What Does Race Have To Do With Getting on the “Right Track?”

Through Their Own Voices: An Analysis of How Tracking Stratifies Students by Race

By

Virginia Riel

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Sociology Department

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Approved:

Dr. Ted Mouw, Thesis Advisor

Dr. Ted Mouw, Reader

Dr. George Noblit, Reader
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Abstract:

Rooted in an extensive history of racial segregation between schools, this research addresses the subsequent stratification within schools that often arises once schools are integrated, through an analysis of tracking and its implications for students in rural high schools. Using a sample of three racially diverse public high schools, this interview and fieldwork based study assesses how tracking stratifies students by race. Although studies have analyzed the permanency of students’ track placements and their differential college readiness, most studies focus exclusively on placement or polarization and have not thoroughly explored how students perceive their track placements, particularly in relation to other tracks. This study fills these gaps by assessing, from students’ own views, their placement into tracks as well as their perceptions of their school experiences, their teachers’ expectations, and their schools’ college-going culture, while also taking into account their plans for the future. Through in-depth interviews with thirty-seven students, with a specific focus on how students are stratified by race, this study acquires a more holistic perspective of why students are placed in their tracks, whether they change tracks, how they perceive their tracks, and how their placements and perceptions impact their plans for and confidence about their futures. This study’s in-depth analysis of the process of tracking, from placement to perception of treatment to plans after high school provides increased insight about how race plays a role in educational opportunity within schools. By exploring tracking from students’ placements and mobility to their perceptions and plans, this study analyzes how the structure of schools stratifies students by race, and it enhances our understanding of the enduring implications of tracking for students, including limited racial diversity, hindered interaction between races, differential encouragement about college, and judgment from higher-tracked groups, as inflexible tracking structures in schools tend to reproduce inequality outside of them.
Introduction:

Tracking has provoked debate in the sociology of education literature about whether the educational practice objectively promotes meritocracy in schools or subjectively arranges students into societal positions based on stratifying criteria. Although the concepts of tracking and ability grouping are often used interchangeably, the term tracking refers more broadly to all ability grouping practices, whether differentiated by distinct track levels or by hierarchical courses such as AP, honors, and standard (Rossell 2002:190). Proponents of tracking view the practice as beneficial in creating academically homogeneous groups of students and thus facilitating teacher instruction, but tracking often streams African American and Latino students into lower tracks in such disproportionate numbers that it raises questions about whether the practice is actually based on external, subjective criteria relating to social background, rather than academic merit or potential. As stated by Karolyn Tyson in her book Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, and Acting White After Brown, “racial differences in achievement do not fully explain racialized tracking” (Tyson 2011:14). African American students are more likely than their white and Asian counterparts to be placed in low tracks, even when their test scores are equal to or better than their classmates (Flores 2007:34). This results in a lower percentage of minority students in college track courses, and it perpetuates racial disparities in academic achievement (Flores 2007:30-37). This racial stratification, or isolation, within schools represents a more overlooked issue that has arisen since schools have been integrated (Rossell 2002:190). Tracking within schools, and the stratification between classes than often results from it, is the focus of this study, particularly in regards to the perspectives of black and white students. If tracking stratifies students by race, streams them into distinct track categories within the school, and polarizes their readiness for college, school experiences, and
academic identities, school structure has implications for students beyond their time in school, and this study further explores those implications in terms of racial stratification in placement into tracks, mobility between them, and treatment within them, from students’ own perspectives.

Although it has been argued that tracking follows a legacy of resistance to school desegregation (Tyson 2011), the practice was originally developed to serve a functional purpose. Tracking emerged in an attempt to accommodate the needs of an increasingly diverse public school student body, tailoring instruction to students’ plans after graduation (Green 1999:236). Tracking was established under a more functional view of schooling—one in which some students prepared for higher education and liberal arts, while others gained vocational skills to prepare them for a job in lieu of college. Proponents of tracking argue that the practice facilitates teacher instruction and thus increases learning and cognitive development (Hallinan 1994:347), as the practice is based on the assumption that homogeneity of academic level between students creates the most effective learning environment (Green 1999:239). Through tracking, students are able to learn at different rates based on their placements, and teachers can more easily accommodate the individual differences of students when they are grouped by ability (Green 1999: 239). However, tracking students by perceived ability is a controversial educational practice due to its subjectivity.

The way that students are grouped by a counselor’s perception of student ability, or by standardized test scores, does not significantly differ from the subjective notions of intelligence that stemmed from IQ testing. In Sociology of Education Today, Jack Demaine refers to tracking as the new IQism, as standardized tests are frequently used to group students into distinct tracks or hierarchical courses based on perceived ability, or intelligence (Demaine 2001:65). As a result, students’ placements in higher-level tracks tend to connote intelligence, or to label
students as possessing superior ability, even though intelligence is widely considered a subjective term, and human knowledge has long been recognized as socially constructed (Brint 1998:205) (Green 1999:240). When schools place students into tracks or ability groups based on standardized tests, they ignore the “extent to which good test results are socially produced” and disregard that “tests measure only certain kinds of intelligence” (Brint 1998:205). Since test scores are products of the classroom environment, labeling of lower-track students as inferior may damage their ability perform, and reliance on test scores to determine student potential overlooks students’ capacity to improve through perseverance. Furthermore, ability is frequently defined in ways that systematically disadvantage certain groups, particularly students with lower socioeconomic status and racial minorities (Demaine 2001:65). While “equal access to curriculum allows all students the opportunity to build upon their base of knowledge” (Green 1999:240), tracking limits them to the confines of their placements. Students who are never given the option of a higher-track, faster-paced course may never be able to compete with the students who have consistently been placed in those course groupings. Although “lower test scores of minority students is sometimes conceptualized as evidence of the minority group’s intellectual inferiority,” (Brint 1998:216), Steven Brint’s Schools and Societies argues that the root cause of racial disparities in test scores is social and structural, exacerbated by tracking’s tendency to sort students in such a way that mimics inequality in society.

While tracking can be used to organize classrooms and facilitate uniformity in teacher instruction, the practice frequently reinforces and accentuates, rather than dismantles and discredits, social inequalities (Brint 1998:224). It typically results in stratification by race and socioeconomic class (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:94). Students of lower socioeconomic status and racial minorities often receive “less instructional time, less demanding and lower-
quality educational materials, and less imaginative teaching than other students” (Brint 1998:225). Although blaming teachers as solely responsible for racial disparities in schools would be unfair, teachers’ low expectations for students placed in lower tracks only perpetuate racial disparities by treating those placements as inferior and permitting those students to fall further behind, as lower expectations can feed a self-fulfilling prophecy for students who are disadvantaged or discriminated against (Brint 1998:225) (Flores 2007:33). According to Alfinio Flores in his article speculating whether racial disparities in test scores are achievement or opportunity gaps, teachers are more likely to attribute racial achievement gaps to personal characteristics rather than structural factors within the school or their own teaching (Flores 2007:33). The test-score achievement gap between white and black students continues to pervade schools, to divide students by race, and to reinforce prejudices and stereotypes relating to race (Flores 2007:30) (Thompson, Warren, and Carter 2004:5). Racial disparities in standardized test scores are one of the main driving forces of this study, as they are often framed as the cause of racial stratification within schools rather than a consequence of the structure of schools, thus justifying those disparities by race. As recommended by Karolyn Tyson in her book about tracking, this study attempts to steer away from a focus on symptoms of the race achievement gap, a focus which only distracts from recognition of the “disease,” which Tyson argues is racialized tracking (Tyson 2011:6). Instead of dwelling on the symptoms of the achievement gap, this study’s holistic analysis of tracking calls attention to the causes of racial disparities in schools.

When students are sorted and placed into tracks without being offered choices for their future, they often become stuck in those pathways, along with their accompanying labels. Therefore, placement is the point of entry for this study (Flores 2007:29-30). Subjective track
placements are only exacerbated by inflexible tracking systems that stream students into permanent groups, accompanied by prestige or stigma depending on whether a student is labeled as low- or high-track. Consequently, these inflexible tracking systems limit students’ abilities to change tracks or take advanced courses in the future (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:99). This study explores how tracking mechanisms are operating in rural high schools, an oft-neglected region, in terms of students’ own perceptions. This interview-based study utilizes three sample schools to provide insight about how tracking systems are instituted and carried out today in rural schools and how they affect students differently by race. Various scholars have assessed tracking within schools along multiple dimensions, which informs this research, but prior studies on tracking have not provided the full story of its implications from students’ own perception of their placements in tracks to their plans after high school.

Regardless of tracking’s intended purpose, this study examines its impact on students by exploring why students are placed in their tracks, whether they change tracks, how they feel about their tracks, and how their placements impact their plans for the future. Since educational attainment is an increasingly decisive determinant in a student’s future (Brint 1998:181), this study is needed to determine how students’ track placements impact their perception of school experiences, teachers’ expectations, and their schools’ college-going culture, as well as their future plans and self-confidence about their futures. It contributes to the research on tracking and ability grouping by acquiring a comprehensive perspective of how tracking impacts students in rural schools and stratifies them by race by incorporating students’ own perspectives. Although different studies have touched on these topics, interviewing students at three racially diverse public high schools with significant test score gaps by race provides increased insight into how tracking racially stratifies students, as well as how tracking operates from placement to post-high
school plans. Overall, this research aims to expand the literature about racial stratification within schools, in context of the view that “there is still much work to be done in the interest of capturing the meaning and consequences of race for educational experiences and outcomes” (O’Connor, Lewis, and Mueller 2007:541), focusing specifically on the educational experiences and perspectives of black and white students.

Literature Review and Theoretical Application:

The Potential to Provide Equal Educational Opportunity

Education is often considered the primary mechanism of ensuring equal opportunity for all, regardless of social background, and equal opportunity exists in schools when all students have the same opportunities to achieve and to choose their futures (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:87). Public education may be viewed, and rightfully so, as the most direct way to achieve a more egalitarian society (Howard 2003:5). As a result, schools play an important role in facilitating or hindering social mobility (Arum, Beattie, & Ford 2011:xiii). However, scholars have long questioned whether schools truly provide avenues of social mobility by presenting opportunities for advancement for all students or merely recreate social inequalities by sorting students into groups based on subjective criteria and by limiting expectations of students in lower tracks (Rowan 1995:34). Although several studies have analyzed educational opportunity in urban high school contexts (Holland and Farmer-Hinton 2009:24) (Howard 2003:4), far fewer have focused on rural schools in particular. Edward Morris highlights the importance of incorporating rural-based studies and experiences into “the already extensive urban-based literature on school inequality,” but his research focuses on the academic gender gap between males and females in rural areas (Morris 2008:728) or teachers’ perceptions of white students
Daniel Lichter significantly points out “America’s rural racial minorities are often geographically and socially isolated from mainstream America and easily forgotten or ignored” (Lichter 2012:4). If rural areas are not ignored, they are oversimplified and linked to assumptions about the “deficiencies in rural life and people,” as discussed by Caitlyn Howley (Howley 2006:64). This study attempts to provide more space for the voices of students in rural high schools and to examine racial stratification within those schools.

Alternative Views of Schools: Meritocracies vs. Vehicles of Social Reproduction

On opposite ends of the theoretical spectrum, schools may be viewed as meritocracies or as vehicles of social reproduction. The concept of meritocracy rests on the notion that providing all students, regardless of social background, with equal educational opportunity would permit only those “most qualified by brains and sweat” to occupy the most advantageous positions in society (Brint 1998:182). In the conceptualization of schools as meritocracies, social rewards and academic accomplishments are ideally distributed based on individual merit, rather than inherited, or undeserved, social advantages and disadvantages based on membership in a particular group (Moore 2004:7). The perception of schools as meritocracies operates under the assumption that students are given equal opportunities to succeed in the classroom environment and to choose their own paths. However, the consistent placement of African American students in lower tracks combined with the prevalence of inflexible tracking systems suggests that the organization within schools may not be as merit-based as we may assume, thus calling into question the view of schools as meritocracies and making way for social reproduction theories.

Social reproduction refers to a theoretical paradigm in which “the supposed fairness of meritocracy does not exist because the schooling system frequently fails to see the potential of those who do not inherit the language, culture, and values of the upper class” (Brint 1998:183).
Some social reproduction theorists argue that schools use tracking as a method of justifying its distribution of students by race (Arum et al. 2011:xv). Brian Rowan utilizes social reproduction theory to raise the question of whether schools encourage social mobility or whether they serve as vehicles for recreating social inequalities (Rowan 1995:34). Social reproduction coincides with the idea of schooling as a sorting process, or a “sorting machine,” that selects students for distinct hierarchical roles in society from a young age (Oakes 2005:205). In this view, tracking has transformed schooling into a sorting and allocating process in which testing acquires significant power in guiding students’ outcomes, as school performance, especially in terms of test scores, matters more than ever from first grade onward (Brint 1998:171) (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:100).

According to Steven Brint’s *Schools and Societies*, the role of schooling in selecting individuals for particular societal positions has increased since the 1930s (1998:171). Many schools utilize testing as a method to track or “stream” students as early as the first grade (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:64). When Alfred Binet developed the first intelligence tests, he recognized the malleability of intelligence and its potential to increase with training, as opposed to being a fixed attribute (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:64). Although it was not Binet’s recommendation to use intelligence tests for mass placements, standardized tests have become widely accepted as mechanisms to sort students into tracks or courses, and some schools still even use the original IQ tests to place students (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:64). Despite the widespread use of standardized testing to measure “ability,” it is incapable of fully grasping a student’s potential because, just as little agreement exists about what qualities and skills constitute *intelligence*, it is equally subjective to define and assess *ability* from a test (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:64). The phrase “ability grouping,” like the concept of intelligence,
connotes genetic or inherent abilities that are natural rather than something over which students have personal control (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:95). Even though ability grouping has superseded intelligence grouping in many schools, the same issues still arise because both rely on forms of testing that are frequently influenced by environmental circumstances, culturally biased, and rooted in an indefinite measurement of intelligence or ability (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:65-66). These tests also fail to assess the degree to which students are capable of improving and persevering to reach their goals. As stated by Kimberly LaPrade, “our society awards the good test takers, but places less value on individual effort and progress” (2011:741). However, as imperfect as these tests may be at measuring student potential, some form of testing will most likely continue in order to maintain the view of schools as meritocracies (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:68).

Functional vs. Conflict Theory

Functional and conflict theories may be contrasted to illustrate the justification for and argument against tracking in schools. Functional theory views inequality as inevitable, thus justifying the tracking system as a method of selecting and allocating people to unequal societal positions (Sadovnik 2011:3) (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:107). In Durkheim’s view, classrooms operate as small societies, or agents of socialization into particular roles in society (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:15). On the contrary, conflict theory asserts that inequality is not inevitable, that it is purposeful, and that it is perpetuated through positions of power (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:108) (Collins 1971:45). Thus, conflict theory refutes the inevitability of societal sorting by acknowledging that tracking works to advantage some students over others and to exacerbate racial and class inequality. Due to conflict theory’s recognition of the potential to reduce structural inequalities, it implies possibilities for change through de-tracking or re-
structuring the system to accommodate all students, regardless of social background (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:107).

Significance of Interaction Theory

Interaction theories are helpful in understanding how tracking impacts students, particularly labeling and exchange theory. Both theories help to explain the impact of ability grouping and differential teacher expectations on students’ achievement, self-concepts, and aspirations (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:21). Labeling theory recognizes the influence of self-fulfilling prophecies in regards to how micro-level interactions with teachers and peers affect students’ self-concepts and perceptions of their abilities (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:20). When students are placed in lower tracks, labeled as lower-track students, and treated as inferior to students in higher tracks, they may internalize those perceptions and perform according to their labels (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:20 & 102). Exchange theory intervenes when labels affect students’ views about the costs and rewards of their actions (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:20): when they do not perceive the opportunity costs of dropping out of high school, it implies that students “knew” that they were not going to college anyway. If this is a common theme among lower-tracked students, it suggests that either their placement or their school faculty’s expectations, or both, caused them to view attending college as unattainable for them (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:102). Therefore, some of the most enduring consequences of tracking lie in its application of labels and its reduction of opportunity costs for students placed in lower tracks. Both of these theories illustrate the impact of structural factors on students, such as tracking’s labels and subsequent expectations for different tracks. Therefore, the structure of schools, in regards to how they sort students, helps to determine students’ social mobility and whether inequalities are reproduced.
Structure of Schools

The structure of schools—in terms of how they organize their students into classrooms—is the primary focus of this study. As suggested in Ballantine and Hammack’s *The Sociology of Education: A Systematic Analysis*, “we must look beyond individual characteristics to the structure of society to find causes of inequality” (2009:66). Although some studies have incorporated rural schools and addressed school-level processes, they often focus on educational spending per student and financial investments in regards to student achievement, rather than how students perceive treatment within schools (Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Crowley 2006:2130). By acquiring Durkheim’s view of classrooms as small societies, we can question how schools’ structures reproduce inequalities (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:15). This structural approach makes room for critical race theory as well, focusing on the classroom and asserting personal student accounts, or “counterstories that challenge the conventional take on integration as a universalizing move to equalize education for all races” (Roithmayr 1999:5). In the view of critical race theory, “the classroom—where knowledge is constructed, organized, produced, and distributed—is a central site for the construction of social and racial power” (Roithmayr 1999:5). Since school structure is the focus of this study, it suggests avenues of intervention for policy and ways to address disparities that cultural arguments, which blame individual behaviors or group customs for particular outcomes, frankly cannot.

A focus on structure bypasses the variability and often over-simplified conceptualization of culture, and it avoids favoring particular cultural practices and norms over others (O’Connor, Lewis, and Mueller 2007:542). Prudence Carter emphasizes the need to surpass cultural arguments and embrace structural explanations in her response to Fordham and Ogbu’s thesis of acting white and oppositional culture (2006:295). Fordham and Ogbu use data from an
ethnographic study of students in a predominantly black high school in Washington, D.C., and they assert that intellectual achievement has become conceived as characteristic of white Americans and that, as a result, black Americans not only doubt their own intellectual ability but they discourage their academically gifted or ambitious black peers from emulating white people, or from “acting white” (Fordham and Ogbru 1986:274). Carter refutes this “acting white” thesis by contending that the academic, social, and cultural experiences of African American and Latino students are dynamic and heterogeneous, which contrasts the monolithic view of minority experiences in Fordham and Ogbru’s cultural explanations (Arum et al. 2011:211).

Although scholars differ in their arguments about why students begin or remain in their tracks, potential for improvement lies in structural arguments about systems, rather than cultural arguments about customs. In “It’s Not ‘A Black Thing:’ Understanding the Burden of Acting White and Other Dilemmas of High Achievement,” Karolyn Tyson, Domini R. Castellino, and William Darity, Jr. critique Fordham and Ogbru’s hypothesis of acting white and oppositional culture (Fordham and Ogbru 1986). In their analysis of North Carolina public schools, Tyson, Castellino, and Darity argue that, although black students were underrepresented in AP and Honors courses statewide, black students did not opt out of these classes because of concerns about how their peers would view their achievement (Tyson et al. 2005:284). Tyson, Castellino, and Darity’s critique of Fordham and Ogbru’s oppositional culture hypothesis effectively displays the inability of cultural arguments to explain differential outcomes by race, and the scholars speculate that emphasis on school structures, rather than culture, would produce more consistent results and enhanced insight (Tyson et al. 2005:291). However, their argument leaves a gap in the debate between cultural and structural explanations by failing to assess how tracking may
contribute to racial disparities between groups of students. The racial stratification that tracking produces is rooted in, and perhaps justified by, an extensive history of racially stratified schools.

**History of Racial Stratification in Education**

Scholars have analyzed the differences between and within schools in regards to the impact of school desegregation. *School Desegregation in the 21st Century* recounts the long, complex, and perpetually controversial story of the relationship between race and education (Rossell, Armor, and Walberg 2002). Prior to the end of the Civil War, enslaved African Americans were largely prohibited from reading or writing. Since less than 500,000 of the approximately 4.5 million African Americans in the U.S. were free in 1860, access to education for African Americans was not truly developed until the Confederacy’s defeat (Raffel 2002:17). The Freedman’s Bureau initiated the first established schools for African Americans, while whites inhabited their own governmentally funded schools (Raffel 2002:18). Although the passage of the 14th amendment in 1868 showed promise for the future of education by instituting equal protection for all citizens under the law, Jim Crow undermined its progress, especially in the South (Raffel 2002:18). Jim Crow laws not only legalized separate public facilities, including schools, but they established a framework through which unequal education could become a norm in American society (Raffel 2002:18). The ruling of the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* hindered any progress toward equal educational opportunity for over half a century, as the decision in *Plessy* segregated blacks and whites under the doctrine of “separate but equal” (Raffel 2002:19). Although the decision pertained to railroad cars, its legacy extended to public schools and endured until the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision struck down the doctrine of “separate but equal” in public education, but massive resistance followed while states used different tactics to
resist the implementation of *Brown* (Raffel 2002:23). In “*Brown* at 50: King’s Dream or Plessy’s Nightmare,” Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee reflect on progress of racial desegregation in schools since the *Brown* decision in 1954 (Orfield and Lee 2004:166). Emphasizing their argument that school desegregation was not inevitable (2004:166), Orfield and Lee assert that public schools in the South have been moving toward re-segregation since the early 1990s due to Supreme Court decisions that have limited continued school desegregation efforts and authorized the return to neighborhood schools (Orfield and Lee 2004:170-171). However, they note the overall progress since *Brown*, acknowledging that “virtually all black students in the Southern and Border states were in completely segregated schools” before *Brown*, while the majority of black students today are in integrated schools, despite the past couple of decades of increasing segregation (Orfield and Lee 2004:171-172).

Although public schools are now more integrated, a subsequent question arises regarding how segregated that classrooms remain, particularly in the oft-neglected or seldom considered rural areas. A shifted focus from the stratification between schools to the stratification within schools reveals a new dilemma: although segregation between schools has improved, the issue of classroom segregation often remains, and racial stratification may exist within the schools (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:134). Extensive emphasis is placed on the desegregation of schools, but “it is only after the schools have been desegregated that anyone notices the classrooms” (Rossell 2002:189). Referred to as a “‘second generation’ desegregation problem,” tracking often segregates students by race and class (Rossell 2002:189). Students in “any given grouping tend to be more homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status and race than are children in the school as a whole” (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:99). Consequently, students in lower tracks are often placed into classrooms with least-qualified teachers and limited access to
textbooks, computers, and science equipment (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:100). Multiple studies focus on tracking within schools, addressing issues of electivity, mobility, and polarity.

**Specific Focuses Within the Literature About Tracking**

**Electivity Into Tracks**

Electivity refers to the way that students are placed into tracks. In “Tracking: From Theory to Practice,” Maureen T. Hallinan argues that electivity impacts the effectiveness and equity of tracking systems (Hallinan 1994:190). The language used to define tracking has come to include sorting and grouping based on perceived ability (LaPrade 2011:742). However, mechanisms of perceived ability, or criteria of electivity, differ depending on the school (Hallinan 1994:190). Most schools have standardized criteria for tracking, which often relies on standardized tests to place students (Ballantine and Hammack 2009:100). However, students may be placed into tracks based on teacher or counselor recommendations, or their own choices. Tyrone C. Howard’s research in urban schools indicates the way in which students refer to being “put” in classes, thus highlighting the influence of counselor discretion (Howard 2003:10). This study aims to discover which method of electivity is operating in rural high schools and how it impacts students’ perceptions of their tracks, school experiences, and treatment from teachers.

**Mobility Between Tracks**

The concept of tracking connotes a degree of permanency, which is problematic, especially if students are being placed in tracks at an early age (LaPrade 2011:742). Once students are placed in particular tracks, those track assignments tend to be permanent (Hallinan 1994:189). However, some studies have shown that track assignments in many high schools are somewhat flexible across and within school years, but adjustments are usually made to accommodate reasons
unrelated to academics, such as participation in extracurricular activities (Hallinan 1994:350). This lack of mobility can have detrimental effects on the self-esteem of students who are placed in lower tracks (Hallinan 1994:189). Maureen T. Hallinan highlights the frequent consequences of inflexible tracking for students, such as lower confidence of students and depressed expectations from teachers and belief in students’ abilities (Hallinan 1994:189). According to Hallinan, students “are likely to view their assignments to lower tracks as evidence that teachers have a low regard for their academic abilities and as an indication that they cannot be successful in school and should not aspire to go to college” (Hallinan 1994:190). Hallinan highlights the importance of flexible tracking in ensuring equal educational opportunity, permitting mobility for students, and reducing the stigma often attached to lower track courses. She identifies lower-track students’ slower growth in achievement as the most detrimental effect of tracking, thus indicating how tracking polarizes students in college readiness (Hallinan 1994:189).

**Polarity of Students in Different Tracks**

Adam Gamoran’s “Is Ability Grouping Equitable?” highlights the way that students in higher tracks or advanced courses are often favored over those in lower tracks or remedial courses, which tends to polarize students toward schooling or to repel students away from it (Gamoran 1992:196). Jeannie Oakes further describes this polarity between tracks by examining the differences between tracks in terms of the concepts and types of information that students are exposed to. She found significant differences in the “kinds of knowledge students in various tracks had access to…differences that could have important implications for the futures of the students involved” (Oakes 2005:205). Oakes also acknowledges the consistent placement of minority students in the bottom groups of the track system (2005:200). This polarity selects students in advanced courses for higher education, as exposure to SAT vocabulary prepares them
for admission to college, while simultaneously excluding students in lower tracks from college preparatory material (Oakes 2005:205). Although it is expected that students within college-bound tracks learn college preparatory material, it is more surprising that students in lower tracks often do not even have exposure to this material (Oakes 2005:203). The discrepancies in curriculum between tracks contribute to students’ limited mobility. As a result, students are not only polarized by their differential readiness for college: they are polarized by differential teacher expectations, as teachers often attribute differential achievement by track level and race to personal characteristics rather than the structure of schools (Flores 2007:33). Therefore, students’ own perceptions of teachers’ expectations and treatment of them reflect the other main focuses of this study, in addition to the way in which students may be favored based on their track level and their race. This study assesses the polarity between students both by track and by race, expanding on the notion that “teachers’ expectations and behaviors toward them [students] have had a real effect on the ways in which their identities are formed” in the school context (Howard 2003:11).

**Synthesis of Literature**

Tracking systems often limit students’ mobility by placing them in the same level of courses across all subjects based on subjective, stratifying criteria and by treating them as static placements (Hallinan 1994:189), which polarize students in their perceptions of school (Gamoran 1992:196) as well as their readiness for college (Oakes 2005:205). Although tracking could be viewed as an objective method of placing students, the way in which it is typically applied seems quite subjective, even prejudicial. Since higher tracks are often favored in terms of curriculum, instruction quality, and access to resources, tracking fosters development and confidence in higher-track students, which is beneficial for them, but this is often achieved at the
expense of students placed in lower tracks, who are disproportionately African American and Latino (Gamoran 1992:195). As a result, tracking often polarizes students into distinct groups, one group recognized as college bound and the other relegated to an ambiguous future. Not only does tracking have polarizing implications for students’ futures; it has implications for their school experiences and thus their views toward schooling as well (Gamoran 1992:196).

By differentiating what students in various tracks learn and failing to expose lower-track students to the same material as those students who have been labeled as advanced or “gifted,” tracking tends to perpetuate the inequality that meritocracies ideally aim to reduce. The disparities in curriculum and treatment between track levels reinforce the limited mobility between tracks, as the omission of college preparatory content from lower track courses denies students of the opportunity to learn the material necessary to move among track levels (Oakes 2005:207). According to Ballantine and Hammack, students placed in higher tracks are taught more and at a faster pace than are those in lower tracks, which also impacts the ability of students in lower tracks to ascend the tracking system (Hammack and Ballantine 2009:97). Though the consequences of tracking may seem intuitive, this study examines whether all students have the opportunity to opt into higher-track courses and whether opportunity is stratified by race.

Prior research is helpful in articulating the stratification that exists within schools and between tracks or courses. However, it does not thoroughly explore how students perceive their track placements, nor does it holistically address the implications of racial stratification, of limited mobility, and of differential exposure to knowledge and concepts for students in terms of their opinions of and feelings toward their own tracks, particularly in relation to other tracks. Although other research, like that of Tyrone C. Howard, attempts to provide space for students’
own perspectives and opinions through studies based in urban high schools (2003:4), this research focuses on student perception in rural high schools—an oft-neglected region in the sociology of education literature and wider society. This study aims to discover how tracking stratifies students in rural high schools and to incorporate students’ perceptions of their tracking placements and of their school experiences in their tracks. This study also examines how students’ track placements affect their perceptions of teachers’ expectations and of their schools’ college-going culture, as well as their plans for the future and their confidence about the future. By focusing on how tracking stratifies students by race and impacts their perceptions of school and their plans for the future, we can look beyond cultural explanations of differential academic achievement between racial groups to identify structural causes of racial disparities, and thus points of intervention for policy.

Methods:

Participants

The research design for this study employs in-depth, semi-structured interviews with thirty-seven students chosen from three rural high schools—Northridge, Westbrook, and East Hills. The informants were male and female students who racially identified as African American, Latino, white, or multiracial, and they represent the honors and advanced placement track, the general education track, and a more ambiguous track that encompasses those students who have taken a few honors classes but do not consider themselves to be in the honors track. Specifically, I interviewed fifteen black students, fifteen white students, four Latino students, and three students who identified as multiracial. The informants were juniors and seniors in high school, so most of them had to obtain parental consent in order to participate in the study.
This study utilizes purposive sampling as the method of selecting students to interview, and these students represent a subset of the student body’s larger population and of their respective tracks. According to Russell K. Schutt’s *Investigating the Social World*, in purposive sampling, participants are selected for a *purpose*, usually due to their unique position (Schutt 2011:157). In this study, the students were chosen due to their position in the tracking system and their race. From each track level, the selected students identified as African American, Latino, mixed, or white because those were the primary racial groups that constituted the three rural high schools, and interviewing several students from each of the schools’ racial groups enrolled in different tracks provided insight about how the implications of tracking vary between racial groups. The Latino populations at these schools were much smaller than the proportion of students who identified as African American or white, so their sample was relatively small.

According to the guidelines of utilizing purposive sampling, informants should be knowledgeable about the situation being studied, willing to share their experiences, and representative of a range of points of view (Schutt 2011:157). This study fulfills these prerequisites by sampling students who could speak about their experiences due to their current positions in the track system, by ensuring that students were comfortable before beginning the interviews and throughout their duration, and by sampling students with diverse racial identifications and differential track placements.

**Measures**

Several variables remain stable throughout this study. All three of the selected schools are racially diverse, are located in a rural area, and have similarly large test score gaps between black and white students. This study assesses the amount of support by counselors and of encouragement from teachers, particularly in terms of their expectations for students and their
contribution to college-going cultures at the schools, which is measured from the perception of the students. This study analyzes students’ perceptions of their tracks, school experiences, and teacher expectations, in addition to students’ plans after high school and confidence about their futures. Therefore, it examines how track structure holistically impacts students, from their placements to their plans.

**Internal Validity**

Participants were chosen from diverse racial groups and different track levels to secure internal validity. In order to reduce measurement errors that are often associated with lack of internal validity, interviews consisted of open-ended questions, with the exception of questions like “do you recall being asked which track you wanted to be placed in,” “do you feel that going to college is a norm at your school,” and “do you feel confident about the future?” Students usually explained their answers to these closed-ended questions, or they would be asked to elaborate further. The open-ended questions allowed students to expand upon their perceptions as thoroughly as they would like as well as additional probing about their responses. Also, open-ended questions provided for interpretive answers and insight about the way that students conceptualize their school experiences in detail. Examples utilized in the interview guide include “how do you feel about your track, particularly in relation to other tracks,” “where do you see yourself in four years,” and “how do your teachers’ expectations affect your academics?” The open-ended, semi-structured nature of the interviews helps to reduce measurement errors, such as idiosyncratic errors, by allowing for follow up explanations of a particular concept. For example, if students did not understand the term *norm* in the question “do you feel that going to college is a norm at your school,” they can clarify its definition by inquiring about its meaning. Interview
questions were constructed to reflect the main processes that this study explores, specifically relating to students’ electivity into tracks, mobility between tracks, and perceptions of tracks, experiences, teacher expectations, and future plans, as well as their confidence about the future.

External Validity

To contribute to the study’s external validity, I interviewed students at three different rural high schools. This study’s findings may not be representative of all rural areas of the southeast United States, or the nation as a whole, but this research represents a case study for how the process of tracking unfolds, which cannot be easily deduced from a survey. It compensates for its lack of representativeness through its depth of analysis and its insight into student perception. Even though the study lacks representativeness across the nation, it is generalizable to other schools in the southeast United States, and possibly the southern part of the nation, through its findings’ applicability to how school structure affects students differently by track placement and by race. Regardless of geographic location, the findings of this study have implications for any students who are tracked in schools.

Reliability

In order to maintain the reliability and consistency of the findings of this study, I asked the same questions to all informants, and I employed multiple questions about a single measure, whether related to placement and mobility or perception and plans for the future. For example, asking students “what is your plan after high school” and “where do you see yourself in four years” both indicate the students’ plans for the future. In regards to placement, I asked students about what kinds of classes they are enrolled in, how they chose their classes, whether their classes were recommended to them and by whom, whether they consider themselves to be in a
particular track, and whether they recall being asked which track they wanted to be placed in; together, these questions provide a thorough overview of how students are placed into tracks. I also asked multiple questions to indicate how students perceive their tracks, school experiences, and teachers’ expectations. Other questions encouraged students to elaborate about the school’s college-going culture and how college is emphasized in classes with teachers and outside of classes with counselors and peers. Since reliability is a prerequisite for measurement validity (Schutt 2011:120), I ensured that a diverse range of participants were chosen, that they all responded to the same questions, and that multiple questions touched on the same measures, which helps to attain consistency.

**Procedures**

I chose the sample schools based on their rural location, racial diversity, and test score gaps between black and white students. I made at least two visits to each of the three schools. During the first visit, I distributed parental consent forms to students who were not eighteen years old. Although the first and third schools only required one additional visit to complete interviews with students, the procedure for selecting students from classes at the second school required me to return three more times to interview students.

The procedure for selecting students varied slightly between schools, depending on their requirements, but the characteristics of samples remained as constant as possible. At the first and third schools, I selected students through the guidance office. At the second school, I visited actual classrooms to recruit students to interview, which enabled me to briefly observe the classrooms. I selected students from various AP, honors, and standard classes in order to assure a sample of students with different track placements. Although the interview process and the characteristics of the sample did not change, the differences in sampling procedure could reflect
a weakness in sampling. It is possible that the students selected through the guidance office were favored by guidance because they could have visited the office more frequently and, as a result, may have more solidified plans for the future than the students pulled directly from classrooms.

The procedure for gaining informed consent depended on whether students had reached eighteen years old and were able to consent to their participation, or whether they were adolescents younger than eighteen years old who needed parental consent to participate in the study. Before interviewing students who were younger than eighteen years old, I ensured that their parental consent forms were signed. I also acquired the students’ own assent to participate in the study. Eighteen-year-old informants were able to sign their own consent to participate. The parental consent forms, adolescent assent forms, and adult consent forms for students eighteen years or older were all approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board. The forms indicated the purpose of the study, the topics that students would be asked to discuss, and the anonymous nature of the study, and they stated that participation was voluntary and could be revoked at any time by withdrawing from the study.

In order to maintain confidentiality, I interviewed students in a private setting, usually a vacant office or computer lab, and I did not document any identifiable information such as names, addresses, phone numbers, or identification numbers. Although I recorded the interviews, the recordings could not be traced back to the informant’s name or identity due to the omission of identifiable information in the process. I also assured students that I would not use their names in documenting the findings of the interviews and explained that pseudonyms, or fictitious names, would replace their own, thus protecting the anonymity of their stories.

Overall, the procedures and research design of this study provide for a detailed inquiry about students’ track placements, school experiences, and teachers’ expectations, as interviews
allow for probing and follow up questions in ways that surveys cannot. Although this study has fewer informants than a survey typically would provide, its methodology allows for a more thorough analysis of tracking within schools and for a deeper perspective of why students are placed into tracks, how they feel about them, whether they change tracks, how their tracks impact their plans after high school, in addition to how placements, perceptions, and plans are stratified by race and by track levels.

Results:

These results reflect interpretive conclusions drawn from interviews with thirty-seven students at three rural high schools—Westbrook, Northridge, and East Hills. Although there have been attempts to de-track students across the nation and an increased hesitancy to use the term tracking in schools, remnants of tracking and indicators of stratification between tracks remain, particularly in the rural areas where this study is based. The findings of this study reveal that students differed in their perception of their tracks, their teachers’ expectations, and their schools’ college-going cultures between tracks and by race. However, the school with the most flexible tracking structure, Westbrook High School, seemed to mitigate disparities in student perceptions of their teachers’ expectations and their school’s college going culture between tracks, but disparities between students’ perceptions by race remained, regardless of track level. Stratification between tracks has implications for all students, especially those who tend to be disproportionately placed in lower tracks without being given options for their futures, and stratification between students by race has implications beyond students’ time in classrooms, as contact between young people in rural areas is often limited to school-oriented activities.
Since administrators have shifted away from use of the term tracking in schools, tracks are now more nuanced, and students’ conceptualization of their track positions depends on which classes that they take. However, a hierarchy of courses remains in these schools, and the effects of tracking appear to be as consequential as ever for students, regardless of its nomenclature. Students in the lower track who had taken more standard core classes and vocational-oriented classes, such as those related to nursing or cosmetology, tended to identify more with their career pathway as their track, while the students in the highest-tracked group at each school consistently referred to themselves as high track, upper level, honors, advanced, gifted, overachievers, or college bound. These labels are symbolically powerful, arguably conveying impacting messages about superiority and inferiority between students.

Despite the shift away from tracking as a formal system, it is evident that counselors continue to have discretion over the classes that students take by placing them where the counselors see they best fit, particularly at Northridge and East Hills. This system of placement appears to create racial segregation between classes, or a disproportionate amount of African American students in lower track and elective courses, even at East Hills, a school with a majority black student body population. While several white students at Northridge High School indicated that they were pushed by counselors to “just try out” AP courses for a week, none of the black students interviewed at Northridge recalled being asked which track they wanted to be placed in, whether they wanted to be considered for AP courses, or whether they were willing to “try out” advanced classes. Various black students at East Hills indicated their struggle to even enroll in the classes they needed or desired to take, as counselors appeared to make decisions about placement on a case-by-case basis.
Electivity: How Are Students Placed?

“I really want to be an OB-GYN but hair and nails, that stuff *still* I like, and that’s something that, you know, if I knew how to do that I mean that can still make me money. *But I really want to be an OB-GYN*…I came from a whole other county and when I was in middle school I made all A’s. The school that I was going to, the way it was set up, if you kept a certain grade all year you could go straight into honors classes, so I had signed up for all honors classes. So when I came up here [to register for high school classes] I thought I could be placed in all honors classes, honors math, history, all of that, because I did good in middle school, but when I got here I was told that I could not be placed in any honors classes really because of the test scores that I made on my EOGs in middle school… She [the guidance counselor] would not place me in any honors classes.”

–Felicia Powell, black lower-tracked student, East Hills High School

On multiple occasions at each of the three schools, students indicated that their counselors just “put” them into honors courses or placed them in AP courses to “just try it for a day.” This seemed to be a trend that occurred, regardless of race, at Westbrook, but it appeared to be more racially selective at Northridge. While Corina Brady—a student who described being “put” in an honors class at Westbrook High School—was black, as were many higher-tracked students at Westbrook, Casey Hamilton—a white student at Northridge who described that her guidance counselor placed her in AP classes to try for the day—took advanced classes that were almost entirely white, with the occasional exception of one black female who enrolled in some of the AP courses with the “group,” as the higher-tracked students described themselves at Northridge. According to Casey Hamilton, her guidance counselor told she and her fellow classmates that “she believed in us and that we could do it,” and Casey insisted that she “still didn’t want to take them [the AP courses].” However, her counselor pushed her to “just try it for a day and if you don’t like it then we can take you out. Just try it.” Each of the seven white AP students interviewed for this study at Northridge conveyed a similar message about their counselor pushing them to take advanced courses. Despite their interest in school and desire to
attend good colleges, none of the black students interviewed at Northridge, or East Hills, conveyed similar messages about course enrollment. Instead, they conveyed a very different message: counselors and teachers rarely encouraged them to enroll in advanced classes.

The influence of counselor preference in students’ course enrollments was apparent across each of the three rural high schools. While black students at Northridge did not perceive as much encouragement or “push” to take honors and advanced placement classes, black students at East Hills perceived difficulty enrolling in honors courses, which was the highest level of courses offered at the school. For example, Patricia Harris—a black female student at East Hills who took honors classes and planned to pursue a career in Pharmacy—was placed in a construction vocational course and a physical education course, despite her desire to take upper-level classes. She described the situation as “there was one point in time where they messed my schedule up completely, and I had to go to guidance and tell them, you know, ‘I can’t do this because I need this class to graduate.’” When I asked her why she was put in those classes, she responded “I guess they just kind of threw you in there…I went up to Guidance and I told them, like, I don’t need these classes, and they did, they took me out and they put me in correct classes that I needed.” Although this student was able to correct her wrongful placements in elective classes that she didn’t need, presumably because she was a sophomore at the time and considered to be an honors student, other black students at East Hills reported being prevented from taking honors courses all together: another black female student named Felicia Powell—who transferred to East Hills from another school district as a freshman—was barred from enrolling in honors courses due to her middle school end-of-grade test scores. However, a Board of Education member in the county in which East Hills is located clarified that test scores are not determining factors in placement and that counselors can “use their judgment.” Felicia further
elaborated about how her initial placement in lower-track courses in her first year of high school prevented her from taking honors English until tenth grade, reflecting that “then when I got into cosmetology it kind of made it hard because they only offered it at a certain time, so I just said I’ll just go with the regular English.” Felicia indicated that she postponed her career plan to become an OB-GYN in favor of cosmetology, a track that she was able to pursue in lieu of honors courses. Felicia’s account displays the way in which electivity into tracks can impact the trajectory of students’ coursework and plans. Tracking systems with rigid, yet subjective, methods of electivity are only exacerbated by limited mobility between tracks.

**Mobility: Do Students Move Between Tracks?**

Interviewer: “Do you anticipate any movement between tracks?”

Student: “I think I’m pretty much set. I have had a path since I was a freshman, and I am staying on that path.”

-Grace Pritchard, white higher-tracked student, Northridge High School

Most higher tracked students interviewed at Northridge, whose classes were entirely or almost entirely white, reflected that they just “knew” they were going to college, that they had not changed tracks during high school, and that they anticipated staying in the same track, which they considered to be the more favorable and prestigious pathway. When asked if these students anticipated staying on the same track until graduation, most of them responded with an emphatic “yes, of course,” and all responded affirmatively. Lower tracked students at Northridge conveyed little movement between tracks as well, though their career plans seemed to have evolved over time between nursing, culinary arts, and military.

Students rarely reported changing tracks at East Hills High School either, regardless of track level. However, students at East Hills were more likely to take a range of honors, standard, and elective courses, while the higher-track students at Northridge only enrolled in core classes
at the highest level available, usually AP, and lower-track students at Northridge enrolled exclusively in standard courses. The students at East Hills who tended to change tracks were those who were choosing between military and college or were trying to take more honors courses in order to get into a good college. For example, Lorie Lawson—a black student at East Hills—explained that she was “trying to go on a college track,” though she expressed hesitation about being on the highest track. Joseph Stephens—a white student at East Hills—wavered between honors level courses and agricultural and automotive related electives. He described how he felt that his electives “help him in terms of getting a job after high school and other classes help him get into college.” Therefore, he seemed to be open to the possibility of not attending college, while simultaneously preparing for admission.

Students at Westbrook High School had the most mobility between tracks, as more students indicated that they changed tracks compared to Northridge and East Hills. While many of the higher tracked students enrolled in honors courses also described that they always knew they were going to college and that they had always taken honors courses throughout high school, other higher tracked students conveyed that they had alternated tracks depending on their shifting interests. Corina Brady—a black higher tracked student at Westbrook—stated “I’ve always had honors classes throughout my whole high school…ever since I was little I said I was going to go to college, so I just stuck with that.” However, another black student at Westbrook named Melanie Scott described that she first chose to take elective courses to align with her goal to join the military, then she changed to a health-oriented focus in order to pursue nursing, taking upper level science courses instead of JROTC. When asked if she anticipated further movement, she indicated that she “might just go into the military” after high school, even though she was planning to go to college and preparing for a health-oriented career. Furthermore, Cindy Porter—
a Latino student at Westbrook—described herself as being “stuck in between” tracks and still
deciding whether to pursue honors courses or her CTE arts pathway. She elaborated, “towards
the end of my sophomore year, I changed to instead of doing arts started doing nursing.” These
accounts convey the flexibility of tracking at Westbrook High School.

Polarity: How Are Placements and Perceptions Stratified?

“I think that the students in the AP classes are a little more motivated than the other students…in our AP classes,
there are not as many African Americans in there. They are the standard group.”

-Casey Hamilton, white higher-tracked student, Northridge High School

Despite efforts to de-track students through the development of a college-ready, common
core curriculum, students continue to be tracked through their placement in hierarchical courses
in racially stratifying ways. Even though many students did not feel that they were a part of a
track, they often enrolled exclusively in AP, honors, or standard classes at Northridge, without
much overlap. There were a few exceptions of students who took some of both, but students’
perceptions differed between those in higher-level and lower-level courses. Westbrook High
School, the school with the most flexible tracking system that—from the students’
opinions—provided ample support from the guidance office to the classroom, seemed to
mitigate the polarity between tracks. However, racial disparities in perception were still
pronounced, in terms of their perception of their teachers’ expectations and treatment of them.
These disparities by race were evident at Northridge and East Hills High Schools as well.

Perception of Own Tracks: Awareness and Teacher Interaction

Students in higher track courses tended to be more aware of their position in the track
system. When conceptualizing her academic identity, Eva Hobson—a white female higher
tracked student at Northridge—described herself as “on the higher scale, near the top…confident
about being on the higher track.” When asked if she considered herself to be in a particular track, another white female higher tracked student at Northridge who only took AP classes, Casey Hamilton, indicated that she felt part of a track and that “our teachers don’t separate us into sections, but we kind of do that ourselves. People do good on tests, and others don’t and we say ‘she’s smart’…there’s a division.” These account reveal the awareness of tracking position that was prevalent among the vast majority of higher track students, especially at Northridge, and they also convey the division between those who are classified as higher-track and lower-track.

Lower-track students tended to conceptualize their tracks as their career goals or CTE pathways, such as nursing or auto-mechanics, rather than the level of classes they were enrolled in. Emma Burbank—a black student at East Hills who took both honors and standard courses—conceptualized her track as nursing. When asked about perception of her own track, she said “I think it’s cool…I want to be a nurse so I’ll never run out of a job because people stay sick, and I like kids so it’s working for me pretty well.” Some lower tracked students seemed excited about their pathways; others expressed confusion about how they even ended up in their CTE pathways. This was evident from an interview with a white female student at East Hills named Eleanor Sigmon, who stated that her horticulture pathway “has nothing to do with what I want to do,” to become a nurse. When I asked her how she ended up in the horticulture, pathway, she said “they just put me in it.” Tracking appears to create an information gap in which higher-track students become aware of their track position and are reminded of its superiority, while lower-track students are streamed toward CTE distinctions, or more career-oriented pathways.

Black students at Northridge High School tended to be less aware of which track they were in or how they got there. This was common, though less obvious, at the other two schools as well. Jason Ballard—a black male student at Northridge who had mostly taken standard
classes—described that he was not sure about his track. He had taken one honors course in history, and he said that he liked the course, noting “the teacher was good; he broke it down so you could understand it.” When he was asked if he noticed any differences between the standard and honors classes, he said “to me, I feel like it was pretty much the same—to some people it might be different.” Despite his ability to handle this honors class, when asked if anyone had encouraged him to take more honors classes, he stated “No. My friends have; they say, ‘you should take honors.’” Jason attends a high school whose AP classes are almost always entirely white, with the exception of one black female student who occasionally takes the advanced classes. However, even though he claims to enjoy his classes and try his best at everything “whatever the curriculum is,” he was not encouraged to take more honors classes, much less AP courses, by teachers or counselors. Similarly, Valerie Melvin—another black student at Northridge—had not taken any honors classes because she worried about how she would perform in them, a concern comparable to the worry of Casey Hamilton, a white student at the same school who was put in AP courses by her counselor and instructed to try them out. However, unlike Casey, Valerie was never just placed in honors classes, much less advanced placement, and she was unaware of her track or pathway. Although Valerie indicated, when asked if anyone encouraged her to try honors classes, that “our counselor asked us if we want to take them or not,” being asked whether one would like to take classes is not the same as being put in them and told to try them out by a guidance counselor.

Black students also tended have more ambivalent perceptions of teacher support and less personal interactions with teachers than white students, but this often—though not always—coincided with track level since tracks tended to be stratified by race. While white students at Northridge and East Hills indicated that teachers often approached them, black and mixed race
students suggested that teachers would help students plan for college, but only if students approached them with their concerns. According to Casey Hamilton—a white higher tracked student at Northridge—“teachers will come to you if you don’t understand something; they will come to you and ask if you need help.” Additionally, higher tracked white students at Northridge conveyed that they had a personal connection with their teachers. For example, Gregory Horne asserted that his teachers “like to interact with you one on one.” Similarly, another higher tracked white student at Northridge, Eva Hobson, stated “a lot of my teachers are good at one on ones, getting to know us, and setting aside time…a lot of my teachers know me more on a personal level.” Linda Granger—yet another white higher tracked student at Northridge—corroborated other white students’ perceptions of teacher interaction, asserting that “teachers really know us, so they can help us out.” Many of these students’ statements implied a close connection between teachers and students, as Grace Pritchard—a higher tracked white student at Northridge—stated “the teachers really do care about us here…they will take you to the side and ask if there is anything they can do to help you out…it’s like a big family here.” This view contrasted the perceptions of black students.

Black students’ perceptions of teacher interactions and encouragement tended to be less personal and optimistic. In discussing her interactions with teachers, Valerie Melvin—a black student at Northridge—indicated that “some teachers just don’t care, but some do…with my English class, we just had our teacher leave. Now we have a new teacher. I don’t understand why the teacher did not finish the semester before she left…it makes me feel like she didn’t care or something.” The recurring notion conveyed by black students that teachers “don’t care” is strikingly similar to Tyrone C. Howard’s findings in an urban high school, in which a black student explained “it was like these teachers think that just because we’re Black kids from the
ghetto that we can’t learn anything” (Howard 2003:10). However, unlike Howard’s finding, none of the black students interviewed in this study connected their perceived treatment to race. The racial disparity in perception of teacher interaction could possibly be the result of differential tracks as well, since black students were largely excluded from the higher track at Northridge. Contrary to Eva Hobson’s assertion about interaction with her teachers on a personal level, Glenda Lofton—a white and Latino female who took both honors and standard courses, representing a more ambiguous track—asserted that “teachers here don’t try to get on a personal level with the students.” Lofton’s quote provides insight about how differential perception of teacher interaction may be explained by stratification between higher and lower tracked courses.

Black students’ perceptions of teacher interactions at East Hills were also not very personal. While elaborating on her interactions with teachers, Evelyn Newkirk—a black student at East Hills who only took honors classes and made straight A’s—discussed that teachers “can be helpful” if you ask them about school or college, but she definitively stated that “but them just telling us, no.” However, rather than taking personally her lack of closeness with teachers, she attributed it to them not wanting to push students or make them feel uncomfortable. Similarly, another student at East Hills named Donovan Ross—a half black-half white student who had taken several honors classes and planned to graduate early and go into the military—explained that teachers “don’t come to you one-on-one because they don’t want to inflict your decision,” referring to students’ decisions about the future. Every black student who was interviewed had an alternative explanation of their teachers’ treatment of them, an explanation unrelated to race. Even when Evelyn had a negative encounter with an elective course teacher, who did not know her as a student, gave her a less-than-satisfactory grade on her progress report that did not match her coursework grades, and accused Evelyn of being talkative and having an attitude, she was
clearly reluctant to connect the incident to race. Though Evelyn vaguely implied that it may have been the color of her skin that motivated the negative encounter, she did not give much weight to that possibility. This tendency to discount race recurred at each of the three schools.

Despite the overwhelmingly racialized results of this study, these issues—like most aspects of the social world—are nuanced, and the answers are not always starkly black-and-white. For example, one lower-track black student at Northridge conveyed positive perceptions of teacher support and interaction, like her higher-track white peers: Jillian Caldwell felt that teachers “really care,” “know what we can do and what we’re capable of,” and have high expectations for students. The black and white binary is further complicated by the accounts of Latino students at each of the three schools, who similarly indicated their perceived distance from teachers due to their teachers’ familial connections with other students. Considered in tandem and individually, Latino students conveyed feeling like outsiders in regards to interactions with teachers. Considering the increasing populations of Latino immigrants in rural areas (Lichter 2012:4), a focus on Latino students and their school experiences deserves further exploration.

**Perception of Other Tracks: Teacher Expectations and Racial Diversity**

Students’ perceptions of other tracks revealed the differences between the “standard” or “college ready” track and the “honors” or “advanced” track, both in terms of teachers’ expectations and racial composition. According to Joseph Stephens—a white student at East Hills who had taken both honors and standard classes—“with the honors classes they [teachers] expect more from you and expect you to do more work and expect higher grades from you, but with the regular classes most of them just don’t care what you do…the teachers’ expectations aren’t as high.” Jillian Caldwell—a black female student at Northridge—conveyed a similar message about teacher expectations between honors and standard courses: she said “I feel like
the teachers expect more out of honors students…the teachers have expectations for standard students but more for honors students because they’re honors.” This quote illustrates the degree to which students are labeled because of the classes that they take, implying that the courses in which they enroll ascribe them to a particular status or level of intelligence and capability. According to Casey Hamilton—a higher tracked white student at Northridge—“now that we are in AP classes, teachers expect us to do well because we have the potential to.” Higher tracked students’ language usage implied a preferential treatment of AP students by teachers, as Christine Jordan—another higher tracked white student—noted that her AP Calculus teacher “has helped us every day after school this week getting ready for the SAT on Saturday…They [teachers] really know us.” Overall, these accounts indicate that teacher expectations differ between course levels, and they reveal differential treatment from teachers depending on students’ track placements.

It was evident from interviews with students across the three rural high schools that standard or college-ready track courses were much more racially diverse than advanced placement or honors courses. Haley Canter—a lower tracked black student at Northridge who took standard courses—stated “I feel like it’s an equal amount of the same race in all my classes…it’s white, black, and Hispanic.” Grace Pritchard—a white student at Northridge—explained the difference in racial diversity between her Chorus elective class and her three AP classes: while her AP classes contained “generally the same people” since “there are only a few people that take one AP class,” her Chorus class encompassed “football players, cheerleaders, people that are good at math; that class [Chorus] is probably the most diverse. All of the tracks come together in that one big class.” This quote illustrates the diversity of elective classes, where students are more equally represented by race. Advanced placement classes at Northridge were entirely white, with the
occasional exception of one black female. A white student named Casey Hamilton in the higher tracked, AP group described African Americans as being “the standard group.” Casey conveyed the racial diversity of her classes in the following quote: “racially wise, we do have two or three African Americans who are really smart and are in there with us. In Chemistry, there are no blacks. There is one in Calculus. In History and English, we have one. Those few are the only ones who want to stay with our group and our friends.” This quote conveys the exclusivity associated with higher tracked students at Northridge.

White students even outnumber black students in honors courses at East Hills, a school in which black students constitute the majority of the student body. “Honors” is the highest level of courses offered at East Hills. Patricia Harris—a black student at East Hills who took only honors classes—described her classes as “most of it is, you know, white and Caucasian. I mean every once in a while you get a few black people.” She further elaborated “I’m not trying to be funny or anything, but most classes I’ve ever been in is predominantly white.” Felicia Powell—another black student at East Hills—similarly described her honors class in tenth grade as having “more Caucasian kids in there, and it was only three to four African Americans in there.” Black students’ perceptions about the racial composition of honors courses at East Hills were corroborated by white students as well, which also perceived their honors classes as predominantly white. Joseph Stephens—a white male student who takes both honors and auto-mechanics courses—explained that “in the honors classes it’s mostly the white children and not many black people, and in the regular classes it’s more of the black people and all that.” Rachel Storms—another white student at East Hills—described her classes as “pretty mixed up” racially, but she was enrolled in two elective courses, one nursing course, and only one honors course. Students at Westbrook conveyed that honors courses were more diverse, but they still did
not have many Hispanic students overall. Cindy Porter—a Hispanic honors student at Westbrook—acknowledged that, “there’s not many Hispanics in the school,” a finding that was paralleled at each of the three schools. These accounts are significant to understanding how tracking works from placement to plans after high school because black students’ underrepresentation in honors and advanced courses, even at majority black schools, perpetuates the achievement gap between white and nonwhite students that continues to pervade schools (Booker 2006:2).

**Westbrook: The Impact of Flexible Tracking Structures in Schools**

Westbrook High School represents the potential of a flexible tracking system to mitigate disparities in students’ perceptions between track levels, as students were elected into tracks and moved between them more objectively and fluidly. As a result, classes were racially diverse regardless of course level, including standard, honors, and advanced classes alike. However, Westbrook also conveys the continued significance of race in schools because, even though the classes were more diverse and stratification between tracks was reduced, perceptions of teacher expectations and treatment varied between black and white students. Corina Brady—a black higher tracked student at Westbrook—conveyed that her teachers “don’t give you like high expectations, well not—they don’t personally tell me…some of these teachers, they don’t care. They just teach to teach. I think they throw it at us: ‘you got to go to college! You got to go to college! But I don’t think they really like emphasize it as, you know, like they should.” Andy Reto—a lower tracked black student who took mostly standard classes and one honors class—also had ambivalent perceptions of teacher support and expectations. Andy described how, though a few of his teachers believe in him, “one teacher, he is like, he makes it seem like I’m the bad guy, you know, like I’m a bad student or whatever, but like I’m not…every day I go in
that class he, it’s like he points me out and just watches me…like I have that scarlet letter on my head.” Despite his explanation of this teacher’s treatment of him, Andy did not even slightly allude to the possibility of race playing a role in his being singled out. The accounts of these two black students, Corina and Andy, contrast the perceptions of white students at Westbrook, who insisted that teachers are slightly strict but nonetheless supportive and encouraging, pushing students to “work a little harder because [they] know you can,” as described by a white student named Katie Day.

Despite the differential perceptions of interactions with teachers by race, Westbrook’s flexible tracking system, combined with its guidance support and college advisor who visited the school several days a week to assist students in applying for scholarships and planning for college, provided for a stellar perception of the schools’ college-going culture among most all students. When asked if the school emphasizes college as a norm, a black student who took honors and standard classes at Westbrook named Bryan Scott said “I think they try to make it seem like it’s great as it can be. Like most of the time when people get accepted in college—any college—they’ll announce it on the intercom…just different ways how they portray it [college] and try to help us out, have little speakers and everyone coming out here to help us out.” Cindy Porter—a Latino higher tracked student—conveyed the schools’ college-going culture in her description of the announcements made on a weekly basis to all students, encouraging students to “sign up on this sheet if you want to talk to a college.” Marissa Carter—a black higher tracked student at Westbrook—described how counselors at her school “ask you [about college] like every year. Freshman year, you’re just like, I don’t know, and then once you get to sophomore year and stuff they pull you out a lot more. Like, senior year, it’s been really kind of annoying for the most part because they pull you out like all the time and they’re like, ‘hey, you want to go
here? You want to do this? You want to do this interview? You want to go and talk to these people? It’s just a lot of work.” A white female student—who took both honors classes and art electives and was planning to go into cosmetology—named Katie Day described how her English teacher “has actually given us two days this year on the computer that we were allowed to look at colleges and apply...we have people that come in and they will talk to us about college. That’s actually been happening pretty much all throughout the entire school year.”

George Woodward—a white higher tracked student who had been ranked first in his class for three years—insisted that Westbrook “give(s) you the tools you need” in regards to college. Todd Parker—a white student who took a variety of standard, honors, and athletic-oriented electives—asserted “every class I’ve been in, whether elective, honors, whatever, the teachers always talk to us about going to college. They really talk about that, want us all to go to college.”

However, students’ perceptions of college-going culture at Northridge and East Hills were less optimistic.

Perception of College-Going Culture:

Students’ perceptions of their own and other tracks revealed the rhetoric that not everyone is going to college, even if you are in a college-ready track, and the differential encouragement of college was evident between tracks. Interviews with students at Northridge and East Hills indicated that discussion about college is more limited in lower-track courses. One student at East Hills named Robert Shepard—a black lower tracked student—even revealed that, instead of discussing college, teachers discuss job applications in his classes and what people want to do with their lives more generally. Conversely, in AP and honors classes, college appeared to be a frequently discussed topic at each of the three schools. According to Casey Hamilton—a white student at Northridge—“teachers always enforce that college is going to make your life better.”
A student at Northridge named Glenda Lofton—who identified as Latino and white and had taken a few honors classes in high school—described “in the hallway, they have framed pictures of students that have graduated in the past, and it tells what college they went to, which scholarships they received, and stuff like that. When other students walk by and see that, it motivates them to want to do great and go to a college like that. I think that really inspires them when they see their classmates on the wall in the hallway.” Despite this view of Northridge’s promotion of college, black students’ perceptions of college-going culture differed from white students’ perceptions at Northridge and East Hills.

Students were polarized by race in their perception of whether college was a norm at East Hills High School. Emma Burbank—a black student at East Hills who occasionally took honors classes—stated “I don’t feel like it’s a norm. No, I don’t…I don’t see many going off and when they do they come back.” She also described that “this is the first year that I’ve had like counselors that are trying to help us, but [they] should have been trying to help us along the way, like encourage students to go to college, let them see that there is help, there’s a way to pay…they haven’t really done that, at all.” In discussing her desire to get a scholarship to attend college, Emma expressed her concern that “most of them you should have applied for junior year, but we don’t know…you have to start doing certain stuff, but we didn’t know. We don’t know.” When asked about college-going culture at East Hills and whether attending college was a norm at her school, Felicia Powell blatantly responded “I don’t really feel like they have equal opportunities for everyone here.” However, white students at East Hills, regardless of track placement, tended to indicate that going to college was indeed a norm at their school. However, one white student at East Hills, the sole exception named Eleanor Sigmon, did not perceive
attending college to be a norm at East Hills, noting that many students have opted to attend community college in recent years.

The racial disparity in students’ perception of college-going culture at their school was also apparent at Northridge High School. White students at Northridge overwhelmingly indicated, when asked, that going to college is at norm at their school, or that the majority of students at their school go to college, which may be attributed also to racial stratification between tracks at Northridge. They consistently asserted that most people go to college and considered it the “only option.” White students in advanced placement classes specifically explained the way that their teachers discussed how knowledge about particular subjects and improvement in their writing would help them in college. Black students more ambivalently suggested that some people go to college, others join the military, and some do neither. Upon asking her if teachers encourage her about going to college, Valerie Melvin—a black student at Northridge—said that teachers “always say some people may go to college and some people may not.” A white student at Westbrook, George Woodward, similarly conveyed “that’s the point of where the CTE classes come in, because not everyone’s going to go to college.” Contradictory to the idea of college being a norm, this oscillating rhetoric about going to college undermines the common core curriculum that intends to prepare all students for higher education, and it continues to divide students by track levels in detrimentally stratifying ways.

In “Leave No Schools Behind,” Holland and Farmer-Hinton define college culture as reflecting “environments that are accessible to all students and saturated with ever-present information and resources and on-going formal and informal conversations that help students to understand the various facets of preparing for, enrolling in, and graduating from postsecondary academic institutions as those experiences specifically pertain to the students’ current and future
lives” (Holland and Farmer-Hinton 2009:26). Contrary to this definition, students’ perceptions of college-going culture at their schools were stratified by race at Northridge and East Hills. Despite Northridge’s earnest attempt to promote college through framing pictures of students who graduated and attended college in the past, the racial division deprives students of the ongoing conversations to which Holland and Farmer-Hinton refer. The scholars further contextualize the creation and sustenance of college-going culture through emphasizing social support as an “organizational dynamic that fosters personalized relationships between students and staff so that frequent communication, academic norms, and the sharing of valuable resources exist” (Holland and Farmer-Hinton 2009:26, emphasis added). It is apparent—at least Northridge and East Hills—that communication, norms, and resources are not accessible to all students: rather, they are seemingly reserved for higher tracked or white students.

**Plans about and Confidence for the Future**

The differential treatment of higher-track and lower-track students is consequential for students’ futures. However, despite the often lacking encouragement perceived by black students and the tendency for black students to not be placed in advanced and honors courses, black students were not any less ambitious, hopeful, or confident about going to college than white students, though a few were considering the military. All students who were interviewed appeared to recognize the importance of planning to attend college, implying continuously how college would improve their future prospects and their lives. This finding is particularly insightful because, when considered in light of placement, the fact that future plans did not differ significantly between students by race or track level conveys that their plans after high school did not play a role in their placement into tracks. The finding that plans for the future did not affect placement of students is contradictory to the supposed purpose of tracking, which was
intended to tailor instruction to students’ plans after graduation (Green 1999:236). When asked about her plan after high school, Gail Simmons—a black student who was enrolled in standard classes but had taken three honors classes—explained her plan “to go to college and be a pediatrician because I like children,” yet she was not placed in AP courses as the white students had been at Northridge. Students’ plans for the future did not affect their track placements, and students’ track placements, despite differential treatment, rarely affected their plans, though Felicia Powell and Jason Ballard were exceptions: after failing to gain access to honors classes during her first year of high school, Felicia decided to follow the cosmetology pathway while still nonetheless hoping to eventually attend college, and Jason described how he wanted to go to college when he began high school but started liking JROTC and thought the military might be the best choice for him to pursue after graduation.

Despite differential treatment, placement rarely affected students’ plans. Black students at these rural three schools conveyed similar sentiments to those articulated by Emma Burbank—a black student at East Hills who had not taken many honors courses—when she stated “I’m going to a four-year university and then I’m going to have to go to medical school” in order to pursue her plan to become a pediatrician, elaborating “I don’t know [which school], but I know I’m going.” When asked about his plans after high school and where he sees himself in four years, Bryan Scott—a black student at Westbrook who had taken mostly honors courses—described “oh, I want to be in college, definitely…I don’t really want to go to a community college. I would like to go to a university.” While higher-track students had particularly well-articulated plans and felt extremely confident about their futures, lower-track students interviewed at the three schools were equally passionate and confident about attending college. However, they still faced apparent stigma from being labeled and treated as lower-track, a label that connoted a
lower readiness for college among peers. This finding displays the resilience of students to aspire to attend college, despite their lower track position, its accompanying label, and differential treatment from teachers and peers. Although students of all races and track levels aspired to go to college, there was still a lingering notion that advanced courses are not for everyone and that going to college is not for everyone either.

Discussion:

The rural context of these schools is significant because less of a socioeconomic divide exists between students in these areas, compared to more urban areas. As asserted by Anthony Sims, a student at Northridge who racially identified as African American, Native American, and white, “there’s not like real wealthy families that come to this school, but it’s not all poor. Most of us are stable, or like in that mid area.” The narrowed socioeconomic gap between people in these rural areas makes for a quintessential site to study the significance of race in schools.

This study makes evident the continued need to refer to the operating systems within schools, at least within these rural schools, as systems of tracking because they tend to group students by perceived ability based on subjective criteria, such as counselor discretion, to stream white students toward AP and honors courses more than black or Latino students, and to create immobile groups of students who take the same level of courses, whether AP, honors, or standard, for all of their classes, regardless of their interests or talents. The most severe consequences of this subjective and stratifying tracking are its tendency to separate students by race and impose differential expectations for students depending on their tracks. The stratification between tracks was made even more evident from interviews with higher-track
students who expressed judgment about lower-track students and consistently utilized terms like “we” and “they” in derogatory ways to separate themselves from students labeled as lower-track.

A contradiction exists between the schools’ promotion of college—through acts like posting framed pictures of former students who attended college in the hallways at Northridge and making announcements pertaining to college over the intercom at Westbrook—and the messages that teachers and counselors send to students about the importance of track position in attending college. Even though Northridge displayed framed pictures of former students who attended college recently and the students who were interviewed at the school were determined to go to college, all of these students did not perceive encouragement from teachers and counselors to be placed in higher-track classes or to go to college. The conversation about tracking or the use of the term in schools may have changed in recent years, but the stratifying effects appear to be as consequential as ever for students. A white student at Northridge succinctly described this when, upon being asked if she considered herself to be in a particular track, she responded, “well, yes ma’am: there’s different tracks. There are always tracks in schools. I do consider myself in a track…the higher, the above.” Tracks are viewed as inevitable, just as stratification in them is viewed as inevitable, and this conceptualization of schools as inevitably stratifying is something that has to change in order for them to fulfill their ideal function as meritocracies.

The Implications of Tracking

Limited Racial Diversity and Hindered Interaction Between Races

The results of this research reveal the “assignment of fewer minority students to the higher tracks and disproportionately more minority students to the lower tracks” that Hallinan discusses in “Tracking: From Theory to Practice,” and they display the enduring implications of
this racial stratification (Hallinan 1994:191). Interviews with students at Northridge and East Hills, in particular, displayed significant racial separation both between and within classes.

Students at Northridge and East Hills described higher track courses at their schools as predominantly white, even though East Hills has a majority African American student body. The separation of students by race within classrooms was most conveyed by students at East Hills.

Donovan Ross—a half black-half white student at East Hills who enrolled in both honors and standard courses—described the segregation within his class: “the class we were just in, did you notice how it kind of looked like black people were on this side and whites were on this side?”

Rachel Storms—a white student at East Hills—described her PE class as being separated by race, with white students in one section and black students sitting separately. This racial separation between and within classes hinders interaction between students whose racial identities differ, which is only exacerbated by tracking. This was clear in an interview with Linda Granger, a higher tracked white student at Northridge: when asked if she interacts with students of another race in school, she articulated an insightful description of her hindered interaction with students of another race: “I try. It’s hard to when I’m in class because there is only one African American in there. We are all together; we are very close in our classes because we are going to be together all year long, and we try to help each other out. It is kind of hard to know when you are in classes with only…you know what I’m saying.” Upon being asked about interaction with students outside of school, Linda responded that “most of the time I hang out with the students in my AP class.” These descriptions display how tracking hinders cross-racial interaction between students, a trend that appears to carry over to after-school activities.

Furthermore, limited interaction between racially segregated tracks has the potential to divide students within the same racial group. This was conveyed by Evelyn Newkirk—a black
student at East Hills who only took honors courses—when she stated “usually, I don’t hang around people that’s not on the same track as I am. Not that I’m stuck up or anything but it’s just that there’s nothing that we have in common or anything to talk about, really.” Evelyn had earlier described that her classes contained few black students. Therefore, hindered interaction between tracks may be consequential within racial groups as well, in addition to its detrimental impacts on relations between racial groups.

Throughout interviews for this study, black students implied that residential segregation impeded their ability to interact with students of another race outside of school. For example, a black female student at East Hills indicated that she did not interact with students of another race outside of school because, according to her, “where I stay, it’s really just, you know…there’s not many different races in our community.” The residential segregation noted by these students contributes to the hindered interaction between races in these rural areas and re-emphasizes the need for meaningful interaction in schools. This is especially crucial in rural areas, where public interaction is almost always confined to school or school-oriented activities. As written by Karolyn Tyson, “Black and White adolescents often have very little meaningful contact with one another in school because they are separated for most of their core classes. Not surprisingly, these divisions are often deliberately replicated in other settings.” (Tyson 2011:10). In rural areas where community interaction often centers on school activities, racially diverse classrooms are vital to ensuring school integration and exposing students to diversity.

**Differential Encouragement About College**

Students conveyed perceptions of differential encouragement about college between track levels, which appears consequential for lower-track students. Patricia Harris—a black student at East Hills—articulated this differential encouragement by stating “like for instance in honors
class there’s more talk about it [college], like people will come in the honors class—. Like I was in English Honors last year and the [Community College] people, they told us more about, oh, you know, you can take college classes while you’re here, you know, this is stuff you need to do, but if you’re in a regular class, like I was saying, you don’t really get that, or I don’t really hear people talk about, ‘Oh, you know, so-and-so came to my class today and they were talking about college.’ It’s more towards the honors kids.” Emma Burbank—another black student at East Hills, who occasionally took honors courses—conveyed a similar sentiment in a less direct manner: “if they hold me to a higher standard, if they put me up there…that will make me want to work harder to prove to them that I’m—but if they just like kind of brush you off to the side and feel like you’re not going to do it, you probably won’t.” This quote illustrates the self-fulfilling prophecy created by differential expectations and encouragement between tracks.

**Judgment By Higher-Tracked Group**

Higher tracked students, particularly white ones at Northridge, were as conscious of lower tracked students as they were of their position in the tracking system: Casey Hamilton—a white student at Northridge—even referred to those students as the “lower ones.” There were also recurring themes of judgment by the higher track group at Northridge, evidenced by the use of the terms *we* and *us* by higher tracked students enrolled in AP courses and *they* to refer to lower-tracked students or those enrolled in standard courses, often in derogatory ways. For example, Casey Hamilton articulated “we have a group that we perceive as the people who don’t care, the people who don’t care, try, or want to go to college. They don’t know what they want to do. They want to live their lives in high school and do what they want to do. They don’t care about the future.” Casey further elaborated on her judgment of lower tracks while describing her disappointment after not becoming the “number one” student, or the student with the best grades.
in the class. She stated “I really wanted to be number one so I tried…but the other kids who
don’t try have always been in the low group. They don’t really do their homework because they
go out and hang out with their friends after school.” Similarly, Eric Williams—an other white
higher tracked student at Northridge, who was ranked first in the senior class—bluntly stated
“well, I mean to be in honest I’ve never been in another track, but I guess the individuals who are
in a different track, I guess the lesser value…that’s their own choice because if they tried to excel
then they would be in the higher level track.” This rhetoric of judgment is problematic for
several reasons. Not only does it induce animosity and divisive relations between tracks, but it
also misleads students to conceptualize the advanced group as innately superior in ability and
motivation, when many of them were completely reluctant, even resistant, to take AP courses in
the first place and had to be placed in them or told to try them out by their counselor.

It is important to acknowledge that the higher tracked students’ imposed judgment on
lower-tracks was not only unique to white students. Though it was not nearly as common with
black or Latino students, this rhetoric was also conveyed by Patricia Harris—a black female
student at East Hills—who stated “it just kind of bothers me when they [students in lower tracks]
say ‘oh, I’m getting so-and-so’ [grades], and I’m like, but I’m taking way harder classes than you
and there’s no comparison—like you cannot compare yourself to me.” This animosity causes
divisions between tracks and racial groups, as well as within racial groups.

**The Tendency to Discount Race**

Despite racial stratification in these rural schools, students tended to discount the
significance of race in their schools, even when they conveyed teachers’ differential treatment of
them by race or racial separation within the classrooms or cafeterias. For example, Emma
Burbank—a black female student at East Hills who planned to become a pediatrician and had
even experienced discriminatory comments from teachers in school—stated “it’s either you’re going to do your work and you’re going to make a name for yourself or just not—it doesn’t matter what color, I feel like.” Donovan Ross—also a student at East Hills, who racially identified as half African American and half white and had taken several honors classes—stated “there’s probably like two rednecks in the whole school that are like, ‘Oh no, it’s strictly white,’ or something like that, but nobody really cares about that.” By implying that, from their perspectives, no one cares about race, Emma and Donovan convey the notion of systematic and institutionalized racial discrimination, as opposed to overt racism.

The tendency to discount race was evident at Northridge as well. After describing in detail the separation of students by race in the cafeteria, Glenda Lofton—a Latino and white student at Northridge—still downplayed the significance of race. Referring to the cafeteria, she said “it’s very, like, segregated. The white kids are here, the African American kids are here, the Indians, the Latinos. It just seems like one race sits in one group. There are some parts of the cafeteria where you see all different races sitting at one table, but mostly it is just one race at one table.” Despite her comments about segregation of students, she immediately stated “I don’t think that we have any racial problems here at the school.” Gregory Horne—a white student at Northridge—asserted that “I do think that some people have a group and whether it is just white or black, that just is all coincidental.” The assertion that racial problems and segregation are non-existent or coincidental undermines the continued significance of race in terms of placement and treatment of students.

The findings of this study present a paradox: students are often racially stratified not only by their placements into tracks but by their treatment within them as well, yet students tend to discount the significance of race in their schooling, even urging a focus away from race and
toward individual merit—previously described by Emma Burbank as doing one’s own work and making a name for one’s self. From the perspectives of these students, two main takeaways may be gleaned, one more optimistic and one less so: although the idea of meritocracy has been engrained in the minds of students, regardless of race, the less optimistic finding is that schools are, arguably, not operating meritocratically. Opposite to meritocratic values, the students interviewed for this study conveyed a system of racially discriminatory practices that determined which courses students took and how they were treated in those courses. The findings of this research highlight an important point within critical race theory—race still matters (Ladson-Billings 1999:8). For decades, critical race theorists have asserted the way in which colorblindness perpetuates racial power, arguing that racism is built into the structure of many American institutions (Roithmayr 1999:2). Their view that “race continues to be a powerful social construct” (Ladson-Billings 1999:8) is relevant to this research, which has made evident that the impact of race in schools remains, though perhaps hidden more covertly within them.

Support for Tracking

Advocates of tracking in schools insist that it provides for more academically homogeneous classrooms and facilitates improved teacher instruction. One black higher tracked student at Westbrook named Marissa Carter provided support for the use of tracking in her description of a typical standard course at her school. She stated that “it was more so like everybody was talking all over each other all the time and it was so annoying, and then you would have people over here that were fast learners and you’d have people that were slow learners and then everybody would just be like all over the place all the time.” This outlook supports the existence of tracking in schools, but she was also speaking from the position of a higher tracked student, described in her own words as an “AG [academically gifted] student,”
which has shown to be accompanied by a label of prestige and an element of judgment of lower track students and courses. Thus, this outlook may bias her perspective or opinion of standard courses.

Although this study focuses on how structure affects students, it does not intend to attack public schools or to criticize tracking practices all together. Tracking originally developed, in theory, with intentions to best serve students and teachers, but this study analyzes the way in which schools actually execute the practice. Schools face institutional pressures—including pressures from school boards, teachers, and parents—that influence their educational practices, and they presumably react to those pressures as best they can while encountering financial constraints (Arum et al. 2011:xv). Kimberly LaPrade argues that the solution to stratification within schools lies in de-tracking students completely and increasing heterogeneous groupings, rather than in the abandonment of rural public schooling, but de-tracking is not the only option for improving educational equity and meritocratic practices, as shown by Westbrook High School (2011:746-748). Tracking does not have to be eliminated in schools to provide equitable treatment for students of diverse racial identities. There are various ways to reduce the negative effects of tracking in schools, which is evidenced by students’ perceptions of college-going culture at Westbrook High School, which were overwhelmingly positive regardless of track or race. As suggested by Maureen T. Hallinan, schools could ensure that non-tracked classes and other school activities, such as extra-curricular groups and sports teams, are integrated (Hallinan 1994:191). However, this proposed solution does not mend the stratification between tracks or the differential treatment of students by race, realities on which this study has shed light.
Schools’ Responsibility to Provide Equal Educational Opportunity

Equality of educational opportunity means more than equal access to free public schools for students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds (Riordan 2004:2-5). Equal opportunity in schools cannot be ensured while tracking subjectively places students, stratifies students by race, labels students as superior or inferior depending on their placements, and imposes differential encouragement and expectations from teachers and administrators. Due to tracking systems that operate as rigidly and subjectively as that of Northridge, in which white students are literally put in advanced placement courses to try for the day while black students are scarcely encouraged to even enroll in honors classes, schools are not only failing as meritocracies; they are reproducing social inequality.

While a few higher tracked students indicated that they were able to get ahead or stay informed by encouragement from their parents, placement in higher track courses, encouragement about college, and academic accomplishment should not be contingent on parental involvement in a school. Several higher tracked students, regardless of race, seemed to benefit from parental involvement, but not all students have parents who are continuously informed about which classes they should be taking, when they should take the SAT, or to which colleges they should apply. If schools’ are not instilling a college-going culture for all students and are only encouraging some students to pursue higher track courses and college, schools are not fulfilling their presumed roles as meritocracies, and they are failing students who lack the backing, clout, or perceived ability to be classified as higher-track, whom are disproportionately African American and Latino.

Students could benefit from a shifted conceptualization in schools from viewing only a limited group of students as superior in intelligence and ability to incorporating opportunity for all students to learn and be successful (LaPrade 2011:750). A shift in the conceptualization of
schools would benefit African American and Latino students in particular because they often face lower expectations from teachers, and they are disproportionately labeled as “lower-track” students, which is accompanied by a host of connotations about ability, intelligence, and potential for the future. Furthermore, this shifted conceptualization would benefit all students by labeling *every* pupil as capable, regardless of social background or racial identification.
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