the byproduct of a school culture that fosters strong, positive relationships. All students at SJHHS are from low-income backgrounds, more than half do not speak English at home, many are designated English learners, and many more are undocumented and do not live with their biological parents, but more than 95% of them graduate (for more information, see Kohli, 2017).

It is important to recognize that there are alternatives to zero-tolerance policies or hardening school measures (e.g., arming teachers) that, based on evidence from the school-to-prison pipeline literature, likely punish the most disadvantaged students (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019). Security should be embedded in environments and philosophies that support students academically, socially, and psychologically (AERA, 2013; Astor et al., 2013). Strong evidence suggests that when educators actively foster trust between students and educators, these elements can become valuable resources in making schools safer (Astor & Benbenishty, 2018; Astor et al., 2018; Berkowitz, Moore, et al., 2017). Hence, academic opportunity, school discipline, and a sense of being safe are likely conceptually linked. More inquiries exploring the potential connections between academic opportunity and safety measures are needed.

Our model emphasizes the role of the school in mitigating harmful outside negative influences. The previous example focused on school culture, discipline, and students’ and teachers’ trust in supporting in-school opportunity structures. Our third example focuses on another important aspect of the school’s internal culture and climate: how staff members’ perceptions of race either create opportunities and safe classrooms or restrict opportunities and decrease a sense of safety.

**Exemplar 3: Practitioners’ Beliefs on How Race and Ethnicity Affect Educational Opportunities and School Safety**

In our model, the beliefs, actions, and biases of the school staff are represented mainly in the school culture and school organization boxes in Figure 1. The presence or absence of stereotypes and biases in the school climate and organization can either restrict or expand opportunities, but also affect how students understand the school’s purpose and mission (e.g., preparing for college, vocational work, liberal arts education, or democracy). Educator perceptions about a student’s potential and ability affect social network opportunities and safety.

Ethnicity and culture have been important variables in the study of opportunity and school violence. Research from different disciplines indicates that school violence rates and opportunities differ by ethnicity and culture (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019). For example, in the United States, victimization and perpetration rates vary by ethnic background (R. Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Gilreath et al., 2014). This affects the sense of safety, belonging, connectedness, and potential access to enriched resources and services in the school (i.e., AP courses, magnet opportunities, STEM clubs, academic decathlon, etc.; Berkowitz, Moore, et al., 2017; Capp et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2011).

The negative beliefs and practices of school staff members about the students in their schools and the surrounding communities also affect safety, interpersonal discrimination, and academic opportunities. Although prejudice, lower expectations, and restricted opportunities have been researched extensively, they have not been integrated into the school safety literature (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019). But indeed, they could simultaneously restrict social and academic opportunities and reduce safety. These types of beliefs, nested in the school climate section of our model, include interpersonal transactions, but also structural ones in the school organization. For instance, much has been written about tracking in schools. The decision to academically track students in some schools has led to multiple subcultures that affect students’ opportunity and safety—very often connected with the race, ethnicity, nationality, home language, and socioeconomic status of the student (Muller et al., 2010). Lower academic tracks often have greater suspension rates, disciplinary actions, behavioral interventions, and special education referral (Carter & Welner, 2013). The courses offered in lower tracks have fewer college and employment opportunities associated with them (Muller et al., 2010). Students placed in AP or gifted programs tend to experience different opportunity and safety environments than students placed in remedial, special education, alternative school, or noncollege-bound tracks. Studies have shown that social injustice is very much related to placement of Black and Latinx students into more remedial tracks. These tracks have less opportunity and are sometimes less safe (Carter & Welner, 2013; Muller et al., 2010). Some of these choices may feature overt or implicit bias. Clearly, these kinds of interpersonal and structural biases limit opportunity and create less safe climates for Black and Latinx students, often in the same schools with magnet programs or top-level AP courses (Carter & Welner, 2013). In Figure 1, practitioner beliefs exist in the organization and climate of the school and could alter the way school staff members implicitly and explicitly interact based on the students’ race and ethnicity.

Research on practitioner beliefs draws our attention to the conceptual connections among beliefs, educational practices, students’ feelings of discrimination and
alienation, and academic performance (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). More specifically, this interdisciplinary research establishes that specific beliefs frame instructional expectations, intervention determination, and the choice of behavioral supports on which an educator may rely. Similarly, safety beliefs and perceptions of children, their families, and the communities where they reside may influence judgment pertaining to resource allocation, the use of metal detectors, or armed security personnel. These and other decisions and practices have a strong bearing on the capacity of a school and its personnel to address the academic needs and socioemotional development of students. In this section, we focus on three beliefs that have implications for opportunity structures affecting both academics and school safety—racial colorblindness, achievement expectations, and deficit thinking. Teacher racial colorblindness could cause psychological or physical harm to students. Educators may not perceive the harm of bullying involving race and may not intervene when there is clear racially based harassment. This could decrease student safety. Colorblindness could create a classroom culture in which students feel they cannot speak up about their race-related negative experiences (such as harassment or bullying) out of fear of being misunderstood or ignored, thus allowing violence to continue or escalate. These negative outcomes could also affect opportunities students have and take in the classroom.

**Racial Colorblindness**

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) described the pretense of colorblindness as a new form of racial ideology that emerged after the civil rights era. Bonilla-Silva highlighted the following features of a colorblindness ideology: (a) an assumption that the best way to remove racism is to omit race, even when racial disparities are evident; (b) a commitment to treating individuals as individuals rather than recognizing how their social identities influence the way they are treated in everyday life; and (c) a presumption that by focusing on commonalities, individuals will be treated fairly and equally. Researchers who have studied preservice and pretenure teachers have found that White candidates’ colorblindness impairs their efficacy because it limits their ability to identify and respond to inequities (Boutte et al., 2011). In the aggregate, research on colorblindness illustrates that such beliefs minimize the voices of racial and ethnic minorities and downplay discriminatory experiences (Fergus et al., 2014). In turn, colorblindness may also dramatically affect how students feel in their school, regarding both safety and academic opportunities. These potential linkages should be explored by future research.

**Low Expectations**

Decades ago, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) drew attention to the effects of low expectations on students and their academic performance. In addition, group-level expectations may have more impact than individual-level expectations because the group norm perception operates as a gauge for understanding individual student interactions (Agirdag et al., 2013). In the aggregate, research shows that low academic expectations of students can constrict educational performance and access to educational opportunities (Fergus et al., 2014). Similarly, negative expectations also contribute to the adoption of zero-tolerance policies, disproportionate referral of children of color to special education, and overreliance on suspension and expulsion (Skiba et al., 2002). The linkages among low individual group expectations, academic opportunities, and issues of school safety have not been directly explored. Future studies should more carefully examine these connections.

**Deficit Thinking**

Deficit thinking discounts the presence of systemic inequalities as the result of race-based processes, practices, policies, and history. A deficit ideology places fault on a group (e.g., students with disabilities, based on behaviors, or based on gender or ethnicity) for the conditions its members experience, discounting the disadvantages and oppression the group may have experienced. In a large-scale qualitative case study of Texas school districts, researchers identified multiple ways superintendents’ approaches to academic accountability reduced educator and administrator deficit thinking in their schools (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Addressing deficit approaches could increase opportunity and safety gaps at the macro district level and the classroom level. When educators assume that the students they serve come to their educational experience with cultural or intellectual deficits, they may be less likely to address their learning needs (Fergus et al., 2014).

Similar deficit thinking may occur with school safety issues. For example, in schools in low-income communities, some school staff members may assume that students will be prone to violence because of their culture or environment (Astor et al., 1999). Such assumptions could influence the measures schools adopt to address discipline and safety, resulting in a greater likelihood that educators will rely on punitive and exclusionary measures. Future research should explore these types of assumptions.

**Combined Impact of Beliefs on Behavior**

Interdisciplinary research has explored how racial colorblindness, low expectations, and deficit thinking beliefs influence how educators perceive the cognitive and behavioral abilities
of students. James (2012) found that the deficit-oriented perceptions of African Canadian boys, who were viewed as fatherless immigrants, structured how practitioners made educational opportunities and social interactions available. Similarly, an ethnic and racial mismatch between teachers and students appears to correlate with beliefs and expectations about the behavior and intellectual capacity of students. Gershenson et al. (2016) found that Black teachers’ expectations for Black students’ graduation were significantly higher than those of non-Black teachers. The effects of student–teacher racial mismatch on expectations were larger for Black male students than for Black female students. Research on the ethnoracial mismatch between practitioners and students continuously identifies Black students as faring the least well in cognitive and behavioral perceptions by White teachers (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999).

Beliefs alone do not produce disparate outcomes. Active discriminatory behaviors and decisions further determine the effects of racial and ethnic bias on minority students. The pervasive phenomenon of racial minorities, particularly Black boys, being disproportionately referred to special education or subjected to punitive discipline has been attributed to the prevalence of lower instructional expectations. For instance, Downey and Prihess (2004) found that White practitioners were more likely to identify Black student behaviors as problematic. Fergus et al. (2014) found that racial bias, rather than oppositional behavior of Black students, was more likely to result in discipline referrals by White teachers. Other studies found teacher implicit bias with students as early as preschool (Gilliam et al., 2016). Thus, growing empirical evidence connects practitioner beliefs to expectations of students based on race, ethnicity, and cultural difference, contributing to the persistence of disparate outcomes.

Beliefs About the Community

Another area of research on teacher beliefs involves exploration of contextual factors, such as perceptions and the degree of familiarity with racial and ethnic minority populations. More specifically, White teachers’ unfamiliarity with racial and ethnic minority communities influences the instructional strategies they adopt toward student populations that come from communities they regard as violent, pathological, or inferior (Henfield & Washington, 2012). Research also highlights how this absence of familiarity ascribes negative traits to a community (Pittner & Astor, 2008).

Strategies That Minimize Teacher Bias

A growing body of research points to factors and strategies that can attenuate the effect or maintenance of bias-based beliefs, particularly among White practitioners. Stearns et al. (2014) identified ways teachers’ professional learning experiences mitigate the struggle found in the ethnoracial mismatch between White teachers and students. Bias-based beliefs and expectations are minimized when academic information focuses on disconfirming stereotypes (Glock & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2013; Gregory et al., 2016; Watson, 2012).

Although interdisciplinary research on practitioner beliefs and student achievement demonstrates strong linkages affecting student learning, there is also a need to understand how beliefs about race, ethnicity, culture, language, and other demographic variables emerge from a broader societal “water supply” of thought rather than an individual’s choice of beliefs. We theorize that there is a need to explore these belief constructs as elements of a reproduction apparatus that expands and constricts opportunity structures. The beliefs practitioners maintain about race, culture, poverty, and (dis)ability represent dominant ideologies nested in educational systems that support the social and cultural reproduction of inequality (Annamma et al., 2013). Our reading of the overall bodies of research suggests that without concerted efforts to address systemic bias, opportunity structures that promote safety and student achievement could be impaired by educators’ assumptions toward students and the communities where they reside. Future research needs to directly examine the relationships among systemic bias, school safety, and opportunity structures.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we presented research that connected opportunity structure concepts to school safety. We think, however, that it is important to develop additional areas of research that explicitly connect opportunity structure concepts to school safety. As Figure 1 depicts, factors that contribute to opportunity structures sit both outside (e.g., neighborhoods) and inside (e.g., supportive climates that facilitate student learning) schools. Ample research has shown that poverty, racial and gender discrimination, immigrant status, and other salient characteristics of students’ lives are experienced simultaneously, relative to these external and internal factors (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019). We suggest the development of integrated, social justice-oriented school safety theories, analyses, and designs to examine how the absence of opportunity structures related to issues of racism, injustice, equity, and neighborhood poverty affects safety in schools. This could lead to vastly different types of socioecological interventions that address the interconnectedness of opportunity structures and school safety.
Schools are not mere recipients of external ecological influences (Astor & Benbenishty, 1999; Astor et al., 2009). School culture and climate can exacerbate negative outside influences related to opportunity structures (e.g., through discrimination or systemic racial colorblindness) or mitigate the external risk influences (e.g., through positive and supportive climates; R. Benbenishty et al., 2016). New research that combines conceptual opportunity structure and school safety genres from a social justice-oriented approach is critical to advancing new interventions that include both opportunity and safety. Linking research literatures on school safety and social justice school reform would create a more seamless connection with the concept of opportunity structures. For example, could a massive influx of resources and support for the communities surrounding a school improve both academics and school safety? Combined research methods from urban planning, public health, social work, and education could begin to examine these kinds of questions.

As the education research literature suggests, large societal forces, such as systemic underfunding and unequal funding of safety in schools, stand as barriers to school quality and safety. The prevalence and persistence of these issues call for researchers to go beyond quantifying the problem to identifying approaches that lead to change and greater equity. New genres of school safety studies could focus on the growing number of schools that have transformed their approach to discipline and student support (e.g., using restorative justice methods) to expand our understanding of how the safety mission can be integrated into the ethos and vision of a school. School safety research should explore the nexus of opportunity and safety by explicitly examining the relationships between the quality and cultural relevance of the curriculum to the students and parents in a community as well as issues related to safety, power, and place.

For instance, low resources in schools may create community and school spaces and times of the day that are “unowned” and no one’s responsibility to supervise (Astor et al., 1999). Increasing positive youth development opportunities, supervision, and culturally relevant activities in these low-opportunity contexts could create greater equity for students in low-opportunity environments. Therefore, studies focused on identifying geographic contexts and vulnerable places and times in and around the school are needed. Although hundreds, perhaps thousands of articles examined specific aspects of school safety, few have looked at how physical spaces in and around the school intersect with opportunity and safety (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019). These would attend to factors unique to a neighborhood and school and examine the ease with which students and families can travel to and from school (e.g., buses, routes to and from school, bathrooms, hallways, and sports and arts events) or the quality of life in school (e.g., lunch in the cafeteria, recess, field trips, etc.; Meyer & Astor, 2002). Very often, oversight of activities and monitoring of school spaces are the responsibility of school employees who receive the lowest wages and benefits, have little power or recognition in the school, and have minimal school safety or training in socioemotional learning. Understanding the organizational dynamics of supervision and youth empowerment as they pertain to opportunity and safety in those ecological contexts is needed (Astor et al., 2010).

Case studies and large-scale inquiries that focus on schools already promoting social justice and school safety are needed to better understand how these concepts are implemented on the ground. Field research focused on how communities with strong and weak opportunity structures affect school safety could improve theory and research design in the school safety research literature. These studies could explore how some schools create specific new opportunity structures that facilitate student success while considering new genres of school safety evidence-informed interventions. Research on evidence-informed interventions aimed at both safety and opportunity structures could lay the empirical and efficacy groundwork to:

a. Provide research-supported tools and methods for educators, parents, and students to help navigate challenges outside the school walls and aim to increase safety opportunities in the community and school.
b. Effectively pilot, test, and use new methods to orchestrate partnerships, human resources, and needed supports in the school and community.
c. Create a strong research base for evidence-informed safety practices that intentionally link community, college, university, and vocational opportunities for students through integrated school partnerships with community resources outside the school.

An essential part of such a theoretical and research orientation requires moving beyond the focus of an individual
school. It is important to build a strong body of evidence-based procedures and processes that provides a research base for district environments that sustain safety and supportive regional, state, and community opportunity structures. To advance such a theoretical and conceptual agenda, more school safety studies are needed that examine the effects of changing school district hierarchical influences and the policies, resources, leadership orientation, and accountability systems that may reshape school policies and practices (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019; Gadsden & Dixon-Roman, 2017).

Future combined school safety and opportunity research should also examine issues related to the roles of school boards, the availability of material and human resources in the district, and organizational capacity. Such studies are rare in the school safety research literature, even though school boards and school districts are responsible for safety and can create many opportunity structures in the district.

**TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS’ ROLE IN OPPORTUNITY AND SAFETY**

There is a growing movement surrounding trauma-informed schools (Maynard et al., 2019; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). By definition, the trauma-informed school model seeks to infuse the school with trained professionals who respond in a healing, caring, and supportive way (similar to our school climate definition, but with specific trauma-informed methods). This would help students access academic and social opportunities in school and society. However, another set of trauma prevention and intervention strategies, using our model, could prevent the reoccurrence of trauma in the communities, region, and school district by increasing community–school opportunities and providing more safe ecological settings.

Studies that explore opportunity structures and gaps as they intersect with school safety may require research methods that leverage empowerment epistemologies and allow for participant-directed designs. For instance, case studies could exemplify ways to empower students and their families by respectfully soliciting their input on safety and opportunities. Methods that generate ongoing quantitative and qualitative feedback from students, parents, and teachers could provide a local, data-driven basis for culturally relevant school safety practices, welcoming practices, and sources of data-informed opportunities or gaps in any school or school district (Astor & Benbenishty, 2018).

**CONNECTING OPPORTUNITY AND SAFETY STUDIES TO SCHOOL REFORM MODELS**

Future research on school safety opportunity structures should build on longstanding efforts in school reform and emerging discussions in the literature regarding how the school itself can be a site for opportunity. Theoretical conceptualizations of opportunity structures in relation to safety may result in new definitions of the role of schools, the ways school contexts promote learning and safety, and the interactions between the internal characteristics of a school as a site of safety and characteristics of its external context. By conceptually reconsidering schools as not simply located in a community or neighborhood but as part of the community and neighborhood, research designs and methods used in future safety studies may become more contextual and include both safety and opportunity issues.

We strongly recommend comprehensive reviews that cover the disparate school safety literatures that currently implicitly link opportunity structures and school safety so that these many linkages are explicit. Reviews that span the literatures relevant to this integration are beyond the scope of this article. However, synthetic reviews may help researchers in specific areas of school safety (e.g., sexual harassment, crisis intervention, socioemotional learning, school climate, bullying, and school shootings) to make more intricate links to issues of opportunity and safety.

Research on school safety and opportunity structures should guide school reform practices, particularly as this work aims to address structural barriers such as poverty, race, and discrimination manifested in multiple forms. Research on policies will need to include ways to support the increasingly multifaceted and complex demands and expectations placed on schools and provide them with time, space, and expertise to (re)focus their efforts and approaches regarding school safety. In other words, it will demand that researchers begin to conceptually situate our research designs so they match the shifting realities around school safety and opportunity structures. This will likely require a larger conceptualization of the role of schools and communities along with an expansive theoretical and intervention research agenda that enhances opportunity structures in and outside the walls of schools.

**DISCLOSURE**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

**REFERENCES**


AUTHOR BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENTS

Ron Avi Astor, Ph.D., is the Crump Professor of Social Welfare in the School of Public Affairs and in the Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). His work examines the role of the physical, social-organizational and cultural contexts in schools related to different kinds of bullying and school violence (e.g., sexual harassment, cyber bullying, discrimination hate acts, school fights, emotional abuse, weapon use, teacher/child violence). Astor is a fellow of APA, AERA, and SSWR, and an elected member of the National Academy of Education and the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare.

Pedro Noguera, Ph.D., is the Emergy Stoops and Joyce King Stoops Dean of the USC Rossier School of Education. His most recent books are Race, Equity and Education: The Pursuit of Equality in Education 60 Years After Brown (Springer), Excellence Through Equity” (Corwin 2015), and “Schooling for Resilience: Improving the Life Trajectory of African American and Latino Boys” with E. Fergus and M. Martin (Harvard Education Press 2014). In 2013 he was appointed to the Kappa Delta Pi Honor Society and in 2014 he was appointed to the National Academy of Education.

Edward Fergus, Ph.D., is an associate professor of Policy, Organizational, and Leadership Studies at Temple University. His work explores the effects of educational policy and practice as it intersects the lives of populations living in vulnerable conditions. He extrapolates the relationship between discipline codes of conduct, gifted program practice, and academic referral processes and the educational outcomes of low-income and racial/ethnic minority student populations. This work also outlines policy and practice changes in order for schools to develop as protective environments for vulnerable populations. Dr. Fergus consults with state departments of education and the U.S. Department of Justice on disproportionality.

Vivian L. Gadson, Ed.D., is the William T. Carter Professor of Child Development and Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research and scholarly interests focus on learning, literacy, and the elimination of risk to children, parents, and families across the life-course and in marginalized communities. Her research projects examine early childhood development, parenting, and, families; father involvement; social determinants of health and education; children of incarcerated parents; and intergenerational learning. Gadson is former president of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), an AERA Fellow, former coeditor of Educational Researcher, and a member of the National Academy of Education.

Rami Benbenishty, Ph.D., is a Professor Emeritus at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He got his Ph.D. in Social Work and Psychology from the University of Michigan. His main areas of interest are the safety, welfare, and wellbeing of children around the world. He is studying children and youth both in community normative settings, such as schools, and in out of home placements, such as foster homes and residential care. He investigates and tries to improve decision processes that lead to referral to protective services, removal of children from their biological families, and their reunification thereafter.