

The Track to Educational Equality

In 1963, James Baldwin, an African American writer and social critic, denounced America as “a society which spell[s] out with brutal clarity that...[black people are] worthless” and “not expected to aspire to excellence.” Since Baldwin’s writing and the Civil Rights era, America has made great advances toward racial equality, especially in regards to political and social rights. Nevertheless, the United States has not yet eradicated all remnants of inequality, and perhaps the most persistent and glaring issue is the economic disparity between white and black Americans. According to a 2009 survey by Brandeis University’s Institute of Assets and Social Policy, largely due to inequity in college education, income, and employment rates, the median wealth for white families is \$113,149, while the median wealth for black families is only \$5,677 (1). Because high school provides a base for pursuing higher education, quality jobs, and higher employment rates, it is valuable to analyze how inequality in American public high schools disadvantages black people and how such problems can be solved.

Currently, such a problem regarding high school education is the tracking system, or assigning students to certain ability groups and classes based on their past achievement and abilities. According to Roslyn Mickelson and Damien Heath, sociology professors at the University of North Carolina, tracking is a “virtually universal feature of U.S. public schools”; however, the system has faced substantial criticism because students placed in lower level classes often have access fewer learning opportunities and a lower quality education (567). Problematic for black youth specifically, “track placements are strongly correlated with students’ race,” and the system often segregates black students into lower level classes (567). Thus, while the tracking system tends to hinder all students in the lower tracks, the system is especially

detrimental to black students, who are disproportionately placed in lower level classes when compared to white students.

When evaluating the tracking issue, high schools in North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools district (CMS) are valuable cases to study. CMS is considered one of the most successful school districts in creating a balance between the number of black and white students at each school; nevertheless, it still sustains a large achievement gap between black and white students due to its tracking systems, which tend to segregate students on the classroom level (Heath and Mickelson 567). Therefore, analyzing CMS tracking is beneficial because, in addition to tracking being a large issue in the district, each school has an ample representation of both black and white students, so it is easy to study how high school tracking disadvantages black students when compared to their white peers.

In assessing potential changes to high school tracking in attempt to increase educational equality, the question arises, "Should CMS mandate changes in educational tracking systems in order to reduce the achievement gap between black and white high school students?" Analysis through educational, social, and economic lenses found that unfair student placement and lack of mobility within the CMS tracking system augments the education gap by providing a majority of black students with low quality education and fostering low teacher expectations that discourage them from high educational achievement, exacerbating economic inequality.

First, it is important to analyze both the educational value of tracking, as well as what elements of the system disadvantage black students. The ultimate purpose of the tracking system is to benefit students by allowing them to learn at their own pace. Adam Gamoran and Robert Mare, professors of sociology at the University of Wisconsin and the University of California,

Los Angeles, respectively, explain that “a system of academic tracking matches students’ aptitudes with the objectives and learning environments to which they are best suited,” and “in principle...student achievement is higher in a tracked high school system” (1148). Thus, the tracking system is valuable because it allows students to learn and improve with learning levels and environments personalized for their own abilities.

However, in contrast with the intended purpose of the tracking system, or placing students solely according to their academic capabilities, tracking inadvertently provides opportunities for discrimination based on subjectivity. In CMS, instead of “students [being] assigned to ability groups and tracks according to their past achievement and abilities,” students are often placed in tracks “socially constructed by educational decisionmakers” (Heath and Mickelson 569). After analyzing standardized test and end-of-grade (EOG) exam scores in CMS, Mickelson found that black students with similar academic capability to white students still tended to be placed in lower tracks, suggesting that track placement is partially based upon “subjective judgments...influenced by students’ ascribed characteristics of race and family background” (10). Among 8th grade students who scored in the top decile (90-99th percentile) on the CAT, a standardized test administered in middle school, 27.6% of white students and 81.3% of black students were placed into regular English classes, while 72.3% of white students and 18.7% of black students were placed into advanced English courses (9). Also, in 2001, several thousand students, the vast majority of whom were black, were placed in lower level math courses despite having passed or excelled on their EOG math exams in the previous year (10). Thus, CMS is unfairly placing black students into lower tracks, violating the intended role of the tracking system to place students strictly based on their academic proficiency.

Another shortcoming lies in that CMS tracking does not move students into higher level classes as they improve, an essential element of a viable tracking system (Gamoran 6).

According to Gretchen Guiton, a professor of education at the University of Southern California, and Jeannie Oakes, former Presidential Professor in Educational Equity at the University of California, Los Angeles, “schools view students’ abilities, motivation, and aspirations as fixed” and lower level “curriculum aims to accommodate, not alter, student characteristics” (10-11). As a result, the curricula of many lower track classes is limited in its ability to prepare students for transitioning into higher level courses, and tracking especially limits the upward educational mobility of black students, who are disproportionately placed in lower tracks (Heath and Mickelson 569). Therefore, CMS does not aim to improve student ability in lower tracks, and black students are often permanently left with rudimentary curricula throughout high school, leaving them less educated and less prepared for college.

In addition to academic tracking disproportionately leaving black students with a lower quality education than their white counterparts, the racial divide between higher and lower tracks fosters lower expectations for black students among teachers. As explained by Guiton and Oakes, racial discrepancies between tracks can cause teachers to associate different ethnicities with different amounts of capability and determination (15-20). Stephanie Southworth, a sociology professor at the University of North Carolina, and Mickelson assert that CMS tracking and classroom organization have suffered a long history of inequality, with black students more often placed in lower tracks (515). Hence, the longstanding racial inequality in the CMS tracking system has, over time, fostered lower teacher expectations for black students.

Such lower expectations are problematic because they cause black students to continually be disproportionately and unfairly assigned to lower tracks. Kent Butler, a PhD in Educational Psychology at the University of Central California, asserts that the general “assumption that [black students] are ‘predestined’ to fail at academic pursuits” leads to teachers placing them in lower level classes (51). Thus, the longstanding inequality in CMS tracking only makes it more unlikely for teachers to place black students in the higher level classes that would allow them to become better educated and more prepared for college.

Even more concerning, low teacher expectations discourage black students, lessening their motivation and widening the achievement gap further. Kassie Freeman, a professor of Higher Education at Vanderbilt University, explains that, “outside the home, high school teachers...have tremendous influence on channeling students to choose or not to choose college participation” (529). Hence, teachers having little confidence in black students discourages them from higher educational achievement. In addition, low teacher expectations lead to black students “having feelings of dread at attending class, low morale, and a lack of motivation” (Booker et al.¹ 36). Therefore, lack of teacher confidence leads to black students feeling less motivated and more uncomfortable in school. Such feelings lessen their drive to pursue higher level classes and a college education, only augmenting the achievement gap.

The tracking system is leaving black students both less educated and less motivated, and, thus, the system is setting them up for low economic achievement. According to Samuel Brown, Lorenda Naylor, and Heather Wyatt-Nichol, professors in the School of Internal and Public Affairs at the University of Baltimore, “low-tracked students tend to perform at lower levels and

¹ Keonya Booker, James Lyons, and Beverley Pringle are a psychology professor at Johnson C. Smith University, a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of North Carolina, and a principal in the Rochester City School District in New York respectively.

to drop out of school at higher rates than higher-tracked students,” creating “a negative impact on black...education levels” (527). Indeed, white students are much more likely to attend college than black students. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that 72.9% of white people earn at least a Bachelor’s degree, whereas only 10.3% of black people receive the same level of education. The economic consequences of not earning a high school diploma or college degree are explained by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which reports that unemployment is 9% among those who drop out of high school, 6% among those who earn only a high school diploma, and 3.5% among those who earn at least a Bachelor’s degree. Median earnings also dramatically increase with educational attainment: people who dropped out of high school, received a high school diploma, and obtained a Bachelor’s receive median weekly earnings of \$448, \$668, and \$1,101 respectively (“Employment Projections”). Thus, the tracking system negatively impacts black people economically because lower high school tracks, into which black students are disproportionately placed, increase their chances of dropping out of high school and not attending college, leaving them with decreased chances of employment and high wages.

As for a solution, CMS should not simply eliminate tracking, but instead attempt to preserve its educational benefits while minimizing the unfair placement and lack of mobility present in the current system. Jomills Braddock and James McPartland, sociology professors at Florida State University and Johns Hopkins University respectively, explain that tracking is essential for certain subjects, such as mathematics and reading, where “skill levels are determinants to whole class instruction.” Also, Gamoran asserts that, when done on a subject-by-subject basis, tracking is beneficial for students because they have the option to take

lower level classes in subjects where they struggle while still having the opportunity to enroll in higher level courses in subjects where they are strong (6). Thus, it is not optimal to abolish the tracking system, as skills grouping is vital for determining the curriculum of certain classes and tracking benefits students by personalizing their courses to their individual abilities.

However, in order to ensure that black students are no longer unfairly placed, all subjectivity should be removed from track placement decisions, which should be solely based on EOG exam scores. To solve the lack of upward educational mobility for low-achieving students, lower track curricula should be revised to help students improve and potentially transition into higher tracks, and students who gain high test scores at the end of each semester or academic year should be allowed to transition to higher level classes. In order to ease the transition from lower to higher tracks, Carol Burris, the Executive Director of the Network for Public Education Foundation, and Kevin Welner, a researcher for the School of Education at the University of Colorado, found that offering supplementary classes to former low-achieving students helps ease the shock of entering more difficult classes. With such changes to tracking, black students would no longer be unfairly placed in lower level classes and the racial divide would be lessened between higher and lower tracks, decreasing the achievement gap and, over time, remedying the lower teacher expectations for black students and increasing their motivation.

Ultimately, black students are disproportionately suffering from receiving a low quality education in tracked high school classes. Despite the potential benefits of tracking providing a personalized education, the current system fails in that it subjectively places students, does not properly account for student improvement, and fosters low teacher expectations that diminish student morale. Black students are especially harmed because they are often unfairly placed into

lower tracks, causing them to receive a lower quality education, be less prepared for college, and feel socially uncomfortable or inferior at school, which only leads to higher dropout rates and less motivation among black students. The lower educational attainment of black people exacerbates economic inequality and leaves much of the black community in poverty, so improving educational opportunity will better the lives of many black people and their families. As revealed by analyzing CMS, in order to solve problems with tracking, American public high schools should ensure that test scores alone determine track placement, that low-achieving students transition into higher tracks as they improve, and that lower track curricula and supplementary classes actively prepare students for the transition. With such solutions, not only will racial inequality be even further reduced both educationally and economically, but all lower level students currently suffering from the tracking system will receive a fairer and higher quality education.

(Word Count: 2200)

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