

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

An Analysis of Standardized Assessment and Tracking in American Education:
Tools of Oppression

NATHANIEL GILLESPIE
SPRING 2022

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Secondary Education
with honors in Secondary Education

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Charlotte Land
Assistant Professor of Education
Thesis Supervisor

Michelle Knotts
Assistant Teaching Professor
Faculty Reader

* Electronic approvals are on file.

ABSTRACT

It is well documented that the United States Education replicates inequity and continues the systematic oppression of communities of color that is embedded in American society. Two of the leading factors for this are standardized assessment and tracking, relics of the race politics of the 20th century that cannot move beyond their white supremacist legacies. This paper offers a brief introduction to the issue, including the history of both. I utilize a Critical Race Theoretical perspective, allowing for a critical analysis of these practices through a lens of racial equity. I examine precisely how these two systems negatively affect students of color across the United States and contribute to the education debt between students of color and their White counterparts. I conclude with the assertion that direct and structural action must be taken by teachers, administrators, and policymakers to be critical of and resist standardized testing and tracking to the point of abolishment of these systems. This is the only way to truly fulfill an earnest commitment to all students.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction and History	1
Standardized Assessment.....	2
Tracking and Ability Grouping.....	3
Education Debt and Purpose.....	4
Chapter 2 Theoretical Perspective	7
Chapter 3 Methods	9
Chapter 4 Findings and Discussion.....	11
Chapter 5 Conclusion and Next Steps	23

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Search Terms included in ERICProQuest Search 10

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first and foremost thank my thesis supervisor, Charlotte Land, for all her help, patience, and support in creating this paper. It would have been impossible without her. I'd also like to thank my faculty reader, Michelle Knotts, who likewise supported me with readings and encouragement, and helped spark my initial interest in this topic. I want to also make sure to thank my family, who have supported me through these past four years and helped instill in me the value of hard work and perseverance. Thank you to all of the donors who have helped make my college journey possible. Lastly, I'd like to thank the Schreyer Honors College for the opportunity to enrich my education at Penn State and helping me build a global perspective.

Chapter 1

Introduction and History

The persistence of tracking and ability grouping, paired with the steady rise of standardized testing in the United States is largely responsible for the perceived achievement gap between white students and students of color in American high schools. The systemic oppression of students of color in the United States, perpetuated by tracking and high stakes standardized assessment, leads to a disparity in the equality of opportunity. It is the responsibility of the United States education system, from teachers to administrators to politicians, to make reforms to remedy this. The current status of American education can be compared to the oppressive systems that Paulo Freire described in his landmark book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Tracking and standardized assessment, hallmarks of American education represent a “limit-situation,” wherein some people benefit from their environments and others are oppressed by them (Freire, 1970). In this case, the research clearly demonstrates that in the U.S., White students benefit from their environment in schools, at the expense of Black and Brown students. An oppressive system such as this is one that calls on educators to present to the oppressed in order to solve. It is the responsibility of educators to work collaboratively among themselves and with those who experience this oppression to deconstruct this system and realize their full humanity (Freire, 1970).

Standardized testing and tracking were borne out of the creation of the IQ test at the start of the 20th century. This, along with the contextualization of the test by cognitive psychologists like Henry Goddard, Lewis Terman, and Robert Yerkes to “fit the race and class politics of the United States” (Au, 2013, p. 8) at the time led to a public perception of intelligence as fixed and hereditary. At the start of WWI, as biased IQ tests were used to sort soldiers based on their “mental fitness,” Yerkes concluded that fair-skinned Europeans were the most intelligent humans, and African-Americans were the least intelligent. These conclusions led Eugenicists to claim that “race-mixing” was spreading the inferior

intelligence genes of non-white peoples and immigrants. This notion was used to track Black students into vocational tracks in schools or allowed teachers to chalk up the struggles of students of color in schools up to this (Au, 2013). With this marriage of American education and racism, the education system became and has continued to be entrenched in white supremacy.

Standardized Assessment

While the idea of standardized testing began with the IQ test, they have increasingly become ingrained in American education after evolving into the norm under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Standardized testing and accountability have widespread political support and are presented as a way to prepare students for a global economy, increase achievement and close the achievement gap. A country-wide fear of falling behind economically has fueled reforms like NCLB and standardized testing (Hursh, 2007). Support has only continued under the subsequent Race to the Top policy and the common core national standards. Advocates of standardized testing argue that these tests measure the quality of education and are objective and reliable in assessing student learning and achievement. They argue that standardized testing leads to better education for all students, especially students of color, thereby implying that teachers haven't rigorously held students to standards or accurately assessed them (Au, 2013).

Under the guise of improving outcomes for American students, standardized testing is used to uphold white-supremacy, and the arguments in favor of the practice fail to hold up. Standardized testing is key in "advancing an ideology of meritocracy that fundamentally masks structural inequalities related to race and economic class" (Au, 2013, p. 7). Dropout rates associated with these tests are disproportionately higher for communities of color. These tests cannot "shake off their racist and classist legacies" (Au, 2013, p. 12). Though said to reduce disparities, "standardised test data has found that the high-stakes

testing policies have not improved reading and math achievement across states and have not significantly narrowed national and state level achievement gaps between white students and non-white students or gaps between rich and poor students” (Au, 2013, p. 11). The tests are unable to even achieve their purported goal.

Tracking and Ability Grouping

Similarly, tracking reinforces the role of parental privilege, and thereby reduces equality of opportunities (Brunello & Checchi, 2007). Tracking refers to the concept of grouping students based on their perceived ability. There are high tracks, including Honors and Advanced Placement classes, for students expected to move on to college, and low tracks for students who are often not considered to be candidates for higher education. These students that are perceived as high achieving benefit by being placed with other students who are similarly high achieving, and receiving instruction from more experienced or talented teachers, who often want to teach these students. This benefit comes at the expense of those in the lower tracks. Combined with the fact that the level of access to resources often varies greatly between these higher tracks and the lower ones, tracking has increased stratification in the United States (Brunello & Checchi, 2007). “Tracking in practice often leads to lifelong, divergent educational trajectories, in which students in initially lower tracks end up with fewer opportunities for advancement than do their high-track counterparts” (Rodolfo, 2014, p. 479), creating a self-fulfilling prophecy for lower-track students.

Teachers have bias in judgment and decision making which affects the trajectory of their students’ lives. The racial bias of teachers becomes salient, as “studies have repeatedly demonstrated discrepancies between teacher ratings of minority and majority students with similar academic profiles” (Pit-ten Cate et al., 2016, p. 225). In many cases, the tracking path that teachers put students on “is not

only important for the student's direct educational pathway but may also have a long-lasting effect as academic standards affect future adult life" (Pit-ten Cate et al., 2016, p. 227). If teachers cannot evaluate students without bias, then tracking cannot lead to equitable outcomes. Though some reform of tracking could increase diversity and help curb some stratification in the short term, the long-term solution is to detrack our schools, which will be discussed at length later.

Education Debt and Purpose

This paper has thus far referred to the ways that racism in the American educational structure is reflected in the achievement gap. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that this hyper-focus on the achievement gap does a disservice to our already marginalized communities. Achievement gaps exist when looking at standardized test scores, dropout rates, the number of students taking advanced classes, and admission to colleges and professional programs, but she argues that to focus on achievement gaps is to take a myopic view of the issues truly facing us, and instead must realize that we have an education debt that affects Black and Brown students. Only then is true structural change possible.

Ladson-Billings (2006) describes four facets of this debt that exacerbate it every year. The first is the "historical debt," referring to the inequities that have historically been intentionally created around race, gender, and class. The history of standardized testing reflects this source of debt. The "economic debt" refers to the disparities that have existed in funding schools that are predominantly White and those that predominantly serve communities of color. School districts in inner cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York routinely spend half as much money per student than their counterparts in the suburbs that serve a primarily White student body. The third facet of the education debt is "the sociopolitical debt", which "reflects the degree to which communities of color are excluded from the civic process" (p. 7). Black, Latinx, and Native American communities have continually been disenfranchised throughout history, and therefore have had very little power in the decision-making processes to ensure the equality

of educational opportunity for their children, increasing the education gap. The last facet of our education debt is the “moral debt.” This aspect refers to what we know to be right versus “what we actually do” (p. 8). We know that education should uplift all students and promote equity—yet educational policy rarely makes meaningful efforts to solve this crisis, increasing the debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). With this careful reframing of the issue in mind, I will henceforth refer not to the achievement gap between our students, but to how these systems increase our education debt and the steps to be taken to pay off that debt.

Though tracking and standardized assessment are deeply embedded in the United States education system, dismantling these systems is possible. A shift away from capitalistic impulses will allow us to establish an education system that promotes the growth of all students and advocates for change and democracy (Hursh, 2007). Another similar shift will require us to view intelligence as ever-changing, similarly reducing the power that standardized testing and tracking have over our students’ lives. Initial change will come through teachers, as they can engage in abolitionist teaching, critical compliance, and reflective resistance to fight back against a structure that they know is wrong and inequitable, even as they continue to be utilized (Love, 2019; Gorlewski, 2018). These concepts will be explored in greater detail later. From there, standardized assessment and tracking can begin to be dismantled as schools detrack and move to alternative assessment, which both work for the advancement of students of color and not their oppression. A combination of activist educators, informed administrators and policymakers, and an American mindset reframing will allow us to leave these archaic systems in the past.

This paper will explore the ways in which standardized testing and tracking are tools of oppression within American Schooling. It will cover how biases within testing culture and the tests themselves, lead to the intentional disempowerment of people of color. It will also explore the ways that bias plays a role in tracking and long-term divergent outcomes for White students and students of color. These systems combined amount to a schooling system that is inherently white supremacist. Then, this

paper will explain ways that these systems can be dismantled, at the classroom level with abolitionist teaching, and at the administrative/ policy level with the shift away from neoliberal capitalist policies, and toward forms of alternative assessment and detracking. Though not an easy shift, this will certainly begin to promote more equity in American schooling and help the U.S. Department of Education actually meet its goal.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Perspective

This work is situated within a Critical Race Theory framework (CRT). CRT, though frequently misunderstood, is a lens that says that racism is endemic in American society, meaning that the education system often perpetuates racism and benefits white citizens. CRT can help us understand issues of inequity within education (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT has a commitment to intersectionality that recognizes “that oppression and racism can be experienced within and across divergent intersectional planes, such as classism, sexism, ableism, and so on” (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015, p. 207). This framework originated as a counter to the “positivist and liberal legal discourse of civil rights” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 7).

CRT is an important lens through which those studying education can analyze educational opportunity, pedagogy, and representation among other things, because it focuses on marginalized communities (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). CRT has been the subject of criticism nearly from its inception, with legal scholars like Richard Posner dismissing Critical Race theorists as the “‘lunatic core’ of ‘radical legal egalitarianism’” (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015, p. 207). Despite enormous pushback, particularly in recent years, CRT has persisted for over 20 years as a way to problematize race in schools (Howard & Navarro, 2016).

The need for a critical race lens to address the issues of standardized assessment and tracking is that they negatively impact students of color. In 2016, Tyrone C. Howard and Oscar Navarro wrote that social inequity in schools arises from a few central factors:

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States.
2. U.S. society is based on property rights.

3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity (2016).

CRT allows educators to disrupt racism and constructions of race within their classrooms and in their pedagogical stances. It uniquely allows us to see how racism directly plays into the inequity that is derived from both standardized testing and tracking (Howard & Navarro, 2016).

In this piece, I draw on CRT to help me understand how the implementation of tracking and standardized assessment perpetuates a legacy of white supremacy in America. CRT helps me truly show how problematic standardized testing and tracking are through a lens of racial equity. CRT is useful for a close analysis of an oppressive system such as this and gives me a basis for advocating for reform.

Chapter 3

Methods

The process of conducting research for this paper was an ever-changing process. I began with some preliminary inquiries, simply conducting informal searches on Google and Penn State Libraries' list of research papers for papers related to standardized testing, tracking, and inequity. This turned up some papers that were helpful, but I was then shown some resources by one of my education professors that ended up being foundational for my research, and this changed my approach to collecting data. I turned to Google scholar and would look for papers that cited or that were cited by those initial authors. Eventually, with the help of a University Librarian, I conducted a systematic search of the ERIC ProQuest database through the Pennsylvania State University Libraries for articles published relating to educational inequity, Critical Race Theory, standardized assessment, tracking, achievement tests, meritocracy, racial bias, and social justice, among other topics. The full list of search terms I included in my searches can be found in Table 1. This search ultimately yielded 81 results, which I eventually narrowed down to 10 additional sources for my paper. In order to narrow down my search, I excluded papers that focused on very niche and specific situations or that were not about the United States Education system. In particular, I was looking for papers that articulated the ways that standardized testing and tracking perpetuate inequity but also presented solutions and alternatives to these problems. I looked for papers published primarily within the last decade, but also explored foundational texts, and several in between. I was aiming for a comprehensive examination of the history and modern implications of tracking and standardized testing, which required analyzing research from a variety of time periods. I also continued to solicit pieces from my supervisor which

contributed greatly to the completion of this paper. In total, I utilized 30 sources, spanning 51 years of research.

Table 1. Search Terms included in ERICProQuest Search

<i>Search Terms</i>		
Achievement Tests	High Stakes Tests	African American Education
Intelligence Tests	Racial Difference	At Risk Students
Exit Examinations	Racial Bias	Latin Americans
Standardized Tests	Achievement Gap	Minority Groups
Hispanic Americans	Social Justice	African American Achievement
African Americans	Minority Group Students	Urban Schools
Access to Education	Equal Education	Hispanic American Students
Race	Ethnic Groups	Politics of Education
Slum Schools	Urban Education	Urban Areas
Racial Discrimination	Bias	Socioeconomic Background
Track	Peer	Meritocracy

These terms were selected based on the papers that I had found in my preliminary searches that matched my purpose. The terms were meant to broaden my search and include terms relating to Critical Race Theory, standardized testing and tracking, and reform.

Chapter 4

Findings and Discussion

As noted above, the racist and classist legacy of standardized testing and tracking means that they fundamentally uphold a white supremacist system of education within the United States. These two systems within schools are used as what Froese-Germain (2001) calls “educational gatekeepers”—particularly standardized testing which is used to make decisions about students’ placement within these tracks and has implications for tracking down the road. Unfortunately, these practices have only increased in regularity over time. This is because, as Wayne Au (2015) explains, public education has been reshaped in the image of free-market capitalism and seeks to serve this purpose. While advocates of these oppressive systems claim that they maintain accountability for school districts, teachers, and students, the truth is that they are in fact full of bias (Froese-Germain, 2001). In this section, I will begin by analyzing standardized testing.

As mentioned in the introduction, these tests were created with the specific intent of oppressing black and brown communities. The widespread implementation of standardized assessment under NCLB led to what Royal and Dodo Seriki (2017) call “system spectacle and surveillance” (p. 201). It created a system where unattainable standards were set for schools, and in urban areas where supposed underperformance was chronic, they were punished with a withholding and reallocation of federal funding, exacerbating the issue (Royal & Dodo Seriki, 2017). Au (2015) concludes that the perceived objectivity of standardized tests masks the structural racial inequity that they perpetuate through meritocracy. Meritocracy is the idea that anyone has the ability to become traditionally ‘successful’ through hard work and “individual merit”, regardless of their “social position, economic class, gender, race, or culture” (Au, 2015,

p. 46). Some scholars have come to suggest that perseverance and “grit” are necessary to improve the academic performance of struggling students, particularly those of color (Cunningham, 2019). This completely discounts the structural barriers that exist within institutions like education. Combined with the racist legacy of these tests, they are instrumental in the assumption that low test scores are the failure of people of color and a product of their lack of hard work or personal deficiencies (Au, 2015). Taking up a perspective informed by CRT and an understanding of the historical implications of racism in the United States makes obvious how ridiculous this proposition is.

But let’s dive into exactly how these tests are biased. Though popular opinion holds standardized tests as the most objective form of assessment, it’s crucial to remember that they are created by real people who exist within cultural, racial, and social spaces (Au, 2015). There is no such thing as a truly objective test. Standardized tests are filled with “subtle racial, linguistic, class, and gender biases” (Frose-Germain, 2001). The test questions themselves completely exclude the perspective, experiences, and funds of knowledge of children from racially and ethnically marginalized communities, rural and inner-city backgrounds, and low socio-economic status. These tests assume that all students perceive the world and solve challenges in the same fashion and variations in students’ strategies for problem-solving are not factored into test design. The values and beliefs of the cultural elites who create standardized assessments are reflected in the questions, usually a far cry from the experiences of children of color taking the tests (Frose-Germain, 2001). Dominant and white-supremacist ideologies are favored over the experience and knowledge of communities of color, which are erased within this system (Cunningham, 2019).

Beyond this, the formal, standardized English used on these high-stakes assessments exemplifies an obvious language bias (Frose-Germain, 2001). Love (2019) explains that students whose first language is not English are not only tested on whether they understand the content, but on their understanding of the English language. There is no national language in the U.S., but the message communicated to these students is that their language and way of knowing the world is inferior to Whiteness. This bias further advances the notions of who is intelligent and who is not that stem from the inception of standardized tests. Standardized assessment serves as another reminder to students of color “that their darkness and language [are] not valued in a country that may require the completion of a Spanish-language class to graduate from high school but condemns you for speaking Spanish as your first language” (Love, 2019, p. 20). This is all part of a complex system of erasure and censorship within neo-liberal capitalist societies to push the perspective of people of color to the margins of society (Cunningham, 2019).

Despite these glaring issues, the favorable public portrayal of standardized assessment is no accident. Since their inception, black leaders in education have often challenged the supposed objectivity behind the tests, but popular opinion and the support of popular psychologists perpetuates this myth of objectivity (Au, 2015). But why? A multitude of reasons. Wealthy white elites want the myth of meritocracy to prevail in order to, as Wayne Au (2015) describes, “mask their own structural advantages, deny the existence of systemic racism, justify racial hierarchies, and structure specific racial groups as less intelligent and inferior” (2015, p. 47). In essence, a test that is biased toward Whites but is considered objective will always make them look better and allow them to maintain their privileged status in society.

Furthermore, as products of a capitalist system, there is a financial aspect to the prevalence of standardized assessment. The SAT, perhaps the most prominent standardized test

and a key factor in college admission and career trajectory, is a lucrative business. To portray it as an unfair measure would erode its credibility and use, and as such, significant capital has been invested in protecting its image against legal challenges. This is despite the fact that the test's credibility is questionable at best, having been shown to underpredict women's success in college when they actually outperform men. Lower SAT scores for marginalized students lead to them having reduced expectations for themselves and therefore applying to lower-achieving colleges (Frose-Germain, 2001). Other major testing companies, like Pearson Education, Educational Testing Service, McGraw-Hill, and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt "make \$2 billion a year in revenue while spending \$20 million a year lobbying for more mandated student assessments" (Love, 2019, p. 10). The industry is lucrative, but not necessarily able to effectively measure learning (Cunningham, 2019). Kohn (2000) notes that the factors that contribute to test score variance are almost 90% noninstructional, according to a 1992 study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The factors that do influence these test scores are the "number of parents living at home, parents' educational background, type of community, and poverty rate (p.1)" of individual students (Kohn, 2000). In general, these tests have repeatedly been proven to be an inadequate way to measure the complexity of the development of learners and the adequacy of teachers (Frose-Germain, 2001).

Yet, not only are these tests protected from criticism, but they are also, as Au (2015) describes, actually framed as the solution to racial inequity:

"Educational policymakers, as well as many others in the United States, have established a tradition of wrapping education reforms around civil rights discourse, fundamentally linking the use of high-stakes, standardized testing to concepts of racial justice in education and beyond" (2015, p. 50).

Many make the argument that standardized tests hold school districts accountable and ensure that children in low-income and inner-city schools receive an equitable education. They equate standardized testing to a civil rights issue in an attempt to portray the tests as the ultimate measure of accountability. In reality, high-stakes assessment has never produced more equitable outcomes nor improved education for students of color. In fact, the gap in test scores between black and brown students and their white counterparts has widened since the implementation of programs that mandate federal high stakes testing, starting with No Child Left Behind (Au, 2015). Furthermore, this portrayal of a gap in achievement posits that the norm is whiteness, and the formula for success in this model is assimilation. (Cunningham, 2019). It's necessary to entirely reframe what it even means to be "successful" within this system.

It's clear that standardized assessment is fraught with bias and underserves our students of color, but the broader implications of this should immediately compel policymakers and school districts to action. Because performance on high-stakes tests is linked to school funding, failing grades on standardized tests mean that elective classes like art, music, theatre, and physical education are cut in favor of classes that teach specifically to the test, i.e. math and English (Au, 2015; Frose-Germain, 2001). As we know, this means that schools with large populations of students of color, low-income, and inner-city schools will feel the brunt of these cuts. Low-income families often lack the financial freedom to be able to give their children these experiences outside of school, and so standardized assessment effectively robs these students of these experiences entirely (Frose-Germain, 2001).

High school exit exams, another common high-stakes assessment, cause Black and Latinx students to drop out of high school at a much higher rate than White students as they fail these exams at a disproportionate rate (Au, 2015; Frose-Germain, 2001). Championed as another

form of accountability and a way to ensure student preparation for life after school, these exit exams represent another gatekeeper to success for people of color. In one clear example, Massachusetts' drop-out rate increased by 300% in the 90s after introducing a standardized testing accountability system, and 4% decrease in graduation after implementing a high school exit exam (Au, 2015). A plethora of groups, including the National Research Council, the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Federation of Teachers all discourage districts from basing important decisions about a child's future, like graduation, on the results of a single test (Kohn, 2000). Standardized assessment has effects that reach beyond graduation day, and as Au notes, "a study commissioned by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that standards-based high school exit exams correlated with an increase in the rate of incarceration by 12.5%" (2015). White supremacy is the underbelly of these high-school exit exams and similar high-stakes assessments in American education. They are only meant to hold back communities of color and keep them incarcerated.

Another facet of the problem with these tests is the pressure they place on school districts to perform well or risk a loss of funding. In one case, the pressure to succeed on these tests led to a highly publicized scandal involving 11 Black educators in Atlanta, who were punitively sentenced to up to 20 years in prison for cheating on standardized tests. These educators, though wrong to cheat, were confined within a system that doesn't care about black children. The harsh sentence handed down to them was supposedly justice for the children in the district, though it's clear that those educators attempted to help students far more than the state of Georgia— which continues to promote a failed system of standardized testing— ever has (Royal & Dodo Seriki, 2017). This case is a quintessential example for the state's inherently oppressive agenda, which

seeks to eliminate dissent from White ideas and the structures that uphold them as the standard. The entrenchment of this capitalist ideology is reflected in the ways that American education is structured.

Standardized testing is only half of this equation, as tracking is another core institution within schools that oppresses Black and Brown children. The two feed into each other, as school districts often use test scores to make decisions about the future of students, including which tracks they are placed in (Frose-Germain, 2001). In this way, Standardized testing has become a key facilitator for segregation that occurs within U.S. education, and even within the same school district (Knoester & Au, 2017). Curriculum in low tracks is especially harmful, as it is often role-oriented and limited in scope, often focused almost exclusively on preparing students for these assessments. These students are often held to lower expectations, taught by less experienced or skilled teachers, and experience far fewer opportunities for enrichment or growth. Worse, students who are placed in low tracks often have a negative self-image and reduced expectations of their future. This negativity becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Students of color and low-income students are most affected by this because lower tracks have been demonstrated to limit students by reflecting and perpetuating class and racial inequities. (Frose-Germain, 2001). Because of this, segregation persists inside school buildings even today.

Tracking, like standardized testing, has only increased since the 90s, as many state and federal reforms sought to improve literacy in American schooling. This is despite criticism of the practice as ineffective in increasing student performance (Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019). What we see with standardized testing and tracking is two sides of the same coin. In the same way that the legacy of standardized testing upholds white supremacy, tracking amounts to modern-day segregation within schools. It has been over 125 years since *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld “separate

but equal” schooling and nearly 70 years since *Brown v. Board of Education* mandated the desegregation of American schools, yet schools remain segregated and unequal largely due to tracking, owing to the practice’s history stemming from resistance to desegregation (Francis & Darity, 2021).

After *Brown*, many districts created “magnet schools” that offered enriched curricula and opportunities in order to attract white students to urban schools that were predominantly black. This allowed segregation to continue within schools as students of color were mostly placed in standard or lower track classes and white students were put in the classes with the enriched and advanced curriculum (Francis & Darity, 2021). This isn’t something that stopped in the 50s or 60s. A study from 2004 showed that 33 percent of White students were enrolled in AP or IB courses, compared to only 16 percent of Black students. The same study showed that 29% of White graduates had been enrolled in “academic concentration” tracks, compared to just 17% of Black students, who were more likely to be taking “general” or “occupational” classes (Archbald et al., 2009). And the issue persists to this day.

“During the 2015–2016 academic year (the most recent year for which data are available), black students made up 15.4 percent of the U.S. public school student population, but were only 9.4 percent of students taking advanced placement (AP) courses. Black students were underrepresented in AP courses in every U.S. state where black students made up at least 5 percent of the student population” (Francis & Darity, 2021, p. 188).

Black students continue to be pushed away from higher tracks, including AP classes (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). This is evidence for a flaw in the system but pinpointing that flaw can be more difficult.

Francis and Darity (2021) explain some factors beyond teacher bias that likely drive this issue: “fear of failure and fear of being isolated from same-race peers” (p. 188). As students of color come to campus and see few students like them taking advanced classes, they may believe that they cannot be successful in these courses (Francis & Darity, 2021). This is not because they cannot be successful, but students of color are positioned as objects of failure within school systems by standardized assessment and this is reinforced through tracking (Au, 2015). They may also see advanced classes as places where they will be racially isolated (Francis & Darity, 2021). These issues stem from the existence of several structural barriers. Bias on the part of teachers and counselors (predominantly White) leads to them being more likely to recommend advanced courses to White students over their Black and Brown peers, because of the perception of intelligence as fixed and race-based, going back to the IQ test of the 20th century described earlier (Archbald et al., 2009). Other structural factors that affect the equality of tracking and placement of students of color in advanced tracks include the lack of access to resources like tutoring for low-income students. This makes advanced classes seem less achievable. Finally, the parents of students of color lacking “access to social circles where students and parents trade knowledge on the best courses to take” prevents their children from enrolling in these tracks (Francis & Darity, 2021, p. 189). This is all to paint a picture of the ingrained structural barriers that prevent marginalized communities from accessing the opportunities afforded by higher tracks.

Inside schools, the way that students are directed to tracks means that tracking can only ever perpetuate inequity and the myth of meritocracy. Like standardized testing, the general public assumption is that students are placed into tracks objectively, based on their academic performance. After all, “merit-based selection is a strongly held American value” (Archbald et

al., 2009, p. 67). While the research presented here has already demonstrated that assessment of academic performance based on standardized testing is fraught with bias, there are many factors beyond this supposed objective measuring stick that play a role in where students are tracked. Research on this issue has shown that teachers in schools with tracking implicitly begin to correlate specific racial groups with specific tracks in their minds. Black and Hispanic students are associated with lower tracks in many teachers' minds and therefore placed into those tracks without fair judgment (Archbald et al., 2009). Teachers essentially filter out students of color, ethnic/ migrant children, and others who have "additional support needs" (McGillicuddy & Devine, 2018, p. 92) into lower tracks, which McGillicuddy and Devine (2018) coined "symbolic violence." The very act of defining students into these fixed categories inhibits them, as they are exposed to "different knowledge forms and differing consciousness that shapes their view of their place and existence in the world" (McGillicuddy & Devine, 2018, p. 89). Essentially, these students have no concept of their limitations until schools impose them upon them. They come to see their place in the world as below other students, just as they have been placed below other students by way of tracking. Just like standardized testing, tracking is in place to uphold the established social order that primarily benefits White citizens.

The implication of this disparity in education is clear: it upholds a system of "separate and unequal" (Francis & Darity, 2021). Students in higher tracks are exposed to literature, research, expository writing, and theories in math, whereas students in low tracks are limited to workbooks and rudimentary methods of education that cap how much they could ever hope to learn. Coupled with less time to learn for low-track students and a lack of qualified educators in these classes, we are severely underserving this group of students. Teachers who are early into the profession or deemed less skilled are more likely to be assigned to lower track classes

(Oakes, 1986). Still, many proponents argue that separating students into tracks is the best way to serve their diverse needs. These folks argue that differentiation of classes allows so-called “high ability” learners to flourish and avoid being held back, while allowing those perceived to have “less ability” to not be left behind. They argue that in order to serve both groups of learners to their fullest potential, they must be separated. In reality, the research supporting this defense is inconsistent and there is little suggesting tracking works effectively (Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019). In fact, they actually widen the gap between students in high and low tracks, and in Buttaro and Catsambis’ (2019) study into this issue, they find that every year students are exposed to ability grouping, the disparity between those in high and low tracks increases, when compared to untracked peers. This obviously goes on to have further-reaching effects for students of color, as being placed in higher tracks increases your chance of college admission and therefore career opportunities (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004).

While standardized testing certainly feeds into tracking because those scores are often part of the determining factor for what tracks students are placed in, the causation runs nearly as strongly in the other direction. Students in lower tracks are less likely to be well prepared for high-stakes standardized assessments (Archbald et al., 2009). These systems create a vicious cycle for students of color, where bias and structural barriers push them to the margins of society, with devastating short-term and long-term impacts. Both tracking and standardized assessment, as mentioned above, position students of color as objects of failure, subjecting them to close and oppressive surveillance within schools. Naturally, they are then disciplined disproportionately when compared to their white peers. This cycle of surveillance and discipline increases the likelihood that they will be arrested after leaving school (Au, 2015). These systems limit students of color’s access to college and careers and instead direct them toward prison. If

we are to truly make schooling an equitable practice, we need to look at the results of schooling, not simply the opportunities (Oakes, 1986). Educators and policymakers must begin to look at and address the clear educational inequalities that exist for Black and Brown students and take action to create positive, tangible change (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004).

Chapter 5

Conclusion and Next Steps

The research and ideas presented throughout this paper clearly indicate that standardized testing and tracking are part of an archaic system meant to disenfranchise people of color and maintain a status quo of white supremacy. A history deeply rooted in racism combined with a continued legacy of perpetuating inequity means that these systems should not, and indeed cannot, continue to exist. The United States Department of Education purports their mission to be “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The steadfast integration of standardized testing and tracking—which amount to nothing more than tools of oppression—into U.S. education policy and tradition effectively means that the department is failing its mission. It is not promoting the achievement of students of color by deliberately undermining their success and selling them a lie in the form of the myth of meritocracy. It is thereby paradoxical to assert that American education is somehow preparing those same students for global competitiveness or fostering their educational excellence. And above all, it is decidedly not ensuring equal access for Black, Brown, low-income, rural, and inner-city students. Everything outlined above makes this painfully obvious. The department of education is a failure on all fronts; standardized assessment and tracking are two of the largest (albeit not the only) reasons.

This doesn't mean the system cannot be fixed. It is the responsibility of educators, policymakers, and administrators across America to make that change a reality. Though I

certainly do not have all the answers, there is considerable research and literature on ways to deconstruct the current education system and make reforms that are equitable and actually work to achieve the Department of Education's mission and to begin to pay off the education debt between White students and Black and Brown students.

At the foundational level, schools should be organized to promote individual growth and change through open dialogue and transparency, over the growth of the economy. Schools have been organized to recreate neoliberal capitalism, and only through a paradigm shift in this structure can we begin to tackle these issues (Hursh, 2007). Such a shift would make standardized testing and ability grouping obsolete. In the same vein, the view that intelligence is malleable must become universally accepted, moving us away from the current fixed American mindset. We must also break from our conception of meritocracy and be open and honest with students about structural barriers that exist in this country, while simultaneously actively working to dismantle them. This reframing of American education seeks to empower students.

Pertaining to standardized tests, a start would be to remove words like "aptitude," "cognition," or "ability", which trigger stereotype threat in minoritized students, and they should be renamed and reworded to avoid these terms (Rodolfo, 2014). Eventually, though, a shift from standardized assessment to alternative forms of assessment would allow for the individual students to flourish, regardless of their identity. Though there is not necessarily a definitive and collectively held definition of alternative assessment, for the purpose of the conclusion of this paper I'll define it as an alternative to standardized testing that "allow[s] students to be assessed on what they normally do in class every day" (Derakhshan et al., 2011, p. 174) but enhances the routine activities already in place in the classroom, as Derakhshan et al. describe (2011). This may include techniques "such as performance-based assessment, portfolios, self-assessment,

video journals, and exhibitions” (p. 174). Alternative assessments are multiculturally sensitive and able to carry out the equitable evaluation of students’ performance and learning as they “provide information about both the strengths and the weaknesses of students” (p.174) and position students at the center of their learning, encouraging them to take more responsibility. Alternative assessment “puts emphasis on the interplay among points of view, values, and beliefs” (p. 174) of students and pushes students to apply their knowledge rather than practice rote memorization or other much more basic skills (Derakhshan et al., 2011).

As mentioned above, in order for standardized testing to be replaced with alternative assessment, a shift in the American educational paradigm is required. It requires an entirely new “assessment culture” (Derakhshan et al., 2011, p. 175), in which teaching and assessment are integrated and indivisible, students are empowered and given the voice to develop assessment procedures, and evaluation and result-sharing are reframed. Under this model, students have a say in both how and to what standards they are evaluated, and there is a careful analysis of both the products and the process of whatever the assessment task is. Likewise, when the results of these evaluations are reported or shared, they should not be based on a single score or number, but rather on a qualitative measure of the student’s performance as a whole (Derakhshan et al., 2011; Birenbaum, 1996; Wolf et al., 1991). The shift to alternative assessment would require constant research and revision to ensure that they remain credible and valid. This is the ultimate goal, but at this juncture, many school districts are failing to embrace a critical stance on standardized testing, and as Derakhshan et al. (2011) note, those tests “are still used by those in power without giving individuals any right to voice their ideas” (p.177). Though initial changes would likely be subtle, a nationwide shift in opinion to favor alternative assessment would begin to ensure that American education achieves its own stated goals.

When it comes to tracking, change may similarly be slow. It's unlikely that schools nationwide will throw out the deeply ingrained tracks that have been established for decades, but action can still be taken to reform the practice. Teachers must be held accountable for the decisions they make so that the students are being prioritized. Above this, should schools instead focus on outputs and what students are gaining rather than inputs (i.e., instilling standards), there would be progress made in reducing the achievement gap. This concept is referred to as answerability, which puts the focus back on learners and places the responsibility in the lap of the institution. In a world that requires things like tracking and standardized assessment, teachers can practice "critical compliance and reflective resistance" (Gorlewski, 2018). Critical compliance essentially means that in a system where teachers are forced to do things they disagree with, they can comply and meet policy mandates, but remain critical of aspects of these mandates that perpetuate inequity. Reflective resistance is when teachers engage in "subversive activities against policies or mandates that are harmful to learners" (Gorlewski, 2018, p. 47). Teachers don't need to be complicit in these detrimental practices in schools. When backed up by ethics and research, teachers must model active democracy and dissent. Other methods, like allowing students to choose their own tracks and actively encouraging students of color to take advanced classes can be effective to counteract the biases that currently exist. As Francis and Darity (2021) found out in their research:

"a 1 percentage point increase in the share of black eleventh and twelfth graders in advanced math courses increases the likelihood that an academically eligible black ninth grade student will take an advanced math course before they graduate by 22 percentage points in racially diverse schools and 11 percentage points in predominantly black schools" (p. 189).

This can be the start of building equity, though certainly should not be where the movement for change stops.

Though teachers can model dissent and practice reflective resistance, it's imperative that schools move to detrack—that is, do away with tracks entirely—in the near future. This will open up opportunities for all students to flourish, not just those in higher tracks. In order to be successful in this endeavor, schools need to realize that reaching an agreement on the alternatives to tracking is not easy because of the prevailing ideas about education and the benefits of ability grouping (Oakes & Lipton, 1992). Again, those are the product of neoliberal capitalist ideology and need to be scrapped. As educators and advocates, we have to move past the belief that intelligence can be measured by IQ tests and standardized assessments and that it is fixed. Learning is not simply acquiring facts but is in fact a “complex process of constructing meaning” (Oakes & Lipton, 1992, p. 449). We have to let go of the idea that children have some sort of set potential from a young age and that we should group those with similar “potentials” together. When we begin to reform our conception of intelligence and learning, detracking becomes a much more natural response. Beyond that, letting go of the capitalistic notion that schools are only meant to prepare students for the workforce makes detracking much easier (Oakes & Lipton, 1992). Dismantling a broken educational system starts with challenging our most deeply embedded values.

It's important that schools don't simply detrack by throwing all of their students in the same classes and teaching them the exact same way—that would be a disaster. Each student is still unique with varying needs, and there are several other dimensions to navigate, like curriculum and the classroom social organization. In order for detracking to be successful, classes need to be rebuilt around engaging and complex ideas, with teachers understanding that

not every child will come away from a class knowing the exact same things in the exact same way. These classes are about problem-solving, and there is no one right answer. Detracking requires schools to expand their pedagogical repertoire and utilize methods that highlight, collaborative, constructivist learning. Not surprisingly, given what we've already seen between the close relationship between tracking and standardized assessment, mixed-ability classes should rely on alternative assessment and foster inquiry. It will not always be easy to integrate classes, as parents—particularly those who enjoy the status of having their child in higher tracks—may push back. But, with the steadfast affirmation and commitment of school leadership, this vision can become a reality (Oakes & Lipton, 1992). Some schools across the country have already made this transition to detracking classes, and it's necessary for this practice to become the norm if we aim to truly serve the students who have been pushed to the margins of schooling and deconstruct the system of white supremacy within schools.

The need for change is imperative, because, as Ladson-Billings (2006) explains, it's the right thing to do.

“As Americans, we pride ourselves on maintaining those ideal qualities as hallmarks of our democracy. That represents the highest motivation for paying this debt. But we do not always work from our highest motivations” (pg. 9).

American ideology suggests that we should want to work for equity and justice for all—after all, this is touted as one of our core values. In reality though, it's clear that private citizens and politicians need incentive beyond moral ground. Because of this, Ladson-Billings (2006) describes three reasons to erase the education debt that exists in America:

“a) the impact the debt has on present education progress, (b) the value of understanding the debt in relation to past education research findings, and (c) the potential for forging a better educational future” (p. 9).

To explain these, the education debt currently stops us from advancing education to the point where it is most effective for all students. This has clearly been articulated in the exploration of the shortcoming of tracking and standardized testing. Second, a better understanding of the debt can help us reconfigure our understanding of education. Many policies and traditions are a result of incorrect assumptions and flawed research. And lastly, reforming the education debt means that we can continue to improve education and see better outcomes for our students and therefore our country as a whole.

There are many ways, large and small, that standardized assessment and tracking can be dismantled, and the United States owes it to students of color—and truly to all students—to begin implementing these changes. As mentioned, making these changes will not be easy. In the beginning, change will come through teachers. It will require a commitment to abolitionist teaching—what Love (2019) describes as action that centers Black joy and applies a critical lens to the work that we’re doing as educators. It goes beyond just fighting for reform, but actually fighting for justice for students and ensuring that they are actively thriving within the school system, “not simply surviving”. (Love, 2019, p. 11).

In order to make a change, we have to see that there is a problem with this system that we’re operating within. The purpose of this paper was to make this starkly obvious. When teachers take up abolition and culturally responsive pedagogies, they value student’s funds of knowledge and integrate that into the curriculum (Hoffman & Martin, 2020). This can’t be done alone. Teachers need co-conspirators—those who are willing to be more than just an ally, but

someone who will work for the benefit of groups that are not their own identity and recognize their own privilege while standing in solidarity with other abolitionist teachers (Love, 2019). Abolitionist teaching often requires “breaking the rules” in order to truly benefit your students (Hoffman & Martin, 2020). The practice looks different for everyone.

“Some teachers will create a homeplace for their students while teaching them with the highest expectations; some will protest in the streets; some will fight standardized testing; some will restore justice in their classrooms; some will create justice-centered curriculums and teaching approaches; some will stand with their students to end gun violence in schools; some will fight to end the prison-industrial complex in and outside of schools” (Love, 2019, p. 89-90).

Every teacher who is committed to justice will find their own way to practice abolitionist teaching. They will understand that the practice goes beyond just tearing down oppressive systems but is equally about the creation of improved ones (Love, 2019). To resist standardized testing and tracking is abolitionist teaching, and conversely, abolitionist teaching will facilitate this change. This fight for reform will start (and indeed has already started) in individual classrooms with individual educators.

Ultimately, change will come slowly. Ladson-Billings (2006) asks us to imagine that understanding how students of color are “provoked an immediate reassignment of the nation's best teachers to the schools serving the most needy students” and “within one generation we lift those students out of poverty” (p. 7). This would be the ideal situation, but it’s rare that reform can ever happen that quickly. It is always a fight. The best immediate course of action is for individual teachers to practice critical compliance and reflective resistance and take the charge of becoming abolitionist educators. They should actively support candidates and policies that

dismantle systems of oppression. It will undoubtedly require great effort on the part of individual teachers, but the United States education system can be reformed. With efforts to improve public understanding of the issues surrounding common education practices, it will become easier to reframe the entire mindset of American schooling. Only then, once we have liberated ourselves from oppressive practices like standardized testing and tracking, can we truly realize the U.S. Department of Education's stated goal and come to truly serve students of color, inner-city students, rural students, and students from low-income families in American education.

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