Tracking Myself: African American High School Students Talk About the Effects of Curricular Differentiation

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Abstract   Research on the merit of school tracking policies has long been at the center of heated educational debate. Unfortunately, while the trend in studies looking at tracking in schools has continued, the student perspective has been underutilized in much of this previous research. Recently, however, there has been a surge in research that focuses on the benefits of student-centered research. This research recognizes the legitimacy of student perspectives in reform efforts. This article focuses on the student perspectives in a qualitative project with seven black students to understand the insights and contributions they have for school leaders. Findings revealed that students contribute nuanced perspectives on complex educational reform issues, such as tracking, and provide powerful insights that should be considered in school reform conversations.

Keywords   School tracking policies; Student perspective; Educational reform; Tracking

Introduction

In the long history of public education in United States, many curricular reforms have fallen in and out of favor. School tracking policies, defined as "a process through which students are sorted and grouped, based on some measure or perception of their academic ability" (Rubin & Noguera, 2004, p. 92), is a good example of just such a reform. After the first widespread implementation in the 1920s, tracking fell out of favor by the 1940s, only to regain popularity in the wake of Sputnik and desegregation in the 1950s (Oakes, 2005). Research on tracking has shown it to have a deleterious effect on the learning of all students, pointing to the early ages that tracking, or ability grouping, is implemented (Lleras & Rangel, 2009; Nieto, 2000; Oakes, 1995), the fact that placement decisions are often based on non-academic factors (Nieto, 2000; Oakes, 2005), the relative permanence of these placements (Dickens, 1996; Meier, 1989; Oakes, 2005), and evidence that disparities in performance get worse, not better, the longer students are in these environments (Donelan, 1994; Ferguson, 2002; Meier, 1989; Oakes, 1993; 1995; 2005). However, despite this consensus in the research, many schools continue to use tracking and ability grouping as a standard instructional tool. Given this disconnection between research and practice, new perspectives must be explored to better understand why schools continue to use tracking and ability grouping when research does not show it to be effective.

As the debate over tracking has continued, critical discourses in the field of educational policy have shifted and opened to recognize that important voices in key educational issues have been ignored and suppressed. Students, particularly students of color, are one group that has been recognized in this trend (Cook-Sather, 2002a; Fielding, 2001, 2002; Fine, Weiss, & Powell, 1997; Lincoln, 1995; Mansfield, 2014; Mitra, 2004; Raymond, 2001; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001; Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997). This study takes the unique approach of using student voice to highlight one aspect of this research-praxis disconnect. Specifically, it asks African American high school students to redesign a tracking policy for their school. The following section discusses the need for a student perspective. The article then outlines the methods employed in this project and shares the findings.

Why use student voices?

Students represent an important and legitimate perspective in education. While parents, teachers, administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders are represented in conversations about education reform, students have largely been left out of the discussion. Students, however, bring a unique perspective to the table—one that represents a huge deficit in our knowledge base when disregarded (Cook-Sather, 2002b; Mansfield, 2014; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001; Silva, 2003). As Beth Rubin and Elena Silva (2003) suggest, the student perspective is an essential component of the policy debate, but one that is "too often assumed, undermined or altogether ignored in the implementation and assessment of school change practices" (p. 211). Students represent an important constituency in these endeavors, as they bring perspectives that are sometimes unwanted, too controversial, or too political for adults to deal with without additional pressure (Mitra, 2004). Students

may also benefit from such participation by feeling more engaged in school when their perspectives are heard and validated (Mitra, 2004). Accordingly, in this article, the premise that students are legitimate policy agents is key.

Given the underuse of student voice in education scholarship generally, and the topic of tracking in particular, the purpose of this article is to highlight the voices of seven African American high school students who provide insight into whether, and how, tracking might be used in schools to support student achievement and engagement.

Methods

This qualitative project followed typical case study methods (Yin, 2002) to understand the experiences of seven African American high school students with tracking and within-school stratification at Highview High School (HHS). Highview is a medium-size school located in a suburban area in the Midwest, where students reflect a wide range of racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. Nearly one-quarter of the student population represents a minoritized group, with nearly 10 percent of those identifying as African American. Further, one-quarter of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

This study used data from the 2005–2006 school year, which were collected by visiting HHS several times per week over the course of several months. Data sources included multiple interviews with study participants (both individually and in focus groups), over one hundred hours of classroom observation, and relevant school documents and records. After observing in the school for a few weeks and seeking teacher recommendations, the authors identified a pool of potential African American students and contacted them regarding their interest in participating in this project. A balance was sought across various track levels and gender. The final pool included seven students (most were juniors or seniors). Two students (one male and one female) from the alternative education program (pseudonym "Bridge"), two students (one male and one female) from the general education program, and three students from the advanced placement (AP) track (one male and two females, though one girl, Nicole, had graduated the year before the study began and was attending school at an elite university in the area).

Each student was interviewed three separate times individually. In addition, three focus group meetings were held with all of the study participants. Further, during the classroom observation time spent in the school, the second author (Terah) was able to visit each student's English and math class, and also followed each student through his or her entire class schedule at least once during the study period. All data were analyzed using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Issues of trustworthiness were attended to using a combination of data triangulation, peer debriefing, and thick, rich description (Erlandson, Skipper, Harris, & Allen, 1993). The first author, Darrius, participated in the final analysis and writing phase of the project. The next section shares students' voices regarding their experiences with tracking at Highview and how the practice could be revised in order to be more effective.

Findings

Over the course of the individual and focus group interviews, students discussed a

variety of topics related to tracking at Highview. After discussing their experiences, the students were invited to create a new policy for the school concerning tracking that, if implemented, would address some of the issues they expressed during the project. Students were asked to think about designing a policy for Highview for the following year that would apply to incoming students. The students' responses were captured in three distinct themes: 1) preparing students earlier; 2) letting students fulfill their individual strengths; and 3) building a strong community of students.

Preparing students earlier

Interestingly, while the students could have chosen to eliminate tracking entirely, most of them felt that dismantling tracking completely was not necessary. They felt that tracking was not at the root of the problems they were having at Highview. Rather, they focused on creating an atmosphere that was more embracing and welcoming to all students through specific, student-centered policies focused at all levels of school leadership. The motto they created for the school, "Individualized Students, Specialized Classes, Personalized Faculty," sums up their perspective in creating the new policy. Their main goals were to prepare students academically much earlier so that students would be better prepared in high school to take upper level classes, create a stronger community of students, and to focus on allowing students to fulfill their interests based on their individual goals and desires for the future.

In interview after interview, students discussed their concern over how early tracking had come to play a role in their lives. They felt strongly that tracking could only work if students were given an equal chance of being successful. That meant ensuring all students had access to high-quality instruction. They all agreed that tracking should not happen before high school, although a few students felt that even junior high was too soon. Discussing why she felt tracking in middle school was problematic, Raine, a regular-track student had the following to say:

> I don't think tracking should have been in middle school. … 'Cause in middle school, you're just coming out of elementary school and you're just learning what you could do and what you can't do and how to figure everything out. And to put somebody who just came out of the 5th grade into a high honors class and make the other students [who are not placed in advanced classes] feel bad, like, "Was we not coloring right?" I don't think that that should happen.

In her unique way, Raine paints a portrait of how ridiculous it is to her for students at early ages to be separated for honors or advanced classes. The students all felt strongly that it would only be fair to separate students in high school if the students' preparation to that point had been equal. This issue also came up at later in Cortez's final interview, when he was asked if he had anything else to contribute to the interview and he spoke about his issues with tracking beginning at such early ages.

Cortez: They try to get us at a young age. Real young.

Terah: What do you mean by "get" you?

Cortez: They put us in these classes [and] make it seem like we can't read when we're like six, and [in] first grade and stuff. They start off tracking us when we're in elementary. Come on! That's very disrespectful.

Terah: You're gonna make me cry. So you think it's intentional? I mean, you said, "they get you when you're six." Tell me about that.

Cortez: At a young age, they try to program our minds to be lower than white people. That's my opinion. That's what I think it is. Because since I was young they done put me in classes, and when I was back there [in early elementary school], I thought I could read just as fine as other people in my class. I thought I knew math just as fine as other people in my class. But somehow I was in little anger management and help-read classes and stuff like this.

Vocalizing quite eloquently the problem he sees with early separation, Cortez talks about how he felt as a young student being separated according to his perceived academic ability, but who didn't feel that decision was made fairly. Unfortunately for him, these placements had lasting implications for him and set him on a particular course throughout his educational career.

Together, Raine and Cortez succinctly discuss the problematic aspects of tracking at early ages. Coming from the opposite perspective is Ted, who talks about the benefits of tracking, when students are given access to high-quality instruction at early ages. At the final focus group, he discussed his thoughts on the problems early student preparation would alleviate.

With that in mind, I'm not sure what else would really have to be revised in tracking. Let students find their strengths, but that's still not getting rid of the tracking system. That's not even really revising it. So, I guess what I'm saying is, all of these negative things that people seem to be attributing to tracking, can all be solved without revising or even touching tracking at all. You can still have it. But, it's going to revise itself to a point where there are no longer any negative externalities. Just by letting students further their own strengths, and preparing students earlier.

By far one of the most ardent supporters of tracking among the students in the project, Ted still felt as though tracking was not fair when students had such differential preparation prior to arriving at Highview. From his perspective, however, this was the only revision to tracking that would be necessary to correct any inequalities at the high school level. The students overwhelmingly felt that focusing on student preparation at early ages was a key aspect of tracking reform. A second key factor they considered had to do with catering to students' individual strengths, interests in the courses they took, and academic programs they followed.

Let students fulfill individual strengths

The students felt that the second key factor of creating tracking reform centered on making sure students were able to fulfill their individual strengths at school. As they saw it, schools approached learning with a "one size fits all" philosophy that did not account for students' individual strengths and skills. The students in the project emphasized the point that students have varied skills and interests, and schools should not only recognize this diversity but also embrace it through the curriculum. The students felt strongly that the solution to this issue lies in school personnel taking more of an active interest in getting to know all of the students in the school. They focused on the guidance department, which they were particularly critical of at Highview. Raine addressed this issue in one of the focus groups, where she discussed the unreasonable expectation that the four counselors in the school could get to know all of the students on their caseload.

> I think that the [students] that don't speak up for themselves are the ones that get hurt [by tracking]. Because they could know something and they could just be in the class passing and everything, but not one guidance counselor that's assigned to 1,200 students is gonna look at anybody's schedule. They could just get skipped over.

While she may overstate the ratio somewhat (the actual ratio is about 400 students to each guidance counselor), Raine's point about it being unreasonable to expect one person to be able to foster meaningful relationships with so many students is well taken. She feels that in the end, the students who are not as vocal about their interests may be the ones to suffer because they may not feel comfortable speaking up about wanting to take a different course of study. Nicole echoed Raine's sentiment in one of her interviews, where she explained *how* personal relationships could lead to a greater number of students taking higher-track classes.

> I think there should be a much stronger focus on the growth of each student. Let's say you're in the average track in your freshman and sophomore year and you show, for whatever reason, considerable development that would allow you to be much more successful, or just prepare you for—or you're suddenly more equipped to be in the higher track your junior year. There should be no inhibition to that, whatsoever. Somebody needs to know the students, somebody needs to KNOW that you made that growth. Somebody needs to stop and point and say, "look at how much you've learned." Or, "look at how, you know, now you work twenty-five hours a week so your study habits have begun to falter and you can't flourish in these classes. You're beginning to flounder, let's move you back to a place where you can still be successful academically and keep a priority of a job, let's say, or you know, a child, or your family member, or what have you." But somebody needs to be paying more attention to the students and it's not happening.

Nicole expresses the sentiment of the other students when she discusses how important it is to have someone who knows you play a role in helping you enroll in courses.

In addition to the importance of school personnel getting to know students on an individual level, the students also thought it was important for students to be informed about the tracking policy at their school. One of their main concerns with the policy at Highview was that they were not aware that tracking was occurring, let alone the major impact it had on their educational journey. Cortez addressed this issue when he spoke about what he wished he could tell incoming freshman students about life at Highview.

> Once you in a low class, you know, a lot of that brings down your self-esteem. That's part of tracking. It brings down your self-esteem and makes you not want to even care about school anymore. It makes you not want to even go to school or even care about it. You know, the ones that are feeling that way and end up dropping out of school and not having a good life. And not be able to take care of themselves. Those are the ones that are being hurt by it.

From Cortez's perspective, the students who are most negatively affected by tracking are those who take their lower-track placements personally, and subsequently feel that school is not a place for them. If these students were informed about the larger structural and institutional factors playing a role in their school experiences (which have been playing a role from their earliest days in the system), they might feel differently about their situation. However, Cortez fears that for many of these students, irrevocable damage has been done. Trevonne, a regular-track student, had a similar perspective, and felt that if students were informed earlier, they would be able to prepare themselves better.

> It affects students in a BIG way by not knowing if you were educated about tracking earlier, then there'd be better ways to prepare yourself about it. But if you really don't know about it, or really don't care about it, it's gonna hurt you in the long run. I just feel if you prepare yourself and prepare others about it, it will kind of help the situation with yourself and with black males and black females.

Trevonne underscores the importance of students being informed about factors that play a role in course enrollment. An important point raised by Trevonne and Cortez, however, is that perhaps tracking *is* the problem. If students internalize negative feelings about themselves as a result of being tracked in low-track classes, the question becomes whether any amount of personalization or individualization could compensate for those feelings.

This section deals with the students' thoughts on the importance of students being allowed and encouraged to explore their own individual strengths. Having adults in the school who are familiar with the students and their performance was one key to this, another was allowing students to take an active role in enrolling in courses, with explicit knowledge of the ways tracking works in the school. While in

this way the students were focused on strategies at the individual level, they also saw the importance of creating a sense of community in the school. One of the lingering issues raised by Trevonne and Cortez, however, is the psychological damage done to students in lower-track classes. That said, the students' third and final recommendation regarding the revision of tracking at Highview had to do with creating a stronger community of students in the school.

Building a stronger community of students

To be sure, the students in the project felt that both preparing students earlier and letting students explore their individual strengths were important considerations in revising the tracking policy at Highview. However, the issue discussed at greatest length was creating a strong community of students. The students' responses fall into two general categories. First, the students discussed problems that result from the lack of community; second, they suggested what they felt could be done to address these issues.

Student concerns about the lack of student community at Highview

When the students discussed the issues of community at Highview that were particularly problematic to them, they invariably focused on the issues of segregation and isolation that occurred among the various academic tracks in the school. In fact, many of the participating students had never met prior to the start of the project. This issue comes to the forefront in the second focus group, where Cortez, Trevonne, Ted, and Nicole discuss having very little contact with one another.

> Nicole: I maybe saw you thirty seconds while I was walking to one class, and you were walking to a different one. But that doesn't mean I ever got to learn your name.

> Cortez: I know. Yo, I don't know nobody—except them two now [pointing to Nicole and Ted]—in some real high class.

> Trevonne: She graduated though.

> Cortez: Man, she was here last year?

The participants were particularly disappointed by the lack of contact students have with students in other tracks. The racial segregation that occurred among track levels (with black students dominating the Bridge program, but virtually nonexistent in AP courses) merely made the situation even worse. Raine discussed this issue in one of her individual interviews, when she discussed her feelings about the plethora of black students in the Bridge classes. When asked about strategies the school could employ to increase the number of black students in AP courses, she immediately discussed this issue.

> Terah: Is there something that can be done to help black students take more AP or advanced classes?

> Raine: Yeah, get all those black kids out of Bridge! Half of the black kids out here are all in Bridge. … Teacher help you

take your test, you don't have to do nuthin, people have pity on you, "Oh these blacks in white schools. Have pity on him. He's in Bridge, let him pass easily." Like that. "Oh you see Curtis, come here, come join Bridge." It's like— it's like they see an easy way out, and they take it, and then they play the "race" part—if it's not played on them already.

Terah: How does that make you feel?

Raine: I just get mad, cuz half of 'em in Bridge and they ain't in my classes.

Raine has several insights here. One is that she feels that some students are capable of taking regular-track or even AP courses, but teachers are holding these students back due to the low expectations they have of them. Also, she wanted them to be in class with her so she would not feel so racially isolated.

Nicole addressed this issue as well, talking about the isolation she experienced as a black student in AP courses. She feels that she is strong enough to handle the isolation she experienced, but also that she was somewhat isolated from the larger black community because of the lack of overlapping academic and even social spaces.

> I think, having been in the higher classes, um, socially you get really siphoned off from the rest of the world. Particularly coming in as a black student. I was often one of one, or one of two, tops one of three, black students in my classes. It didn't necessarily bother me because I'm strong enough of a person that I could get my cultural identity from myself and other people around me. But I don't think that everybody necessarily can. And I think that particularly as a minority student, I think that's detrimental. Not to be able to be in certain social groups just because those aren't the people that you take classes with, and it doesn't, you know—the people you're in classes with are the people that you're going to choose to have the same extracurriculars with, the same people that you're going to choose to be in electives with, the same people you're going to choose to sit with at lunch. And it doesn't help anybody.

The students learned a lot from each other during their conversations in the focus group, and this underscored their perspectives that students should have more contact with one another, even if they are in different academic tracks and extracurricular activities. They saw one piece of this as making sure students are taking the courses they should be in. Another piece is creating opportunities for students to interact with one another in different academic settings. The students talked about several strategies the school could employ to strengthen its feeling of community and encourage this type of contact.

Strategies to create a stronger community of students at Highview

The students were very clear that while they found many aspects of the school cul-
ture at Highview problematic, particularly with regard to issues of segregation and
the isolation of students of color, they also felt that these issues could be overcome
if the school employed new strategies. For example, they felt that creating a culture
at the school that celebrated students' backgrounds would be one positive step. Raine
was particularly supportive of this idea, since she felt the school did very little to
support or celebrate black students' culture.

> We don't celebrate black kids—maybe somebody will get on the loud
> speaker and say a quote from somebody. You know, at assembly? We
> don't celebrate Martin Luther King Day. We don't recognize any black
> people. This school is so—they could celebrate the Mexicans, or the
> Latinos, but it's like they don't do nothing for us. We don't have any
> black teachers. We don't even have a Black History class. It's like,
> how are we suppose to know anything?

In their final focus group, students discussed the importance of being able to find
community with other students of the same race and/or ethnicity and being encour-
aged by the school to do so. Nicole summarizes the perspective that emerged out of
a conversation the students had about this issue:

> [It] comes back to building a stronger community of students. It's
> not singular communities that just all happen to be in the same
> place, it's small communities that overlap, this community over
> there, that can—I can sit at any lunch table I feel like because I
> know somebody at every single one. I can talk to people at every
> single one. My friends are not just over here or over there, or are
> my friends because we took this class together, or because we all
> played football together. My friends are a little bit of everything.

Nicole (and Ted, though his response is not included here) reported being in many
"communities" in the school. Nevertheless, all of the students felt that the school
could and should do more to create communities for students of color and encourage
curricular and extracurricular opportunities to discuss issues of race and ethnicity.

Part of creating a stronger community of students was also about increasing the
number of students of color taking advanced classes in the school. The students felt
that it was important not to just send students who were not prepared into these
classes—which aligns with their perspective that students should be prepared better
earlier—but agreed the disparity in the racial demographics of advanced classes was
problematic. Raine picks up on this point in her final individual interview, and gives
her insight on why this disparity in course enrollment happens at Highview.

> Only the ones that really need to be. Like that are so doing much
> better in the classes they are in. Not just any ol' black person in the
> classes. That just defeats the purpose. But to make sure that students
> are exactly where they need to be, not just because of the color they

are, or the way they act, or how they dress, but because of what they know.

Raine agrees with points made earlier in the conversation by Nicole and Katrina that just putting more black students in AP courses will not solve the problem on its own. But then she makes an interesting observation about the reasons why these students may not be selected for these classes—based on assumptions made about their race, behavior, or dress, and how these issues are thought to correlate with their intelligence. From her perspective, stereotypes about who is "smart" and how a "smart" person looks, acts, or dresses may play a role in which students are encouraged to take the AP classes. This kind of assumption may work against students of color and other students in the school who may not mirror these expectations.

Another important aspect of building community at Highview had to do with increasing the number of black teachers in the school. There was only one black teacher in the school, a biracial woman who taught English. The only other known teacher of color was a Japanese woman who was on exchange from Japan and taught a Japanese language course. All of the other teachers in the high school were white. In fact, most of the students who had attended all of their schooling in the district had never had a teacher of color. This was true for Ted, who explained, "I haven't had really any black teachers. I mean, I had a couple of subs and stuff like that, but I mean, that's pretty different." Because of this, the students were adamant that the number of black teachers in the school had to increase. Darica, a Bridge student who was normally very reserved in her thoughts about Highview, positive or negative, got particularly animated when talking about the need for more black teachers in the school.

> I really think black students need black teachers! A black teacher is gonna tell you about yourself! Get us some black teachers up in here. Get us some people that's gonna help us and know somethin' about us. That relate. That knows how hard it is, you know, because they tell you. "If you don't want to be here, you're gonna get out." "I'm gonna make you get out, cuz you want what I have, basically, and I know how hard it is to get it, so you're not gonna give me no hard time." So, what's gonna help a black student more? Black teachers.

Cortez, another Bridge student, also agreed that increasing the number of black teachers in the school was critical to any improvement, especially related to students of color in the school.

> First, [we need] more black teachers. We have no black teachers. We don't even have Black History. How you gonna celebrate Black History Month by saying over the intercom something from something a black person did—between classes or somethin—and then you got a white person sayin it. There's no Black History. There's no black teachers. It's like they're not even here to help us. You know what I'm sayin? It's just like, we feel lonely. Okay? Lonely. … [We had] one black counselor, and they fired him this year.

Cortez mentions the black counselor that was hired by the school. His official title was "African American mentor," but in a personal conversation he explained that his role was mainly one of security guard or hall monitor. It was unclear what his credentials were. He made some attempts at creating a sense of community for black students at the school, but as Cortez explains, most of those efforts were lackluster at best. Most of the black students either did not know who he was, or felt that his efforts did more harm than good.

Returning to the issue of tracking specifically, the students did see an additional benefit to students of various academic abilities coming together in classes. In addition to helping to build community, they say this as an opportunity to practice cooperative learning skills. Even if tracking were to stay, which is what the students recommended, they still felt it was important for students to have contact with one another and play a central role in the learning process. In this section, the students discuss why they feel cooperative learning is such an important learning tool.

The issue of cooperative learning was discussed in one of the focus groups, and it was a topic that almost everyone present had something to say about. In the following excerpt, Darica, a Bridge student, talks about the synergistic benefits of cooperative learning.

> But if you put people at different levels in the group, we can all help each other. You know what I'm saying? Because we're at different levels. One person will know one thing and then another student will know another thing. And then another student another thing. And all of those different minds and different levels can come together and, like if you were doing a project, create a great project and a great presentation. But if you just got all these people and they know one thing and it's all the same thing, what's that gonna do? Y'all all know the same thing? How's that gonna help you? You need people at all different levels.

At various points in their individual and focus group interviews, all of the students shared Darica's support for cooperative learning.

The students in this project had a lot to say about how tracking could be revised to better support the learning needs of students at Highview. However, their thoughts related to three main issues: preparing students earlier in their school careers, informing students of how tracking works so they can make decisions about how they want to move forward, and creating a stronger community of students. In the process they revealed a strong knowledge base about what students in schools need to be sucessful. The students had some profound insight. They demonstrated that they know what the important issues are in the school, including identifying structural and institutional barriers to "problem" students who actually want more expected from them. The discussion now turns to the larger implications of the students' thoughts on tracking reform.

Discussion

When we think about school reform efforts we often overlook those that are arguably

the most important constituents: the students. Policymakers and researchers have traditionally thought to improve schools *for* students rather than *with* students. Evidenced by the participants in this study, there is valuable insight to be gained from this type of research. African American students at Highview found themselves in a complex environment where race was not always a comfortable topic to discuss. Because of the marginalized status of African American students in the school, and some students perceiving a general lack of commitment by teachers and administrators, very little was done to affirm and celebrate African American culture. Tracking became a mechanism that exacerbated the already segregated nature of the school, making lower-track black students feel even more isolated and marginalized. At the heart of all of these issues is the fact that the Bridge and regular track students in this project felt that they were not *heard* in their school. They were thrilled to have the opportunity to share their perspectives in this research project and dedicated many hours over the course of the project to participate. This section highlights a few of the specific points the students shared.

First, students are capable of understanding complex educational issues. The students were critical of the use of tracking in their school, but were savvy in their critique. They said that just eliminating tracking would not necessarily address the problems, and instead they looked for solutions that would make meaningful change. They pointed to the problems that occurred early in children's educational trajectories that differentially prepare them over time, the lack of information about the choices available to them regarding their own education, and the importance of strong student communities. The students were able to talk about these issues with poise and passion, demonstrating that if they are given the space, they are more than capable of making critical insights.

Second, even though students are capable of understanding these educational issues, this does not mean that their contributions should be romanticized. Despite the participants' intuition and ability to understand complex issues of practice, they still face roadblocks, such as their constraint within school hierarchies and simply their own development. The student participants, although intelligent, are still children and the insight they offer cannot be taken as gospel. There are some significant complex structures in place working outside of the students' current knowledge base, which is evident in some of the findings. However, if utilized properly, these student voices could help inform future policy and school improvement efforts. The insider perspective that the students bring could prove valuable for policymakers and school and district leaders who seek student-centered reform.

Third, the students' insights underscore the point that tracking itself is not necessarily the problem. They talk about problems with how tracking is implemented, as well as deeper institutional and structural factors. Both of these issues illuminate a key point: tracking may be the *symptom* of a much more serious illness at play in schools. Even if tracking is eliminated to treat the symptom, problems related to stratification and separation will likely still exist. An important point that could be drawn from this discussion is the power of the structures that inhibit minoritized groups within schools. In fact, some of these structures are beyond tracking. The students were able to identify the importance of preparation, resources, and support,

which all have an influence on minoritized students' success. The students did not indict tracking as a whole but showed the ways in which these practices were instrumental in thwarting the ability of school personnel to provide equitable support for all students. As the students identified, there are teacher diversity problems, curricular issues, and pedagogical practices that do not allow for cooperative learning. Pointing to these larger structural issues shifts focus from questions of how we can improve or dismantle tracking to how we can look beyond the confines of a policy change to the broader systemic injustices that underlie its use.

Finally, while it is true that consensus on issues of particular educational significance, such as tracking, will be difficult to achieve, the students from this project show that it is possible. If a diverse group of students coming from very different backgrounds and experiences can come together to create a plan they could all be proud of and that addressed their concerns, what is stopping the rest of the education community?

Recommendations for school leadership and policy

There are a number of insights from this research that school leaders and policymakers should consider. First, students can and should be involved in the decision-making process. The students in this project demonstrated a keen understanding of the issues that affected them, and they raised issues that may have been overlooked by adults in the school. Providing a seat for them at the table increases the likelihood that policies and programs will be more effective.

Second, robust student participation takes work. Asking a student to join a committee or inviting one to attend a meeting is likely not enough. A relationship must be created with students for them to feel comfortable, especially if there has not been a history of student participation. It is also important to talk about all the nuances of an issue with students, as they may not fully understand all of the implications of various decisions. This is not any different from what an adult would need coming into a new situation, but this process is often neglected when students are involved. The relationships with the students in this project evolved over months of regular contact. Their understanding of tracking and the broader processes that led to its use evolved over time and after many conversations about their experiences in school. Working with students takes work, but too often students are included to provide insights only in carefully curated situations that provide only cursory opportunities for them to be involved. Truly involving students may require a significant time investment, but the benefits to improving school communities more than justify that work.

Finally, although school leaders should consider detracking their schools (Rubin & Noguera, 2004), if this is not an option, they must also examine their practices with tracking to discover and address inequities. The first step in this process is to deeply examine potential racial disparities on a class-by-class basis, keeping in mind that representation in each class should mirror the demographics of the school overall. For example, if African American students comprise 20 percent of the overall student body, they should also make up about 20 percent of AP and lower-track classes. If the numbers of a minoritized group in any class varies more than a few percentage points above or below their school percentage, this is an indication that

a racial disparity may exist, and a closer look must be taken to understand the factors that drive this disparity. Another intervention school leaders should consider is hiring more teachers of color, an issue the students in this research also raised. Research has shown the positive impact teachers of color have on students of color (Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Grissom, Kern, & Rodriguez, 2015). Another idea is to foster co-horts of students of color who can enroll in advanced classes together. Since students of color often cite being the "only one" in advanced classes as a detriment to taking those classes (Venzant Chambers, Huggins, Locke, & Fowler, 2014), fostering small groups of students—with appropriate support and resources—to take these courses together may be a positive step. Encouraging these practices earlier in the pipeline, in middle school for example, may also positively impact the number of advanced courses students of color take over their career, as well as their academic performance in them. These are just a few recommendations for school leaders to implement in order to combat some of the negative outcomes associated with tracking as well as within-school stratification.

Conclusion

The student perspective is often undervalued in conversations concerning education. However, as the students involved in this project make clear, their insights can be both tremendously accurate and useful. This project is important as it reveals the critical need for more work with a student-centered perspective in tracking. However, the students' particular insights about tracking are also valuable in themselves. The students revealed a very nuanced and mature understanding of tracking in their school. The regular- and alternative-track students were particularly attuned to the structure of the school and had the ability to critically examine how it affected them. This finding suggests that research take a step further by not only including the voices of students in school improvement conversations, as Rubin & Silva (2003) suggest, but also paying particular attention to the diversity within student groups, particularly with respect to track placement. Tracking creates a caste system that leaves some groups more disenfranchised than others. While the students did not necessarily point to tracking itself as the problem, they did point to larger structural and implementation issues that made tracking in the more equitable manner they suggest an impossible task. Thus, the findings highlighted in this project serve as an important reminder that all perspectives are necessary at the education policy table—especially that of those most closely affected: the students.

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