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Plessy's Tracks: African American students confronting academic placement in a racially diverse school and African American community

Richard Lofton

School of Education, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA

ABSTRACT

Why are most African American students in lower-track classes in racially diverse schools? How does the nexus of home, school, and community impact African Americans' academic placement in a racially and economically diverse school district? This research used ethnographic methods to explore 38 African American middle school students' perceptions and experiences of academic placement in a racially diverse middle school and a segregated and disinvested African American neighborhood. This research introduces the term *Plessy's Tracks* to acknowledge the sustained racial caste system that manifests through lower-track classes and devalued homes and communities. Findings suggest students face multiple challenges and systemic inequalities when self-selecting classes. Also, racially segregated homes and communities have shaped racialized tracking while producing Black placemaking in homes, classrooms, and communities.

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Despite *Brown v. Board of Education's* 1954 decision that overruled *Plessy v. Ferguson's* (1896) 'separate but equal' doctrine, many racially diverse schools remain segregated and offer an unequal distribution of knowledge through the institutional practice of tracking (Lucas and Berends 2007; Oakes 2005). Tracking is the segregation of students based on perceived notions of talents and abilities. For over fifty years, researchers have illustrated that tracking undermines educational equity by denying some students the knowledge and teaching quality that make students college- and career-ready, while grooming other students for academic and adult success (Alexander, Cook, and McDill; Finley 1984; Oakes 2005; Rosenbaum 1976; Sørensen 1970; Tyack 1974). More recently, scholars have argued that tracking has produced 'second-generation segregation' because of ongoing racialized tracking over 60 years after the *Brown* decision (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Lewis-mccoy 2014; Michelson 2001; Tyson 2011).

Researchers have shown that when students' socioeconomic backgrounds and test scores are similar, racialized tracking is evident (Gamoran and Mare 1989; Lewis-mccoy 2014; Michelson 2001; Tach and Farkas 2006). Even when African American students and parents opt to self-select their classes, these racial patterns and inequalities based on race and privilege continue (Watanabe 2007; Wells and Oakes 1996; Welner). Thus, the question remains: Why has tracking persisted, despite the good intentions of researchers, policymakers, and school personnel who aim to dismantle it? Research is lacking on how African American middle

school students perceive their self-select process and come to terms with academic placement in a racially diverse school (Legette 2018; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Tyson 2011). Therefore, this article illuminates this old problem that has segregated and legitimized a maldistribution of knowledge, opportunities and career trajectories for African American students in racially diverse schools.

This article builds on current research on tracking by uncovering Plessy's Tracks. Plessy's Tracks refers to the everyday separate, disinvested and anti-Black journey that many African American students travel in their homes, schools and communities that prevents them from full citizenship, equity and justice, which was validated in the *Plessy* decision. If one unveils the everyday journey of most African Americans in their homes, schools, and communities, one can argue that U.S. institutional policies and practices align more with the Plessy (1895) decision than with the Brown (1954) decision. Researchers continue to show how schools and neighborhoods are hyper-segregated and when they are not racially segregated, African American students are on different tracks than their white peers (Orfield et al. 2019). As Gloria Ladson-Billings (2004) argues, the Plessy ruling "validated segregation throughout the nation" (4). America's collective consciousness has not been able to fully dismantle this racial segregation in neighborhoods and schools, thus maintaining a racial caste system that was validated through the *Plessy* decision. According to Wilkerson (2020), "a caste system uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked grouping apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places" (17). Continuing in the vein of Wilkerson and Ladson-Billings, this paper grapples with how tracking in racially diverse schools and the disinvestment and devaluation (Perry 2020) of African American homes and communities validate segregation and allow for distinct assigned places through Plessy's Tracks.

While current tracking researchers have often analyzed tracking through lens of the Brown landmark decision by highlighting "second-generation segregation," the voices, experiences, and observations of the African American middle school students in this study bring forth new insights by uncovering a racial caste system that has not been dismantled but rather provides the infrastructure for Plessy's Tracks. This research highlights how many African American students continue to travel distinct anti-Black (Baldrige 2020; Warren and Coles 2020) paths in their communities and schools. First, this study uncovers how African American students made sense of their self-select process in a racially diverse middle school. Second, it shows how ongoing systemic inequalities prevent African Americans from freely choosing their academic placement. Third, it explores how African American middle school students' homes and communities impact the racialized tracks within a school. In essence, this article unveils the struggle with Plessy's Tracks through the by-product of lower-track classes in racially diverse schools and disinvested predominantly Black communities.

Connecting *Plessy* to racialized tracking

Since the Emancipation Proclamation, powerful actors in the history of American race relations have used the language of 'choice' and meritocracy to mask systemic inequities undermining justice in social outcomes. In the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) ruling that 'equal, but separate' railway carriages for African Americans and Whites did not violate the Constitution, the Court claimed that legal segregation by race indicated a *distinction*;

‘colored’ people’s construal of that distinction as inequality was a choice. The Court posited that policies and laws could not change the racialized attitudes fundamental to segregation (Bell 1973; Hoffer 2012). Defendant Homer Plessy, his counsel, and the grassroots organization backing him challenged the Louisiana law to ensure Negroes’ access to ‘every recognition, right, privilege and immunity secured to citizens of the United States of the white race’ (538). Only Justice John Marshall Harlan in his dissent declared that separation caused a ‘badge of servitude’ for African Americans (562). In other words, it allowed for the racial caste system to continue.

The *Plessy* decision cogently illustrated the ways laws, policies, and anti-Blackness converged to deny ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ to some Americans while privileging others. It gave verbal assent to principles of equality as it normalized and institutionalized race-based segregation. The case also typified the common practice of invoking a language of ‘choice’ to feign equality for African Americans. The justices’ goal was not genuinely ‘separate, but equal’ facilities, which could have improved African Americans’ economic, social, and educational conditions (Bell 2005; Ladson-Billings 2007). ‘Choice’ rather provided an excuse to ignore and further maintain a racial caste system and frame it as African Americans choosing racial oppression. Therefore, moving beyond the rhetoric of choice and meritocracy, Plessy’s Tracks provides new language to explore the nexus of anti-Blackness, segregation and disinvestment that African Americans encounter that far too often become, in the words of Justice Harlan, their badge of servitude.

Plessy’s neighborhoods

The *Plessy* decision continues to haunt today’s society when we examine the segregation, disinvestment and devaluation of African American homes and communities. Maintaining the racial caste system of *Plessy*, the Federal Housing Administration (1937–1968) adopted maps and institutionalized practices that redlined African Americans into segregated areas throughout the United States (Rothstein 2017). Four colors were given to classify each neighborhood on the maps: red, blue, yellow and green. Red was deemed to be hazardous and banks generally did not issue mortgages and if they did, they charged astronomical fees and interest rates. Meanwhile many Whites had the opportunity to leave the city and buy homes in the suburbs through low-interest loans. This policy helped generate intergenerational wealth that many Whites have today (Johnson 2017). It was not until 1968 that the Fair Housing Act of 1968 made redlining illegal. The practice of redlining throughout the United States maintained the racial caste system and embodied Plessy’s Tracks. It excluded African Americans from housing markets and reinforced spatial segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993). Housing policies is an examine of anti-Black policies that excluded African Americans from economic and social capital. Thus, while *Brown* was the law of the land, powerful social actors had a *Plessy* mentality and developed separate and unequal housing patterns leading to high poverty rates for African Americans (Mendenhall 2010). As researchers have already pointed out, the Courts maintained the racial caste system by only focusing on school segregation without addressing racial housing patterns.

Social scientific evidence is extremely clear that government policies and laws have fostered and allowed redlining, racial housing covenants, and predatory lending which all contributed to racial housing patterns, concentrated poverty, devaluation and disinvestment in African American neighborhoods. Furthermore, researchers have declared that educational policy has

inadequately addressed the needs of students who are confronted with these redlining policies that have contributed to concentrated poverty (Anyon 2005; Noguera and Wells 2011; Payne 2008). Bringing forth new knowledge, this study builds on these findings by showing how the collusion of racial housing patterns and racialized tracks have contributed to the current day infrastructure of the *Plessy* decision.

Tracking and a racial caste system

In addition to *Plessy*'s neighborhoods, African American students often encounter the institutional practice of tracking in racially diverse schools. Research has shown that upper-track students benefit from highly qualified teachers, high expectations, fast-paced instruction, and multiple resources (Gamoran 1992, 2010; Oakes 2005; Oakes, Gamoran, and Page 1992; Wheelock 1992); lower-track students face less-qualified teachers, lower expectations, and stigmatization (Datnow and Cooper 2002; Powell, Farrar, and Cohen 1985). Moreover, students' achievement disparities between the tracks increase throughout schooling (Lucas and Berends 2002), escalating inequities in the distribution of knowledge. African American students are less likely to take upper-track classes in racially diverse than in all-Black schools (Braddock and Dawkins 1993; Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor 2009; Eitle 2002). Lucas and Berends (2007) showed that Black students in racially diverse schools were less likely than Whites to take college-prep courses.

Moving always from only addressing what is happening in schools, researchers in the 1990s and early 2000s detected normative and political influences driving tracking inequities. Oakes (1992) showed parents' and teachers' vested interest in tracking, as ingrained views of talents and abilities upheld racialized tracks, despite district intentions (Oakes et al. 1997). Some White parents used sociopolitical capital to ensure their children's placement (Wells and Serna 1996). Choice policies for students and parents had negligible success in countering racialized tracks (Tyson 2011; Watanabe 2007; Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna 2002). Building on this research, this study explores that 'choice' or self-select policies are still related to the inability to acknowledge the infrastructure of *Plessy*. As Justice Harlan mentions in the dissent, choice will never dismantle the badge of servitude nor eliminate a racial caste system.

More recently, despite the evidence that tracking perpetuates unequal distribution of opportunities, resources, and knowledge (Richard and Davis 2015; Lewis and Diamond 2015), the prevalence of tracking varied little from 2001 to 2011 (Kettler and Hurst 2017). Intergenerational tracking intensifies inequities in African American communities (Richard and Davis 2015; Lofton 2019). Parents who received a substandard education are excluded from advantageous jobs and ill-equipped to advise their children, who remain in lower-track courses, which further leads to the racial caste system. Therefore, this research is imperative for understanding African American students' views of academic choice and the factors driving racially disparate tracking in their homes, schools and communities.

Understanding the Black habitus to unveil Plessy's Tracks

To understand how African American middle school students were making sense of their academic placement and the impact of home and community on where they belonged in a racially diverse school, this research employed the conceptualization of the Black *habitus*. The Black *habitus* (Lofton 2014, 2019) in the United States is grounded in

uncovering and connecting social inequalities African Americans have encountered both before and since *Plessy*, which have excluded them from material and economic resources and devalued their experiences, cultural knowledge, and actions. This study explored the continuity between *Plessy* and current educational structures which perpetuate separate, unequal resources and limited educational choices in primarily Black communities.

Habitus encompasses habits of mind and body through which people make sense of their social world (Lizardo 2004; Wacquant 2016). Positing that individuals and groups develop distinct mindsets and habits as they encounter social structures, Bourdieu (1986) explored the *structured structures* that generate and organize social practice. He defined *habitus* as:

Systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes. (53)

Structured structures include external structures in people's social world and internal mental structures governing their beliefs, habits, and actions. Bourdieu (1984) believed that social actors form dispositions through habitual actions associated with social class; the study of *habitus* provides a foundation to analyze ongoing class distinctions. While not claiming that all members of a class thought or acted alike, he was fascinated with how social classes develop intuitive preferences and habits that regulate behavior. Moreover, he believed it vital to explore social and cognitive structures shaping how people make sense of their world. Bourdieu (1986) linked previous experiences to current power relationships:

The *habitus* ... at every moment, structures new experiences in accordance with the structures produced by past experiences, which are modified by new experiences ... [bringing] about a unique integration, dominated by the earliest experiences, of the experiences statistically common to members of the same class. (56)

Beyond Bourdieu's primary focus on class distinctions, scholars have acknowledged the nexus of race and class by illuminating the racial *habitus*. Racial *habitus* scholars study ways people embody specific cultural dispositions based on social constructs of race identity, rooted in historic social, political, and economic struggles and unequal access to power and privilege (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007; Bourgois and Schonberg 2007; Emerson 2006; Mueller 2017; Omi and Winant 2015; Perry 2012).

Building on the racial *habitus*, this research also sincerely acknowledges the anti-Black structures that African American students confront in their educational spaces (Baldrige 2020) that construct Plessy's Tracks. Anti-Blackness refers to the inability to fully acknowledge African Americans' humanistic characteristics (Ross 2020). According to Dumas and Ross (2016), "antiblackness is endemic to, and is central to how all of us make sense of the social, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions of human life" (429). In this study, the Black *habitus* uncovers the sense-making, appreciates, and anti-Black structures that African American students confront that have produced and maintained the racial caste system, which is referred to as Plessy's Tracks

The methodology behind capturing separate tracks

This study took place in a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse Northeastern city with a population of 35,000 (72% White, 13% Hispanic, 7% African American). Hispanics have joined the historically African American community in the last twenty years. Census data showed 30% of the population in poverty, including 720 African American households. The city's four areas include two wealthy White resort communities of 1-2 USD million homes; a middle-/working-class White community with homes at about 650,000 USD; and a segregated, disinvested African American community with homes at about 250,000 USD. Most African Americans interviewed were renters, often with government assistance; a few had inherited their homes. The city has known racial tension since African Americans migrated from the South in the 1940s-1970s, seeking relief from racial oppression and better lives in a town where hotels, casinos, and an aging population offered employment. The badge of servitude continued with them only finding segregated housing and discrimination from social service agencies crucial to their survival and upward mobility: local government, police, business leaders, and the school district (Richard and Davis 2015). Not only were the African American students in this study were in lower track classes, but many of their parents attended the same school district and were also in lower track classes. This intergenerational tracking continued the badge of servitude that many of the African American encountered in this city (Lofton 2019). To keep anonymity, pseudonyms are used for all participants and places.

The district

African American families enrolled children in district schools, seeking upward mobility, but racial conflicts plagued the district for decades. Most African American students took lower-track classes; a local task force found that multigenerational participation in lower-track classes and special education had a profound negative impact on residents' careers and family income.

At the time of this study, this middle school population of over 850 students consisted of 14% African Americans, 65% Whites, and 20% Latinos. About 35% of all students received free and reduced-price lunch. Most African Americans were in classes composed entirely of Black and Latino students. Disproportionate numbers of African American males were in special education; most White students, regardless of ability and talent, took upper-track classes. Of the 38 African Americans interviewed, only four took advanced math or science. Despite a self-select policy for these classes created to counter racialized tracks, most African American students remained in lower-track classes. Thirty-eight percent of the African American students were identified as learning-disabled – more than double the national average (15.5% of African American students preK-12 in 2015–16; IES National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Strategic sampling explored the African American students' experience of academic placement.

Methodology

My focus on this city emerged in the context of a larger study investigating countywide inequities. I visited the city for three years, gathering data, observing the African American community center, and developing relationships with community leaders and members.

I interviewed 38 African American students (around 32% of the total) for the six-month middle school study. Over three weeks, I recorded one-on-one semi-structured 25–30-minute interviews at the school. I remained in the field for five more months (mid-February–mid-June) of field research: interviewing and observing African American students, parents, community leaders, pastors, school administrators and residents; writing field notes; and observing school board and city council meetings and city protests (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2015). These data were collected over three years using participant-observations at the African American community center and through interactions with community leaders and members. I am a visible African American male who was getting a degree from an Ivy League institution that was an hour away from the study location. African American parents and community members welcomed him in with open arms into their homes and wanted to share about their lives and the inequalities that they have experienced in their school district and neighborhood.

In the field, I refined and conceptualized a framework and developed codes using grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998) to gain new insights into students' understanding of academic placement, race, segregation, and racialized tracking. I recorded field notes and memos every day. All interviews were transcribed; transcripts, observational field notes, and memos were uploaded to Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis program. I assigned codes to interview and observational data (Saldaña 2016) and developed analytic memos over several coding cycles (Saldaña 2009), deeply reflecting and interacting with the data. The final codes that were developed centered on how African American students made meaning of academic placement and how their community impacted where they belonged in the middle school. This led to three emerging themes related to: student perceptions of believing they were not good enough and work being too hard, a system of inequalities, and tracks within their community.

Findings

African American students do not live in a social vacuum; they are aware of the anti-Blackness within schools and society. Educators' beliefs in fixed notions of intelligence and ability have sustained tracking and unequal distribution of knowledge (Oakes et al. 1997). Yet, scholars have not fully explored how these ideologies shape academic identities for African American middle school students or how middle school African American students wrestle with these educational structures and outcomes. This section examines how fixed notions of intelligence and ability shape African American students' academic choices and produce an unequal distribution of knowledge.

'Not good enough' and 'too hard'

The 38 African American students participated in a self-select process to choose advanced math and science classes after talking to their counselor and parents. For years, school administrators were aware of the school's racialized tracking and aimed to implement the self-select policy to detrack. Well-meaning administrators felt that allowing students and parents to self-select their classes would eliminate much cultural or racial bias from counselors, teachers, or standardized test content/format. The middle school gave parents and students forms to sign selecting math and science classes. Despite the policy, racialized tracking

persisted. To determine why, the findings revealed that tracks were already developed in students' minds and often reaffirmed by guidance counselors and the racialized school structure.

Only four of the 38 African American students were in advanced courses, while almost all White students took 'accelerated courses' leading to high school Honors courses. Of these 38, four reported they were unaware of the process; 34 understood the process yet were still hesitant to enroll in upper-track classes. The majority of students articulated that the work was 'too hard' and they would fail. In total, 11 of the 34 students in lower-track classes indicated they were not 'good enough' or 'smart enough' for advanced math and science courses, feeling they lacked the skills or abilities to do well. Some students were extremely clear about this point:

Researcher: Why are you not in the accelerated course?

Ivory: Because I'm not good at math that much.

Researcher: Who takes accelerated? What type of student?

Cierra: Smart people, I guess.

Researcher: Do you consider yourself smart?

Cierra: I think I am. I'm just not smart for those classes right now.

Tony: You have to be smart to be in honors. I am not smart enough.

Researcher: You do not think that you are smart.

Tony: I am smart, but not that smart.

Ivory, Cierra, and Tony connected with the eleven students who felt they were not smart enough to take advanced courses in middle school. When probing further, students did not necessarily believe that White students were smarter or enrolling in upper-track classes meant 'acting White'; they just personally did not affirm their own smartness. Beyond their collective blackness, many students identified with fixed notions of academic abilities and concluded they should not take advanced courses because they were not academically strong. Believing they lacked the skills, they concluded they should not take upper-track classes. According to prior research, the school structure often supports the idea that African American students do not have the skills and abilities that prepare them for higher-track courses. For the eleven students who agreed with these fixed notions by perceiving they were not smart enough, their ideas of smartness shaped their decision-making process regarding tracking.

When asked if they believed their guidance counselors thought that they were smart, several of the eleven students paused, then stated they did not know. Not one reported that a guidance counselor said the students were smart or affirmed their efforts to be in advanced courses. However, they did know the guidance counselors recommended the lower-track classes for them. These students considered the recommendation as a requirement, not a suggestion that they and their parents could override. Julian, a sixth-grade student about to enter seventh grade, explained:

Julian: It's like you take on the seventh-grade class, Miss Carson calls you and every student in sixth grade, and she tells you if you should you take it. She just told me what I should take.

Researcher: What happens if you and your parents disagree with her recommendation and want to take an accelerated class?

Julian: You can't disagree with her. That would cause trouble.

Julian's exchange was telling. For him, the self-select process involved guidance counselors telling him what he should take and not allowing him and his family to make conscious decisions about taking advanced courses. Instead, he 'took on' the classes that Miss Carson told him to take – as if forced to take the counselor's recommendation. Julian's story showed that while self-select policies seemingly give students and parents the option to 'choose' their tracks, guidance counselors still dominate the process.

Another major point is that Julian felt he and his family could not disagree with the guidance counselors because he would 'get into trouble' – not trouble with family or community members, but rather with social actors within the school structure that supported racialized tracking. Julian believed that if they disagreed with the recommendation, he would have to confront additional hurdles in schools. Thus, for Julian, maintaining racialized tracks was also about self-protecting from harms that result from disagreeing with powerful gatekeepers.

Early in the conversation, Julian stated he was not smart enough to be in advanced courses. Also, the guidance counselors who suggested he enroll in lower-track classes reaffirmed the message that he was not smart enough. But while the self-select process aims to give students and parents agency in the process, Julian aimed to stay out of trouble by agreeing with the social actor's recommendation. The agency of the tracks for some students and families was hugely problematic because they feared the 'trouble' it would cause to cross these tracks. Other African American students described the classes as 'too hard.' They aimed not to jeopardize their grades by taking advanced courses, thereby choosing lower academic placement to avoid failure. Rita and Meeka made this point:

Rita: I could possibly get into a harder class.

Researcher: What do you consider harder classes?

Rita: Accelerated, Honors.

Researcher: Do you have any desire to be in these classes?

Rita: No.

Researcher: Why?

Rita: I just don't like going to a hard class, because it's more work. If I don't know anything, and I'm going to start failing, then I don't want that to happen. I rather get a better grade

Researcher: Why are you not in accelerated math?

Meeka: I don't know.

Researcher: Do you want to be in accelerated math?

Meeka: Not really.

Researcher: Could you tell me why?

Meeka: I want to stay on the level that I'm in because I was going to be on it, but then I said no because I don't want it to get too hard and then me not knowing it. I just stayed where I am. I don't want to fail.

Rita and Meeka seemed like perfect candidates for advanced classes with their superb grades, test scores, and attendance rates, as well as praise from their guidance counselor. It was clear that these two students did not resist schooling but rather enrolled in lower-track classes because they believed the accelerated courses would be too rigorous, and they did not want to struggle in classes dominated by White students. They felt they had to confront two additional issues by being in an advanced course: an academic struggle and a racial battle. Therefore, they strategically aimed *not to fail* and instead protect themselves. Students like Rita and Meeka valued their high GPA more than advanced placement. They perceived that upper-track classes would compel them to work even harder and confront their peers' racism. In their current levels, they did exceptionally well, so they chose not to rock the boat but find peace of mind by not crossing color lines.

In the field, I spent time with Meeka and her mom. Meeka mentioned how she would help some of her struggling friends/peers in the lower-level classes. She felt connected to them and was helping them by being in these classes. Through observations, I discovered that her classmates were the ones she worshipped with, whom she ate, laughed, cried, and even disagreed in her community. Neighbors acknowledged Meeka's sense of humor and loved spending time with her, while the majority of upper-track students did not know her and lived on the other side of town. Therefore, the school structure and detracking educational strategy implemented in her middle school asked Meeka to make an unjust choice: consciously choose to take lower-track classes to stay with her beloved peers from her beloved community rather than face racial discrimination and intimidation from strangers.

Rita's and Meeka's experiences can help researchers understand that some African American students are confronted with a double burden. Not only are they concerned about getting good grades, but they also believe they must navigate unfamiliar territory, making them susceptible to unchecked racial discrimination and intimidation by White peers and teachers. Students did not want to confront either the rigor of the course or racial battle fatigue that came with it (Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007). These middle school students and their families were choosing to alleviate some of this fatigue by self-selecting lower-track classes. The students reinforced these experiences and perceptions in conversations with their peers and teachers, as Jonas made clear:

Jonas: Yeah. They say earth science is very hard. The kids in it, they can't even do it, but they manage to do it.

Researcher: Who said that they cannot do it?

Jonas: Most of the White kids and my friend Kenny.

Researcher: But you're not in that class; how do you know for sure it is hard?

Jonas: At first, Kenny was thinking about switching out, because it is so hard.

Researcher: Anyone else told you the classes were too hard?

Jonas: Like Mr. Campbell, he told me that they were harder, like very hard. Ninth grade courses and stuff. When you are in the seventh grade.

Jonas may have made an informed decision; White students, Kenny (an African American friend taking Earth Science), and a teacher he admired all described the course as very hard. Teachers and administrators also described the accelerated material as ‘challenging’ and ‘difficult’ for most students. Many were conveying the message that accelerated classes were ‘too hard’ for African American students, leading Jonas and others not to enroll.

Yet beyond students’ internalized perceptions of academic inadequacy, fear of failure, and avoidance of racial battle fatigue, the adults and White students in the school structure reaffirmed their beliefs about upper-track classes, which deeply rooted separate and unequal tracks despite the guise of equality of choice. The school structure helped students reach specific conclusions. First, it normalized that classes were too hard and African American students consented to this belief. Second, African American students stated that because they would have to confront racism and discrimination, they wanted to avoid trouble and prevent racial tensions. Students felt this was a double burden in these classes because they had to develop their academic abilities while simultaneously confronting such tensions. According to previous research, high school students ‘chose’ lower-track classes because they did not believe they were ‘smart enough’ and wanted good grades, taking lower-track classes instead (Rosenbaum 1976; Tyson 2011). The present study built on this argument by showing that the issue existed not only in high school but also in middle school. This finding is vital because researchers and policymakers who aim to develop policies/strategies to dismantle racialized tracking must address the issue *before* high school; interventions must occur before students and parents start self-selecting classes. This research also showed that at an early age, African Americans can internalize the message they are not smart or good enough – a message that the middle school structure only affirms.

In short, this study clearly showed that students are concerned about the racial battles they might confront in middle school. It is the double burden that African American students have to face in racially diverse schools that helps them make sense of racialized tracking. For these students, White teachers and students were the social actors who segregated and treated them differently, and by resisting, the African American students would get into trouble, while whiteness would go unmarked, unquestioned, and unchecked. The student interviewees thought profoundly about deciding to avoid these battles; they chose to stay safe by attending classes with peers who lived in their community.

It is the system

If these classes were so hard, why did almost all White students, regardless of academic abilities, take them? Through observations and conversations with guidance counselors, I discovered another sequence of courses of which many African American students and parents were unaware – a sequence designed to help struggling students in advanced courses. Struggling White students took full advantage of these classes – small, intimate spaces with 7–10 students receiving additional coaching in math and science. Students had the opportunity to not take electives, but rather enroll in Lab Math and Lab Science. The self-select form that counselors and students used to discuss academic placement and from which parents ‘chose’ did not include Lab Math or Lab Science. Moreover, no one used language to clarify that classes were available to help struggling students in accelerated courses, and so most African American students and parents remained unaware. An African American guidance counselor explained:

White parents were upset. They heard that Black students were in the same classes as their children. This is when we first started detracking classes. They were mad. They thought that heterogeneous classes were going to dumb down their children's education. So they started having meetings and forcing the superintendent and principal to come up with something. The principal and superintendent are no longer here. The new principal started the Lab classes. Now all students in sixth grade are in heterogeneous classes, but the seventh and eighth grade math and science classes have different levels.

While the Lab classes emerged from White resistance to detracking, school district administrators were forced to compromise. My observations at PTA and school board meetings suggested that many White parents sought to maintain racialized tracks because they considered African American and Latino students 'not good enough/smart enough.' With the persistence of these anti-Black sentiments, not even good-intentioned White administrators would interfere with their compulsion to segregate.

The White middle school principal and assistant superintendent and superintendent provided a strong evidence-based presentation on the importance of detracking, but two years later, they had either resigned or retired, most likely because of detracking policies. These White administrators paid the price with their jobs. The White parents were powerful enough to pressure administrators to maintain the infrastructure of *Plessy*. They also found a way to ensure that struggling White students could sustain separate educational experiences from minority students and remain in advanced classes with White students who were doing well. By contrast, only four of the 38 African American students in this study were in upper-track classes – one enrolled in the Lab courses, two struggled in upper-track classes, and one did not need additional support. Thus, their parents were encouraged to place their children in lower-track classes. Unawareness and misinformation further kept the majority of African American students from overcoming their academic hurdles (Nomi and Allensworth 2013).

Anti-black tracks within communities

Over the last fifty years, researchers have focused on within-school tracking without examining the paths students take outside of school that also impact academic placement. Since the Coleman Report (1966), research has defined the vital roles of home and community in student success (Tate 2012; Johnson 2017). Coleman et al. (1966) argued that schools have little impact on the achievement of poor students, but my argument underscores the intersectionality of home, school, and community (Epstein and Sanders 2000). An essential piece of the puzzle is missing by not understanding how homes and communities impact school tracking. The African American students in this study showed that anti-Blackness, racial segregation and poverty impact their perceptions of where they belong within racialized academic tracks.

I asked the 38 students to describe their average day. They got up in the morning, walked to the school bus stop, and boarded with the same students from their community. At school, they ate breakfast, then went to classes, after which they got on the same bus and went home. Many visited the African American community center, played with friends, and ate a meal before returning home. I discovered that these students who lived in a racially diverse city and attended a racially diverse school nonetheless traveled anti-Black paths. They were located in separate, often unequal spaces regarding resources, opportunities, and type of knowledge that higher education uses to accept students.

The 38 students were fully aware of the city's racial segregation. Only two lived outside of the predominantly African American neighborhood. Rachael, Cleveland, and Sarah explained this racial pattern:

Rachael: The White areas, the West End, East End. The Black areas, east side, west side. Spanish areas are Broadway. That's basically it.

Cleveland: Where I live at, the projects and the east side near the train tracks. That's basically the two, really, Black areas.

Sarah: It's full of Black people on west side and east side and then on the White people are on the ends.

While students were aware of racial discrimination, they did not know why the city was racially segregated. Many concluded that African Americans just chose their homes in an all-Black area and 'did not work hard to get bigger homes,' just as students chose their track placement in school. Housing and schooling parallel each other in how social actors produce policies and practices to benefit some Whites, while 'society' contends it is about choosing and working hard. Many of the students felt Whites lived in 'bigger homes' because they worked harder. They were unaware that their grandparents and great-grandparents from the South were restricted to the West and East Ends and found only low-wage employment. Their parents attended a racially diverse school district in the 1980s and 1990s that forced them into a rigorous tracking system (Lofton 2019). One may argue that Whites do not have better homes and professions because of hard work, but rather because African Americans were prevented from them because of a racial caste system in their schools, homes, and communities.

Students felt that once they crossed the racial patterns in the city, Whites would seek to force them back. Jenny, a sixth-grade student, recounted:

Jenny: It's like some people on the West End is like racist because I think it was Saturday me and my friends were walking on the West End to go to another friend's birthday party. We were just walking, and we were having a conversation, and I understand that we were laughing and having fun, and then this man comes out of his house and starts yelling at us, Oh, these Black people are not supposed to be on the West End anyway, and we were just like okay whatever.

Researcher: Who said this?

Jenny: A man.

Researcher: What were you doing?

Jenny: We were just walking to our friend's house because he lives on the same block.

Researcher: What did you do when you heard that? Were you shocked?

Jenny: No, I just kept on walking.

Jenny called this man a racist because he wanted to maintain segregation upon seeing a Black female in a predominantly White neighborhood. Tellingly, Jenny was not shocked by this. Her story suggests that African American middle school students are already making sense of the anti-Blackness that surround them, that the man's mentality is in fact in their city and their

school. This man, living in a middle-class White neighborhood, connected more with *Plessy* than with *Brown*. Students like Jenny who must self-select their academic placement in racially diverse schools know the *Plessy* mentality but sometimes continue walking their distinct paths.

Tonya, a seventh-grader in lower-track classes, alluded to Whites not only shouting but calling the cops:

Tonya: They want to maintain them to be White areas. They don't want you over there.

Researcher: How do you know that?

Tonya: They will call the police on you.

Researcher: Why do you say that?

Tonya: They always call the cops on us. They always try to get us in trouble.

Interestingly, Tonya indicated that African Americans in this city do not leave their neighborhood. However, the African American students did not fully participate in recreational areas in the city as their White peers did. Rarely did I see African Americans at the beaches and parks that are only one hour away from a global metropolis. Like Tonya, many of the students in this middle school felt that cops were used as another mechanism to control African Americans and ensure racial boundaries. They cited several examples of police brutality and over-policing to maintain the racial caste system. For them, the role of police officers was to control behaviors, uphold segregation, and treat African Americans differently than Whites. As with racialized tracking, students would get in trouble if they crossed racial boundaries; instead of guidance counselors, however, police officers would be called in to enforce the punishment.

Another key issue was disinvestment in the segregated Black community where resources were unequal, especially in the parks, as Jena reinforced:

Jena: . . . I think the parks in my area should be updated because they're very small, and the parks in the others we go, which are the White areas, . . . because they have bigger ones and . . . more equipment there to go on, and they have a water park.

From an early age, Jena could see this disinvestment; other students also cited park authorities, community centers, and landlords who did not take care of their property. Despite these inequities and brutalities, students still did not want to leave their neighborhood. Thirty-four of the 38 opted to remain in the predominantly Black area; to this point, Jena simply remarked, 'Oh no, I want to stay where I am at.'

I discovered from the interviews that students expressed three main reasons for staying in their community. First, they were familiar with their neighbors. It was clear on my walks that everyone knew each other well; neighborhoods were welcoming and kind. This familiarity shaped a sense of belonging in this community.

Second, students embodied the cultural knowledge, practices, and understanding of their social world, which resonated with their community. This study concurred with Yosso that students and their families over multiple generations developed their cultural wealth and valued this richness because it taught them how to survive in a city where powerful social actors had a *Plessy* mentality. This cultural wealth gave them hope, resiliency, and agency amid separate and unequal policies and practices. I witnessed how this wealth was shared and organically grown in two churches, community centers, basketball courts, streets, and homes.

While African Americans did not own any businesses or restaurants in the city, they cultivated Black placemaking (Hunter et al. 2016) in their neighborhood by producing social interactions that fostered love, sense of belonging, and resistance. Previous tracking research has shown ‘African Americans and Latino’ students chose lower-track classes because they yearned for ‘places of respect’ in their classes (Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna 2002); in fact, they sought these places both within racialized tracks and outside of schools. Thus, it is not only a matter of respect; these students also want to share, preserve, and protect their cultural knowledge and blackness in an anti-Black educational landscape (Baldrige 2020; Dumas and Ross 2016). In addition, these acts allow them to rehumanize and ‘know their worth’ in places that devalued their contributions, assets, and talents (Perry 2020).

Third, students did not want to confront racial tension and discrimination. By living in a predominantly White area, they would face direct acts of racism. Once again, they strove to protect and preserve themselves from racial battle fatigue, moving away from upper-track classes and residing in communities with minimal racial issues. According to my participants, living in more affluent White areas would cause them to lose all three of the benefits they could enjoy in their beloved community.

Conclusion

The most recent research on racialized tracking contends that it is essential to uncover new mechanisms, although established since the *Brown* decision, that maintain tracking in schools (Lewis and Diamond 2015). Building on this idea, this study contends that not only new mechanisms but also the infrastructure of the *Plessy* decision (Ladson-Billings 2004) must be eradicated. Mechanisms will only provide by-products, not address the problem. In other words, it is not only the new mechanisms it is the mentality and the structures of the *Plessy* decision that must be dismantled. These findings not only uncovered this ideology, but also showed the current-day manifestation of these ideas through a racial caste system that many African American students encounter in their home, school, and community. Building on Wilkerson’s (2020) work on caste, this research points out that tracking in schools and disinvestment in African American communities contributes to the infrastructure of our divisions. We must disrupt and interrogate this racial caste system that maintains separate and unequal tracks and hinders the academic trajectories and overall wellness for African Americans students. Many African American middle school students are forced to travel through racialized tracking and racial housing patterns daily. These twin factors have helped shape tracks of unequal outcomes, resources, knowledge and perceptions where students belong. However, along these paths, African Americans continue to build social networks, endurance, cultural wealth and knowledge, resiliency, appreciation, and protection. They produce Black placemaking, in which they rehumanize themselves and find belonging and cultural wealth even within lower-track classes and disinvested Black neighborhoods

This research concludes that choice does not equate with equity or eradicate the structure of *Plessy*. Despite a self-select process at school, the majority still consented to lower-track classes. The issue is more complex than simply choosing tracks. Students are making informed decisions about self-protecting from anti-Blackness and racial battle fatigue, internalizing perceptions of their talents and abilities, and avoiding trouble

by not going against counselors' recommendations. Their 'choice' to be in lower-track classes was never freely chosen, but proved to be their best choice for their circumstances.

The findings also revealed that educational structures maintain tracking because of powerful White parents with a *Plessy* mentality that even causes White administrators to lose their jobs rather than change the system. Regardless of race, those who maintain the *Brown* decision may pay a price. More research is needed to uncover how school and district administrators compromise the educational experiences of African American students to maintain *Plessy* in their schools. As a result of the maintenance of *Plessy*, many African Americans perceived they were not good or smart enough for advanced courses, but were unaware of the extra support the school could provide. African American students were only aware of the take-home form which recorded their 'consent' to the durable racialized boundaries in the school.

A significant contribution of this article is connecting racialized tracking to racialized housing patterns. While the students had a racially diverse city and school, they lived separate and distinct lives echoing back to *Plessy*. Despite confinement to certain locations, they developed their own richness, love, and social networks to rehumanize them away from the surrounding toxic inequalities. But one must wonder, what talents, skills, cures, and solutions have not been cultivated, developed, and affirmed because of this racial caste system. Policymakers must take into account that, in order to address *Plessy's* Tracks, one must develop and implement policies that humanize the lived experiences of African American students and their community members. To address the racial caste system, one must not base policies, practices, and the problem on black inferiority, which the *Brown* decision exploited (Ladson-Billings 2004). Anti-Blackness must cease in curriculum, pedagogical practices, hiring and retention practices, school climate, housing patterns and neighborhood investment, school board meetings and parents' voices. Policy must be designed to allow African American students, parents, and community members to resist and heal from the rigid caste system by providing them the educational landscape to promote their self-efficacy, self-actualization, and self-determination (Warren and Coles 2020). In addition, students, parents, teachers, and administrators must be fully aware of the racial housing policies and practices that confined African Americans to certain locations and prevented them from accumulating wealth through property, and how the disinvestment continues today. Policies that aim to utilize 'choice' without eradicating the infrastructure of anti-blackness further promote the racial caste system; hence, moving people to upper-track classes or out of their communities will never *fully* dismantle *Plessy's* Tracks. Students do not live in social vacuums, and they make decisions in schools based on the knowledge they acquire both inside and outside of school. Students Black habitus confronted anti-Blackness in their schools and city. This research could be the beginning of many studies that explore the mechanisms, ideologies, and structures that maintain racialized tracking coupled with racially segregated and disinvested communities to effectively dismantle these persistent anti-Black tracks that were validated in the *Plessy* decision.

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